Change at the University of Kansas: Process, Experimentation, and Collaboration

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In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

—Eric Hoffer

Higher education is known for both deliberative process and resistance to change. These characteristics often challenge leaders as they attempt to implement changes in organizational structure, services, or strategy. This challenge is even more difficult when decision making is as diffuse, shared, and collaborative as it is in higher education. The base of faculty as entrepreneurial agents, combined with the collaborative governance process, adds another layer of complexity, making effecting change one of the more significant challenges for today's higher education leaders.

Information technology (IT) professionals are no exception. We are challenged to match the needs of an increasingly broad user group to rapid changes in technology. We must deliver relevant services that are timely enough to fit technological life cycles and our resource profile. IT should contribute to the productivity of faculty, students, and staff as they engage in learning, research, service, and effective institutional administration. IT services should be based in a real-time assessment of evolving requirements.

As part of a university-wide reorganization in 1996, the University of Kansas (KU) brought Libraries and Information Technology together as Information Services (IS). The goal was to achieve effective technology services and improved technical integration within the Libraries. The initial alliance among Libraries and three technology units (Administrative Computing, Academic Computing, and Networking and Telecommunications) included consolidation of the financial management functions and collaborative work on common projects (a digital library infrastructure, a campus-wide e-mail function, and a campus-wide portal). Later projects included reorganizing academic and administrative computing along IT architecture lines, consolidating library computing functions into this new structure, and integrating leadership functions.

In 2002, three administrators—the vice provost for IS, the library dean, and the associate vice provost for IS, who supervises many of the IT functions—were charged by the provost to take the next step in the development of IS. The provost at KU oversees both academic and administrative functions. He outlined his vision for what IS should become, choosing not to specify services to be offered or technical systems to be implemented. Instead, he challenged the new leadership team to think broadly about a continuing assessment of campus needs and engage the IS organization to meet those needs. His goal was to achieve consistent engagement with users across campus through services that were not necessarily tied to organizational boundaries. This model envisioned delivery of needed services to faculty, students, and staff without their having to understand the university’s organizational structure.

The KU university community had changed over the past three years as a result of a large contingent of new faculty and the arrival of a digital generation of students. In addition, it had made a major commitment to the recruitment and retention of students.
by reorganizing the academic and social support functions for students into a new unit with its mission reflected in its title: Student Success. These changes resulted in a ready atmosphere for the new approach toward planning sought by the provost.

Margaret Wheatley made the point that in much of our organizational life, we are missing experimentation and instead look “to deliver the right solution.” She said, “then you will spend all of your energy in convincing people that it’s the right solution and then covering up any results which don’t support that.” IT organizations are limited if they search only for the “right solution” rather than looking for alternatives that address user needs. IT organizations must hold a constant view toward experimentation and improvement. User needs are not static; neither is technology. KU knew that continual change and experimentation would be a permanent part of our organization.

It was also clear that our first priority should be to develop a process of engagement, not a static plan. We needed to engage users in a conversation in which they were listened to and respected. We also needed to form collaborative alliances with other support services, such as the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Writing Center, to fulfill the provost’s vision of service delivery.

Our purpose became strategic process development and our means, collaboration. As with many universities, we served many different constituents with different visions and ideas. To move forward, we needed not only their buy-in but also their consensus. We needed collaboration between units and staff within IS as well as a collaborative process that built consensus. At the same time, we were aware that the changes in our user groups called for immediate action. We could not afford a multiyear process of engagement—users wanted immediate attention to their needs. In one particularly critical moment, we realized that we needed to be about “high-velocity change” and that aiming that change toward users would require “high-volume collaboration.” Our project became named High-Velocity Change Through High-Volume Collaboration, or HVC².

The first phase of HVC² was to set up a process for campus-wide engagement about services and infrastructure for faculty, students, and staff. This phase comprised work during the 2003–2004 academic year. The sponsors—the three administrators noted above, plus the vice provost for Student Success—choose to focus on two different areas: defining needs and strategy by client group, and specific topics that were in need of strategy development. We formed groups that would focus on a specific area. The groups would be responsible for the initial approach to campus-wide discussion about the services and infrastructure needs in each area.

Five groups were appointed and charged, three of which were defined by the users served: students (undergraduates), scholars (faculty and graduate students), and decision makers (administrative staff and university leaders). The vice provost for Student Success decided to combine a group already working in the Student Success unit with the HVC² group focused on students, giving us a cross-unit collaboration from the start. A fourth group, with a focus on collaborative learning spaces, was established in response to the immediate need to renovate library and IT lab space. A fifth group, highlighting digital preservation issues, was established to focus on the joint interests
and needs of both libraries and IT and the history of addressing scholarly communication issues resident at the university.

The quest for a process to facilitate rapid change and extensive collaboration posed a significant challenge, so we looked for research in organizational development and learning literature that could help us structure the project.

French and Bell’s classic work summarizing the approaches to organizational development provided a sound basis for review of the literature, and the theories of Kurt Lewin provided a framework for thinking about individual attitudes and approaches to change. Lewin’s analysis of effective learning rests on three elements: changing a person’s perception, modifying values to fit what is wanted in the environment, and modifying behaviors. Lewin’s work became the basis for programs aimed at assisting individuals within IS to develop change management skills.

Given our focus on collaboration, we also needed techniques that would provide success with group process. The literature of process facilitation provided a model with great potential to assist us in designing our group process. Process facilitation defines two functional roles for each group: task and relationship. Groups most easily focus on the task at hand but often discount the need for a focus on the process of the group. A focus on process issues allows the group to communicate better, to develop positive relationships among members, and, ultimately, to reach more innovative decisions.

This bulletin discusses how we took the concepts presented in the literature and used them to build a collaborative model of interaction both within IS and with our clients as part of the HVC² project.

### Highlights of High-Velocity Change

The HVC² project design was based on organizational development theory and on process facilitation as a key component of successful group process. There were three components to the program design. First, the IS organization sought to develop employee capacity to deal more effectively with change processes. A set of programs was initiated to develop an organizational learning infrastructure. Second, the selection of participants and the activity outline of the project were informed by the organizational change literature. Third, facilitators were used with each group to ensure a successful group process.

### Preparing the Organization for Change

Using Lewin’s theories as a basis, IS designed a process that included activities geared toward changing perceptions, clarifying values, and setting expectations for interactions among the IS staff. This learning infrastructure included the following elements:

- establishing an Organizational Development Group that provided a “community of practice” in the area of organizational effectiveness and assisted unit leaders in learning more about organizational change and in implementing change processes;
• developing organizational values, identifying particularly important values for the change process, and delivering programs to educate leaders and change behavioral patterns in the organization;

• building a core group of facilitators to begin assisting the organization’s collaborative process; and

• offering mentoring programs for individual employees.

This organizational learning infrastructure will be treated more fully in a chapter of a forthcoming book being planned by EDUCAUSE.

These activities formed a firm foundation and resource base for the effective implementation of the HVC\(^2\) project.

**Organization of HVC\(^2\) and Selection of Participants**

Clayton Christensen put forth a basic concept of change within organizations called the “innovator’s dilemma.” He argued that you must move out of the organization in order to truly innovate with a technology that challenges the current organizational frame of reference.\(^7\) Gordon MacKenzie, former chief creative officer for Hallmark, discussed the need to stay connected to the organization even while engaging in creative activity in order to bring value back into the daily functions. He called this dilemma “orbiting the giant hairball.”\(^8\) While we needed to engage in our most creative mode, it was clear that we also still needed to remain well connected to the “giant university hairball.”

As we explored these concepts and thought about our environment, it became clear that some individuals who took broad and creative approaches to issues were often subject to the natural conservative influence of organizational structures, thus limiting the value of their ideas to KU. We chose to experiment with taking these individuals and moving them into the more supportive environment of the HVC\(^2\) project with the goal of seeing more of their creative ideas move into actual service changes. Besides their innovative perspective, individuals were chosen for their skills and characteristics using criteria similar to those outlined by Vidal as follows:\(^9\)

- **Representation**—members who represented the various sectors of the community and/or sets of expertise (such as the campus architect for the collaborative learning spaces group)

- **Goal compatibility**—IS staff and clients who believed in the library and information technology integrated service philosophy and were ready to explore its true meaning

- **Deliberation**—members who were able to reflect, use creativity, and communicate effectively in a collaborative environment

- **Positivism**—members who had a constructive attitude toward collaborative problem solving while at the same time communicating openly and honestly

- **Focus**—members who were willing to commit the time and focus to the project
Group members were chosen from within IS and from key user groups. They included individuals from a variety of positions within IS (from reference librarians to PeopleSoft programmers) and across campus (instructional designers, architects, faculty experts), as well as students. Groups as diverse as this posed significant challenges to communication and consensus building. In the next section on facilitation, we discuss steps we took to overcome the challenging aspects of this diversity.

Our model for the groups utilized a common team structure including the following roles: sponsor, facilitator, group leaders, and group members. Each sponsor took responsibility for one of the teams. Facilitators were chosen from the core group that was being developed within IS and from the University Department of Human Resources and Equal Opportunity Professional Development unit. To promote collaboration, we decided to have two leaders per group: one from within IS, and one from the client group that was being served. A senior staff member from IS was also assigned to coordinate the work of the groups.

The HVC² project was kicked off with a retreat, with a goal of building shared vision and a capacity for expanded creative thinking. Exercises led by an acting coach were aimed at creating an atmosphere of creativity. Groups were asked to rephrase the charges they were given into taglines that represented a broader vision. Participants had opportunities to ask questions of the sponsors about the project. Sponsors provided critical clarifications that reassured participants that their work would be taken seriously and that there was financial support already allocated for the work. These assurances were confirmed throughout the process by the sponsors and the facilitators. This retreat provided the groups with a jump-start on building community and defining their work in broad terms.

Facilitators and group leaders organized the work of their groups with effective processes in mind. The first meeting of each group included discussion of the charge with the sponsor of the task group, consideration of ground rules for group effectiveness, identification and sharing of information resources, and activities to quickly engage group members in the topic at hand. Groups took different approaches to information sharing (some used the Blackboard course management system; others used groupware software), communication, and researching their charges. All groups searched the literature and looked to other colleges and universities for examples of similar work. Some site visits and phone conversations with these institutions followed. We also engaged three consultants to assist the groups by giving feedback on their approach. Some groups designed surveys (online and interview) to help with their work.

The groups worked for six months. During that time, the sponsors, group leaders, and facilitators of most groups met monthly to give progress reports, discuss issues and options, correct their courses, bolster project enthusiasm, and learn from each other. By the end of the six months, each group demonstrated its personality with respect to how it worked together, how it used the facilitators, and the nature of the product(s) produced. Interviews with group leaders, participants, and facilitators after six months of intense activity indicated that the monthly meetings improved group development and effectiveness and kept the HVC² project as a whole on track.
A second project retreat provided the opportunity for the groups to present their work. It was, in essence, the accountability event for the project. While the presentations focused on the work accomplished and each group’s strategy for approaching its charge, groups also talked about their experiences. It was evident that relationships as well as shared consensus had been built among the participants. Another important part of the retreat was the inclusion of the IS unit managers. These individuals began meeting with the groups to develop their own understanding of the groups’ visions and strategies for integrated service improvements.

After the second retreat, strategies for each group diverged, depending on where the group was in its process. One group, collaborative learning spaces, was firm in its strategy and began implementation with results in two months.11 Several groups went on to test strategies further and begin the process of moving these strategies back into the units.

During the second phase of HVC² (which continued for about a year, from May 2004 through May 2005), progress toward the group goals was documented and reported in a biweekly newsletter, HVC² Outcomes. The newsletter included diverse outcomes, from suggestions for a common structure for e-mail subject lines to e-mail storage limits to the consolidation of common student services into one-stop locations on campus. The continued communication through the newsletter assisted groups in keeping track of the various recommendations and resulting projects and kept responsible administrators accountable to follow through with the changes.

Facilitation Process

Ensuring effective collaborative processes is important for any organization, particularly an information services organization where much of the work is collaborative in nature and where rapid and effective problem solving is critical in managing and fixing technical systems. It is even more important when bringing together information services staff and their campus partners and clients. Using process facilitators who are knowledgeable about, and experienced in, managing group dynamics can enhance the likelihood of effective group processes.12 Within the HVC² project, given the diversity of participants and the increased likelihood for difficult communications, using facilitators was essential to success.

The word facilitate means “to make easy.”13 Vidal outlined two elements in group process. First is the logical process aimed at achieving a goal. Second is the illogical chaotic social process “provoked by each single participant, by the participants’ relations to each other, or by the participants’ relations to the facilitator of the group.”14 This second process brings to the fore “the participants’ own subjectivity, intuition, fantasy and feelings.”15 The facilitator’s role is to bridge these two processes, ensuring that the logical and social processes do not destroy each other and that the group can take advantage of both processes in accomplishing the goal.

What exactly do facilitators do? They guide group members through structured communication and decision-making processes, offering an array of tools to maximize group effectiveness and efficiency. The facilitator listens to the deliberations of the
group, reflects on the communications and behaviors, and makes suitable interventions that include

- making observations about the process,
- encouraging all group members to participate,
- ensuring that information shared by the group is organized and not lost, and
- directing the use of tools to diverge or converge thinking about the goal.

The facilitator has two elements of focus: building positive relationships among group members, and enabling the group to be effective at problem solving. Facilitators use exercises to enhance knowledge of members to build positive relationships. Problem solving is effectively facilitated through a two-stage process of divergent and then convergent thinking.

*Divergent thinking* invites the group to think broadly about the topic, reframing issues and viewing them from different perspectives. Judgment and criticism are deferred and participants are encouraged to build on each others’ ideas. Divergent thinking makes use of tools such as brainstorming and mind mapping and uses other broadening experiences such as making site visits to see other approaches.

*Convergent thinking* requires the group to find patterns and structure after divergent thinking has produced a universe of ideas. During this phase, team members are asked to group similar ideas, use intuition to assess the importance of ideas, combine and modify ideas, and generate and evaluate alternatives. Convergent thinking uses tools such as multivoting (to quickly establish group priorities) and affinity diagramming and tree diagrams (to show associations).  

The goal of this divergent-convergent process is to bring forward these aspects of creativity:

- **Fluency**—the production of multiple ideas and alternatives
- **Flexibility**—the ability to process ideas in many different ways
- **Originality**—the means of getting away from the obvious and breaking routine-bound thinking
- **Elaboration**—the ability to structure complex solutions

For the HVC² project, a facilitator and a cofacilitator (usually a facilitator in training) were assigned to each team. They provided guidance to the group leaders and members. Facilitators met with the group leaders to plan each group meeting and to debrief after the meeting. The group leaders reported that facilitation had the following effects on group process:

- reassured members that their work would be used and funded;
- nurtured “safe” environments for member participation;
- assisted the group leaders in understanding individual team members' behavior;
- provided strength to group members' voices, helping to ensure that everyone was heard;
- helped the group feel okay about being unfocused during the divergent thinking part of the process;
- provided a sounding board for the group leaders on what reactions to expect from the group;
- assisted the group leaders in understanding their own biases and the effects on the group;
- ensured that all regular members of the group, including the leaders, could participate fully in discussions without having to attend to group process issues; and
- enhanced development of a common language and relationships among participants, which resulted in lasting campus collaborations.

Interviews were conducted with the group leaders at the end of the first phase of HVC². It was clear from this feedback that the facilitators provided many groups with the means of finding consensus about the successful outcomes of the projects. Through their participation, facilitators ensured that conflicts were addressed, that misunderstandings were clarified, and that group process stayed on track. Leaders felt that without this support, groups would have been far more likely to lose their way or follow individual member issues that were not relevant to the overall goals. In addition, group leaders reported that they learned from their interactions with the facilitators how to become more facilitative leaders. They felt that their own leadership skills had been improved. We believe that facilitation in the design of HVC² enabled the groups to function more effectively and to accomplish their activities on a more ambitious timeline.

**What It Means to Higher Education**

The HVC² project provided IS at KU a process for collaboration within our organization and with our users and allowed us to fulfill the vision of the provost to identify needs and deliver user-oriented services through consistent engagement with users. The model of collaboration developed for the project and its implementation during the project demonstrated that we were able and willing to listen to user needs and take immediate action as a result. Groups felt empowered and responsible for acting, not just recommending. IS responded by providing the expertise and resources needed to fulfill the dreams of the groups.

The collaborative learning space group was charged with designing space for campus common areas and with determining how faculty might use such spaces in their classes. The immediate design of a collaborative learning space in one IT lab and the design of a new library facility demonstrated the ability of IS staff, in collaboration with other campus
players, to act on the designs of the group in a timely manner. This model for collaborative space is beginning to spread to other units on campus.\textsuperscript{17}

In some areas, the result of the first phase of the project was a more detailed planning process, such as in our approach to digital preservation. This group was charged with planning for the long-term preservation of the university’s academic and administrative digital assets. It continued its collaborative work by focusing on the technical infrastructure needed for preservation in discussions with IS staff and by engaging campus leaders to determine the degree of awareness and ownership of the issue. These processes resulted in a campus plan for approaching these issues, the beginning of educational sessions with campus leaders and IT staff, and the allocation of new positions to focus on building the infrastructure.\textsuperscript{18}

The three other groups were each charged with investigating the needs of their assigned user groups: scholars, students, and decision makers. They continued to address specific service issues and needs ranging from small changes in the service profile to large reorganizations of services. For example, the student group is working on a full integration of services to students in answering their most common questions. The one-stop concept is being designed and implemented during this academic year. The faculty group has continued its work on specific service enhancements, including a project to address research computing needs.

One of the most difficult areas for our project was to define appropriate services to university administrative staff and decision makers. Interviews revealed significant differences across campus in the way units make decisions and in their need for institutional data and decision-making support. We are continuing to try to determine the process by which we might improve our approach to managing our university data and providing it to campus decision makers.\textsuperscript{19}

However significant the specific project outcomes have been, we believe that the most important change for IS has been the collaborative process that has proven successful in use with other campus units. For example, there are now more than 20 services and projects jointly delivered by IS and Student Success on the KU campus. The collaboration between the Writing Center and Library Services has been strengthened through provision of writing center services in library buildings and through an array of joint venues for teaching writing and the research process. Jointly delivered services that support faculty use of technology in the classroom have been strengthened through closer communication with all campus units that deliver these services.

While it is early to have a definitive view of the results, feedback from participants is positive. They particularly appreciate the rapid results in service changes and the attitude of continuous improvement. There is a sense that the process of evaluating what works and what doesn’t is continuous, and this allows users and IS staff to incorporate environmental changes quickly into our development processes. An IS Assessment Council has been established to gather and track user feedback and to assist IS in designing feedback mechanisms (surveys, focus groups, online feedback, and so forth) for services.
Formation of the Assessment Council is consistent with a movement toward continuous improvement and assessment in higher education. The approach is led by the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI). This group’s mission is “to advance academic and administrative excellence in higher education by identifying, promoting, supporting, and sharing effective organizational practices among member institutions.” We believe that our approach toward campus collaboration is consistent with the NCCI initiative.

High-velocity change is clearly challenging within higher education environments. Yet the need for effective change processes that include collaborations between information services professionals and their users is obvious. It is necessary to find ways of managing that collaboration without making the change process so slow that we cannot keep up with the needs of our users and the changes in our environments.

We believe that the collaborative process outlined in this bulletin brings into focus a means for engaging in true continuous strategic development with users while providing a collaborative process with IS employees that fits the realities of the technical environment. Attention to the ability of information services organizations to “learn” and effectively implement change is an important component. Careful selection of participants combined with effective facilitation of processes can bring forward strategic development that is effective and rapid. Collaborations, if structured and supported by proven techniques from organizational development, can be successful. We hope that the design of our project will assist others when they begin to design and manage campus-wide collaborative projects.

Key Questions to Ask

- What is the vision for a successful outcome from this change process?
- Does the change process require new and innovative thinking? If so, what are the technical skills and the process skills needed by participants?
- What is the level of trust in the organization? Have we provided an infrastructure to ensure that what is learned is shared throughout the organization?
- Does the change process require collaboration among diverse participants? If so, what are the resources needed to ensure effective collaborative processes?
- Does the change process concern a complex problem or issue? If so, is a process in place to ensure both divergent and convergent thinking?

Where to Learn More

- *Master Facilitator Journal*, <http://www.masterfacilitatorjournal.com/home.html>; see particularly the competencies section.

**Endnotes**

1. Printing Services was also made part of the IS unit during the reorganization but functionally remained fairly separate due to a financial model which required that they be self-supporting.
9. Vidal, op. cit., p. 392. For more information about the group members, see <http://www.informationservices.ku.edu/hvc2>.


15. Ibid.


17. Zvacek, op. cit.


19. For more information on HVC² project results and feedback on the collaborative process, see <http://www.ku.edu/~hvc2>.


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