

Culturally Responsive Institutions for Minority People

Ray Barnhardt

University of Alaska, Fairbanks

While there are many factors that shape the policies and practices of public institutions (such as schools and universities), the positions that have the most pervasive influence on the day-to-day operations of an institution are those of the administrators. They, more than anyone else, through their organizational perspective and their administrative style, shape the ethos of an institution and thus largely determine its ultimate effectiveness. Even though particular cultural or ideological concerns of constituencies may be brought to bear at the level of general policy formation through representation on institutional boards or commissions, it is the managers and administrators of the institution who determine how those policies are to be implemented, and it is at that level that cultural considerations can be easily neglected or subverted. Political control of an institution by a particular cultural community does not in itself insure that the institution will be sensitive to the cultural beliefs and practices of that community. The high expectations of more than one community have been dampened when the operational version of their attempt at a more culturally appropriate program turned out to be little different from the established program it was intended to replace.

It would be easy to attribute such a lack of cultural adaptability in institutions to the simple fact that most administrative and supervisory level positions are held by Anglo's, and thus cultural innovations are constrained by the imposition of a Western/Anglo monocultural perspective. Such an interpretation, however, neglects to take into account the fact that similar frustrations have also been experienced in situations, particularly in government bureaucracies, where minority people have held administrative roles and have made a deliberate attempt to respond to the wishes of the minority community. This would indicate that cultural biases can reside not only in the individual occupying an institutional role, but in the very structure of the institution as well.

Administration, Organization and Cultural Adaptation

While administrators, through their own deliberate action, can function as institutional gate-keepers, there are many other less obvious ways in which institutions can present unintended structural barriers to the accommodation of

minority community concerns and perspectives. Such barriers may exist in any feature of the institution in which there is potential for different cultural beliefs and practices to influence the attitudes and behavior of institutional participants. This includes implicit behavioral routines, such as the way people are expected to communicate and interact with one another, and the way decision-making and leadership are exercised. It also includes explicit institutional routines, such as recruitment and selection procedures, the way time and space are structured, and the criteria and techniques used to judge peoples' performances.

It is possible to reduce some of these institutional barriers by training non-minority administrators to recognize how organizational and administrative practices favor some people over others, and encourage them to develop practices that take cultural diversity into account. Such an approach does not, however, address inequities in the distribution of power in the institution, nor is it the most effective or efficient means of building cultural sensitivity into institutional practices. Minority people, with appropriate training and the opportunity to bring their unique perspective and skills to bear, are generally in a better position to break down institutional barriers to minority participation, because they have inherent within them the necessary cultural predispositions. They must also, however, have the incentive and support to take culturally appropriate initiatives in the restructuring of organizational and administrative practices, or they will simply perpetuate the inequities built into the existing system.

Bringing administrative responsibility for the delivery of community services to the level of the minority community is a critical step if those services are to reflect local cultural considerations. In doing so, however, new kinds of demands are placed on the role of the administrator which require a familiarity with and sensitivity to features of the local cultural system that few people from outside the system are likely to develop. It becomes imperative, therefore, that minority people assume those administrative responsibilities and be given the latitude to introduce their own "modus operandi" in response to the needs and conditions in the community. Efforts to achieve "cultural fit" may require changes in institutional features ranging from the simple rescheduling of daily activities to a rethinking of the very function of the institution. Persons fully immersed in the cultural community being served are in the best position to recognize and act upon the discrepancies between institutional and cultural practices that interfere with the performance of the institution.

While moving the control of services closer to the community and bringing

minority people into decision-making and management roles is a critical and necessary step toward transforming Western institutions into more culturally sensitive institutions, that step in itself is not sufficient to achieve the equity of services that is needed. In addition to possessing all of the bureaucratic technical skills necessary to maintain a Western institution, the minority administrator must also understand how the institution can be made to fit into the minority world without subverting essential features of that world. When such a transformation of existing institutions is not possible without losing more cultural ground than is gained, the minority administrator must also have the skill to build new kinds of institutions that can respect and sustain the biculturalism that is inherent in the contemporary minority experience.

Organization for Diversity

Regardless of whether an institution is in minority or non-minority hands, there are certain institutional characteristics and practices that can enhance any institution's ability to accommodate cultural differences. Institutional characteristics and practices that can be particularly instrumental in facilitating organizational responsiveness to cultural diversity are participatory decision-making, a decentralized authority structure, a distributive communication system, and a loosely coupled organizational framework (Barnhardt, 1985). Each of these will be examined briefly, in the context of minority service institutions.

Participatory decision-making. As was indicated earlier, a minority perspective in decision-making can come about only through the presence of minority people in the decision-making arena. To be truly responsive to minority concerns, an institution must not only reflect an awareness of minority cultural values and practices, but it must also convey an attitude of respect for those values and practices. This must be done in such a way that minority people feel a sense of ownership with regard to the institution and see it as incorporating their traditions and perpetuating their interests. So long as the institutional decision-making processes are in the hands of non-minority decision-makers (regardless of how well-intentioned), minority people are going to feel shut out as equal participants in those institutions. But it is not enough to invite a token minority representative to "bring a minority perspective" to the decision-making arena, or to hire a token minority employee to integrate the staff and appease the critics. Nor is it enough to have minority people in professional or supervisory roles using conventional bureaucratic-style criteria to perpetuate Western institutional values. Such gratuitous avenues of participation are too easily subverted by the weight of

Western bureaucratic machinery and do little to counteract the cultural distance between Western-style institutions and minority people.

To develop a sense of institutional ownership, minority people must feel they are a part of the action and are a party to decision-making from top to bottom, beginning to end. They must be on the delivery end of institutional services, not just on the receiving end. If such a transformation is to take place, institutions must adopt a participatory approach to decision-making, whereby everyone that is affected by an institution, whether as producer or consumer of institutional services, has an opportunity to influence the way the institution operates. This requires multiple avenues of access to the decision-making process, so that everyone can contribute in a manner consistent with their relationship to the institution and with their style of participation and decision-making. It also involves a horizontal distribution of power, so that all of the decision-making authority is not vested in a top-down hierarchical structure. Participatory decision-making is at the heart of any administrative process which seeks to strengthen the degree of control that people have over their lives.

Increased minority participation in institutional decision-making can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms. These range from the establishment of affirmative action programs that strengthen minority presence in existing institutions, to the creation of new institutions, where minority people sustain their cultural community through their own system of production and service institutions. Other options include contracting with minority institutions to provide services to minority people; establishing minority councils or guardianships to oversee minority interests; employing minority elders to advise in areas of minority cultural and spiritual significance; and creating minority units within existing institutions through which minority people can manage their own affairs. It is through mechanisms such as these, and any others that bring minorities into the decision-making arenas, that minority people can begin to wield the power that is needed to shape their own destiny. It is not enough to be the beneficiaries of benevolent institutions. minority people must be full and equal participants in the shaping and operation of those institutions.

Decentralized authority structure. Participatory decision-making is empty rhetoric without a decentralized authority structure. In the context of building institutional respect for diversity, bigger is not better. If institutions are to be responsive to differences in cultural beliefs and practices, they must be scaled and situated in such a way that they can interact with the client community on local terms. The larger the system and the more distant the decision-making is from the clientele,

the greater the demand for conformity to institutional norms, and the more difficult it is to accommodate diversity. Conversely, the closer the system is to the people being served, the fewer the bureaucratic constraints and barriers that tend to interfere with peoples access to the system, and the greater the opportunity for diverse points of view to be heard and acted upon. The functional units of an institution must be small enough to allow for a personalized approach to services, so that local styles of communication and interaction can enter into the decision-making process, and so that services can be structured to fit the cultural norms of the client community.

One of the most common approaches to decentralization is to distribute authority over certain aspects of institutional services to regional or branch offices. Such a move can be a significant step toward decentralization, but if the local authority is still tightly controlled by a distant central office, it may achieve no more than to add another layer to the institutional bureaucracy. If decentralization is to increase participation in decision-making, it must include the establishment of local bodies to whom local or regional authorities are answerable. Whenever possible, representatives of the client community should have a direct voice in policy-making, personnel and budgetary decisions. Client participation in the selection of key personnel is especially critical, so that local considerations can be taken into account, and so that the persons selected feel a sense of responsibility to the client community.

Another important consideration in institutional decentralization is the criteria for definition of a service area. Typically, decentralized service areas are structured along the lines of established political boundaries or geographical regions. Such criteria do not always coincide with traditional minority kinship and tribal structures, however, and as a result, tend to interfere with rather than enhance minority participation in decision-making. Any attempt to establish a decentralized system that is to be sensitive to the needs of minority people must begin with a framework that minority people themselves use to organize their lives. For some services, this may mean a village-oriented system. Others may require a regionally-oriented structure. Whatever approach is used, it should fit into the natural authority and decision-making structure of the community or region to be served. In those situations where institutional services are to be decentralized to better serve both minority and non-minority, it may be necessary to establish a dual system with different criteria for service areas for each group.

Once again, it is important to recognize that the structure of an institution is a crucial factor in determining how effectively and equitably the institution can

perform its functions. A decentralized structure, scaled to fit into the cultural and organizational framework of minority communities, will make an institution more accessible to minority participation, and thus increase its potential to serve minority needs.

Distributive communication system. A key ingredient for any kind of decentralized, participatory institutional structure to function properly is an effective communication system. If minority people are to be active participants in economic, educational, community or institutional development, they must have ready access to information related to the development, and they must be able to convey their own views in culturally appropriate ways. This requires a system of communication that provides multiple and diverse avenues for people to participate in, and contribute to, the development process. Institutions that are intended to serve the development needs of minority people must encourage a free flow of information into and out of the decision-making structure of the institution. This can be accomplished through formal and informal channels, including participatory committees, community meetings, newsletters and other regular publications, and various kinds of community consultantships. The important thing is that communication processes be distributed throughout the community so that everyone is well informed, and so that people can use their natural communication patterns to get their views across.

A large-scale, centralized, top-down communication structure is of little use in furthering local participation, whereas a distributive network that links people together with one another and with the institutions serving them, can greatly enhance the quantity and quality of participation. If institutions are to be responsive to minority interests, they must establish a communication system that taps into minority communication patterns and encourages two-way dialogue.

Loosely coupled organization. Another characteristic necessary for institutional systems to be able to respond favorably to the cultural diversity reflected in minority issues is that the various components of the system be loosely coupled (Weick, 1976), so that the system can maintain a flexible, adaptive and open-ended posture in response to diverse demands. A rigidly structured centralized system will have considerable difficulty responding to the variations in social, cultural, economic, political, and historical circumstances that exist in minority communities throughout Alaska. Along with decentralized administrative authority, it is important, therefore, that there also be sufficient latitude to adapt organizational structures to the particular circumstances in each service area. It

is not necessary, for example, that each regional office of an educational agency adopt the same framework for the delivery of services. As long as there is general agreement on the functions to be performed and on the outcomes upon which effectiveness is to be judged, each unit should be encouraged to adapt its structure and services in response to local conditions, rather than be required to maintain a standardized bureaucratic framework. Different means can be used to achieve the same ends.

Demands for institutional uniformity arise from notions of cultural universality and bureaucratic efficiency. While such notions may be applicable to situations of cultural homogeneity, or in relation to functions of a strictly mechanical nature (e.g., the postal service), they are not well suited to situations or functions in which human behavior is a significant variable. In such situations, it is necessary to maintain a flexible and adaptive organizational framework that can respond to a varied and changing human environment. This requires administrators who are sensitive to cultural variations in behavior and possess a repertoire of skills for organizing diverse interests and efforts so that they fuse into a coherent collective endeavor. The administrator in such a situation functions less as a bureaucrat and more as a coordinator and mediator, leading by example and consensus rather than by decree.

The kind of organizational practices and the qualities of leadership required to maintain a loosely coupled structure are not unlike those exhibited in developing countries, where institution-building is an inherent function in any organizational endeavor (Kiggundu, et al, 1983). Institution-builders must understand the relationship between institutions and the clientele they serve, the relationship between individual behavior and the social organization in which it occurs, and the nature of cultural and institutional change processes. Rather than seeking to reduce the variables in the systems they manage, institution-builders must be able to move beyond even the maintenance of existing variables, to nurture and stimulate the development of new variables that take into account the uniqueness of each new cultural situation. They must also be able to tolerate the ambiguity that is inherent in such an open-ended, "variable-generating" approach to administration (Barnhardt, 1985). All of the characteristics outlined above with regard to the role of administrators in developing countries can also be valuable assets in any institutional role associated with minority affairs.

Whether the task is to increase minority participation, decentralize services, improve communication, or develop culturally-sensitive organizational structures, there is one set of skills that is paramount above all others, and that is a thorough

grounding in minority cultural beliefs and practices. Without such grounding (preferably as a practitioner), administrators are likely to lack the knowledge and credibility necessary to bridge the gap between existing institutions and minority people, regardless of how well-intentioned they might be. So we see again the urgent need for skilled minority administrators who can apply their talents to the development of the new kind of minority institutions that are required if Alaska minorities are to achieve the degree of cultural and institutional independence needed to exercise minority control over minority affairs.