

Organizational Problem Analysis

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In my professional role as the Honors College Admissions Counselor at Michigan State University (MSU), I have had the opportunity to observe a number of problems facing higher education institutions and their administrations. This paper allows me to reflect on one issue in particular, the recruitment, admission, and merit-based scholarship consideration of non-resident students at a public institution. In this paper I will present the problem as I view it, use Bolman and Deal's (2008) political and symbolic frames to analyze the problem, and then propose a strategy to address the problem. At the onset, it is important to me that I do not consider the recruitment, admission and scholarship consideration of non-resident students to be a "problem", with the negative connotations that word can bring, but rather an "issue", which I consider a less loaded term. For the sake of the assignment, I will call it a problem, but wish to remove the negative connotations.

### **The Problem**

MSU is a public institution partially funded by revenue from taxes charged to Michigan residents. State funding for higher education has been reduced in four of the last five years and MSU administrators believe that "a decline in state support will be severe and permanent" (Michigan State University, 2009). In the face of reduced state funding, MSU administration has taken steps to both decrease costs and increase revenue (Michigan State University, 2009). One of MSU's "key focus areas for change" is student enrollment (Michigan State University, 2009). Within student enrollment, MSU has specific goals to make "non-resident proportion to reflect peers" and "[promote] geographic diversity" (Michigan State University, 2009). MSU does not explicitly state that increasing non-resident (out-of-state and international) enrollment is a goal because of the greater revenue gains from the higher tuition charged to these students, but it is a desirable side effect at the least.

Even though MSU has a very large student enrollment, there are a finite number of spaces for students. This makes admission competitive. In my interactions with high school students and parents considering MSU, I have heard concerns voiced about non-resident students taking places that belong to tax-paying Michigan residents. In the next sections of this paper, I will analyze this issue using Bolman and Deal's (2008) political and symbolic frames. Utilizing Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames will help to explain why non-resident recruitment, admission and scholarship consideration can be viewed as a problem. The frames can also aid in explaining how the organization of MSU deals with the problem as well as how other stakeholders view the issue.

### **Political Frame Analysis**

The political frame is especially helpful in understanding the problem of non-resident student recruitment, admission and scholarship consideration because of one of its major propositions: "Most important decisions involve allocating scarce resources—who gets what" (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 195). MSU administrators must make decisions on where to spend the valuable resources of time and money, both of which are severely limited in times of budget reductions, when recruiting students. Should the attention of recruiting trips, mailings, and other recruiting activities be focused on in-state residents or out-of-state and international nonresidents? In the political frame, resources that are devoted to one group are seen as taking away from resources that could be devoted to another group. Admissions to one group are taken away from another group. Scholarships that are awarded to one group are funds that are not provided to another group.

A struggle for MSU leadership facing this problem in this political frame is mapping the political terrain (Bolman & Deal, 2008). MSU leadership, including the Board of Trustees,

President, Provost, and Office of Admissions, must “identify principal agents of political influence”, “analyze possibilities for mobilizing internal and external players”, and “anticipate counterstrategies that others are likely to employ” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 216).

The MSU administration is utilizing framing as a source of power in this political climate. MSU’s website, *Shaping the Future*, is a public illustration of framing, which Bolman and Deal (2008) describe as “control of meaning and symbols” (p. 204). Through this website, the MSU administration makes the case that appropriate admission of non-residents will help MSU remain competitive with peer institutions as well as provide an element of diversity that creates a stronger educational environment for all students. Framing can be seen as similar to Birnbaum’s (1988) conception of “clarifying group values” (p. 148). For example, diversity can come in a number of forms, and the MSU administration is making the case that geographic diversity is an important group value. Framing as a source of power in a political environment has strong ties to Bolman and Deal’s (2008) symbolic frame.

### **Symbolic Frame Analysis**

The symbolic frame is also very useful in understanding the problem of non-resident recruitment, admission, and scholarship consideration at MSU. Bolman and Deal’s (2008) most relevant ideas about the symbolic frame in relation to this problem are “events and actions have multiple interpretations as people experience life differently” and “facing uncertainty and ambiguity, people create symbols to resolve confusion, find direction, and anchor hope and faith” (p. 253). While MSU may say that the admission of non-resident students will help to keep MSU competitive with peer institutions and provide a more diverse learning experience, some students and parents may interpret the university’s actions differently. Additionally, admission of non-resident students is a symbolic problem when families are struggling through

the confusing and stressful process of college admission. I have seen families latch onto MSU as a wise economic choice and a symbol of the attainable. If that beacon of hope becomes less attainable, MSU might have perception issues.

MSU was founded as an institution that would serve the needs of the residents of the state of Michigan. Many high school students, parents, and high school guidance counselors believe that MSU still retains that vision. A perceived shift away from that founding mission would mount a significant symbolic challenge.

For all of the symbolic issues listed above, the MSU administration works to symbolically address this problem by managing impressions. One of the ways that I believe MSU is symbolically managing impressions regarding this problem is the usage of the term “world-grant”. While managing the non-resident admission issue may not be the intention of this term shift, I believe it is relevant. MSU has been known as the nation’s premier land-grant university. For many people, land-grant has meant serving the people and needs of the state of Michigan. In recent years, MSU administrators, President Simon specifically, have taken to calling MSU a world-grant institution. They use the term in a number of ways, but one of them is in relation to the backgrounds of admitted students. In this way, MSU administrators are working to symbolically manage impressions of the university.

### **Strategy to Address Problem**

Group conversations and class lectures in this course have helped me realize that Bolman and Deal’s (2008) frames do not exist in vacuums. A situation can not be accurately or completely described or understood through one frame. While I chose to analyze this problem through the political and symbolic frames, the structural and human resource frames may also be helpful. In this section I will provide a strategy to address the problem.

Whether viewing this problem from a political or symbolic frame, I believe open and transparent communication with interested stakeholders is most important. This will help with the political issues of controlling meaning and clarifying group values as well as the symbolic issue of managing impressions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). MSU has a start on this recommendation through its efforts with the website *Shaping the Future*. I hope that MSU administration will continue to explain the goals of non-resident recruitment, admission and scholarship consideration to the MSU community.

### **Conclusion**

While the goal of this assignment may have been to utilize two of Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames to understand how an organization deals with a problem, I found that the frames helped me understand the problem from other stakeholders' perspectives as well. Bolman and Deal's (2008) frames have great power for analyzing issues and I look forward to utilizing many of them in my future work.

### References

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