

**An Organizational Culture Assessment of the Chicago College of Performing Arts
at Roosevelt University**

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Roosevelt University in Chicago consists of six colleges. One of the oldest and most selective of these is the Chicago College of Performing Arts (or *CCPA*), which houses the Music Conservatory and the Theater Conservatory. For this assessment, I have interviewed five employees of CCPA in order to analyze the culture of CCPA and the barriers and enablers of change in the organization.

Universities are a particularly complex type of organization, with some unique challenges in assessing the culture. As Weisbord puts it:

“[T]he organization... has budgeting and controls, but no goals that the people doing the work agree are *organizationally* relevant (for them). The latter describes some universities and medical centers, for example, in which financial control systems provide an illusion of rationality, that like beauty, is only skin deep” (Weisbord, 1976).

This disconnect from the larger organization’s goals is evident in my interviews, as employees of CCPA feel much more clear on their college’s goals compared to the university’s.

CCPA is currently going through a high level of change, from leadership changes in the last two years to a current curriculum revision. It will be important to identify the most positive elements of this culture to maintain employee satisfaction. “When employees feel they fit with the organization’s culture, they’re much more likely to develop an emotional attachment to the company... Employees who sense a good fit are therefore more likely to help their colleagues and ‘go the extra mile’ to benefit the company” (Colquitt et al, 2002, p. 558).

Part I – Data Gathering And Analysis Methods

The gathering of data for this paper was done through interviews. Interviews are a useful tool, but can be challenging for data analysis: “it may be hard to put data from different individuals together into a coherent picture; each person may see things differently even though he or she uses the same words” (Schein, 2017, p. 260).

Five employees were interviewed (list of interviewees has been redacted and names have been disguised for publication, in order to preserve anonymity). Three of them are full-time staff, two are non-tenure track faculty. Three of them have lengths of employment with Roosevelt of under five years and two have lengths of employment for over 10 years. Four of the interviews were conducted in person – three at a local café, and one in the employee’s office – and one was conducted over Zoom. For the in-person interviews, recordings were done (with permission) over the Voice Memo app on my iPhone; for the Zoom interview, I used the Zoom recording feature, again with permission from the interviewee. After the interviews, each recording was uploaded on to the website Trint.com which automatically generated transcripts.

The interview questions were adapted from the Weisbord Six-Box Model Organizational Culture Assessment provided as part of our class materials (see Figure 1 for the full list). When asked questions that referenced “our organization,” respondents could address their responses to the Theatre Conservatory, towards CCPA (which contains the Theatre Conservatory) or towards Roosevelt University (which contains the Chicago College of Performing Arts). When questions dealt with “senior managers”, I specified that interviewees should use the Dean and Assistant Dean of CCPA for that topic; when questions dealt with “middle managers,” I specified that interviewees should reference managers at the Chair and Director levels of the CCPA organization chart.

Once interviews were transcribed, I highlighted and excerpted quotes from each transcript that addressed individual questions and collated those answers together. This allowed me to easily identify differences and commonalities between the interview subjects' responses.

Part II – Findings

To more easily demonstrate my findings, I will gather them under the headings provided by the Weisbord Six-Box Model. Weisbord describes his model as providing “six labels, under which can be sorted much of the activity, formal and informal, that takes place in organizations. The labels allow consultants to apply whatever theories they know when doing a diagnosis and to discover new connections between apparently unrelated events” (Weisbord, 1976). Those labels are: Mission/Purpose, Structure, People & Relationships, Rewards, Helpful Mechanisms, and Leadership; then those boxes all function within an Environment.

Mission/Purpose

Interviewees describe some distinctions between the purposes of Roosevelt University versus the purposes and mission of CCPA and the Theatre Conservatory. Ms. A describes the university's goal as “balancing a budget by increasing enrollment”, while other interviewees focus on the goals of professional training and education, or a good student experience. Weisbord explains that “Purposes can be seen as a sort of psychological negotiation between ‘what we have to do’ (for survival) and ‘what we want to do’ (for growth, self-expression, idealism, etc.)” (1976), and I think that tension is clear here. The interviewees are describing what the university at large “has to do” (balance the budget), versus what the CCPA employees “want to do” (focus on student training and experience).

This tension is also reflected in the answers to “Are the organization's goals understood at all levels of the organization?” Ms. B says, “It feels like CCPA and the Theatre department in general has kind of done their own thing for so long because it's such a specific field... I think the university as a

whole might not understand that.” Ms. C feels that, at the university level, “the collaboration is not in-depth enough to be able to actually have any clear understanding of goals.”

Structure

Answers from interviewees regarding structure and communication are a mixed bag. When referencing the university as a whole, in response to the question “How is the organization structured for communication, decision-making and collaboration?”, the general feeling is one of disconnect and confusion. On this wider organizational level, adjectives are used like “challenging”, “siloes”, and “unclear”. Within CCPA, communication with management seems to be very affected by how an individual employee relates to them – as Ms. C puts it, if faculty or staff agree with the Deans, they communicate well and in a similar style; if they don’t agree, “they’re less likely to work within that kind of culture of communication, collaboration.” Three out of five interviewees describe confusion as to a reporting structure, or who to go to for questions on specific topics.

On a more positive note, four out of five interviewees feel that employees were empowered to take independent action. But this also can be a mixed bag – Ms. A describes the double-edged sword of great freedom and a lack of accountability: “I can make decisions about my classes with no accountability whatsoever... I’m accountable to myself and my students.” On one hand, this feels empowering, but on the other hand, it also feels isolating and had the potential for abuse. Some of this independence comes out of necessity – Ms. C points out that “people do have to work pretty independently just because we are so short-staffed.” Everyone feels pretty clear that larger decisions are either out of their hands or need to be done in collaboration with the Deans.

People and Relationships

In this section of questions, I see the greatest distinction between long-term employees (the two that have been with Roosevelt/CCPA for over 10 years) and the newer hires. On the question of morale, both Mr. E and Ms. A answer immediately with negative adjectives: “Fatigued and resentful”

(Ms. A) and “Very low” (Mr. E). By contrast, Ms. B feels “pretty good” – she can see how long-term employees would be tired and worn down by constant battles, but feels she has the energy for them. Ms. C describes herself as “much happier now than I was before I had this position” even though she is aware of frustration among other faculty and staff members. And Mx. D describes morale as “Positive but exhausted.”

Within this group of interviewees, salary does not seem to be a major factor affecting morale – in fact, four out of five interviewees have little to no information about comparable pay rates in other organizations. But when it comes to questions of training systems and performance measurements, the answers across the board reflect a great lack of support. Three out of five interviewees have received some kind of advancement opportunity (moving from part-time to full-time, or a change of title), but see no opportunity for any further promotion. And while a change of title does come with some degree of training (Ms. A describes it as receiving “some degree of information about that title, but you hadn’t necessarily gotten anything prior to that”), interviewees are in agreement that within the Theatre Conservatory, it is assumed that you knew how to do your job when you were hired. The only other training interviewees are aware of is compliance-based (e.g. sexual harassment training, or online security training).

Mentorship for advancement also does not appear available, as far as our interviewees are concerned. The two longest-employed interviewees are very clear that there is no consistent system for professional development, either for faculty or staff. The newer employees all have a perception that there must be such a system for faculty at least but have no details; as Mx. D put it, “there’s whispers of that.” This is a significant gap for the organization, as “formal [mentoring] programs allow the company to provide consistent information, train mentors, and ensure that all newcomers have the opportunity to develop one of these fruitful relationships” (Colquitt et al, 2002, p. 561).

When it comes to performance measurement and performance reviews, the interviewees are also in agreement – the organization doesn't have consistent measures or review systems. Only one employee describes having had an official performance review with a supervisor, and it was more than three years ago. Two employees describe the self-review process as “a joke.” Faculty performance can be measured by student evaluations, which do not apply to staff, but both faculty members describe having colleagues observe their classes and never actually receiving the feedback.

When asked “Are people happy working here?”, none of the interviewees have a simple “yes” response. Ms. C tells me that when she runs into colleagues at the end of a day, “Every time I ask how they're doing – the answer is usually fine, or okay, never good.” All the employees interviewed emphasize the joy of working with students, and an incredible frustration in dealing with the institution. When asked how people demonstrate their commitment to their work, despite all these negative influences, all five employees say some version of Mr. E's statement: “They still show up and do their job.”

Rewards

In response to the question about what employees value, all five interviewees agree that community and relationships are key. These priorities stand in contrast with the responses about how news (good or bad) is communicated – the universal response is e-mail. In-person communication happens on a very informal basis. When asked how or if good performance is rewarded, all employees agree that rewards are limited to individual thanks or congratulations. Only two employees are aware of any system for reprimanding below-standard performance.

Helpful Mechanisms

The same disconnect between a wish for community and relationship-building and the way information is communicated is also evident in the questions about how technology is used and information is shared in the organization. Department meetings are scattered if and when they happen,

and most news is shared in e-mail blasts that may or may not go to all the people affected. There are many other systems used, but they don't always operate effectively. Multiple employees point out that the university wants all documents shared over Microsoft Teams or OneDrive, but students are not allowed to access faculty OneDrive files, so employees resort to using Google systems instead.

This experience lines up with Weisbord's description of two systems that exist within each box – the formal description on paper and “what people actually do” or normative behavior. “Normative behavior usually determines whether otherwise technically excellent systems succeed or fail, because normative behavior indicates the degree to which the system as designed meets the needs of the people who have to operate it” (Weisbord, 1976).

Employees seem to find the most satisfaction working with their smallest group of working collaborators – for faculty, this is usually the other faculty teaching within their program; for staff, this is primarily their direct reports or direct supervisors. Ms. C says, “There's a lot of collaboration... and through that collaboration, we assign tasks.”

When smaller groups or departments need to work together, they are, as Mx. D puts it, working “functionally alongside each other.” Ms. B attributes this to the macro-culture of theatre: “...so much of theatre is based on production meetings... so we already have that built into our system.” But Ms. A feels that this is not necessarily the norm; she believes it's “usually in a moment of crisis or forced decision-making.”

The question “How do you identify processes or areas of focus for improvement?” received a wide range of responses. Ms. B sees this as a very personal process, using the metaphor of “stubbing my toe” to describe discovering a mistake, figuring out how to fix it, and do better next time; both Mr. E and Mx. D see it as a group project, to be worked on in meetings as a continuous process. Ms. C and Ms. A both express frustration at not being part of improvement conversations enough – as Ms. C says, “After a decision has been made or a change has been made, it's communicated down. There's not

always a lot of communication, and there's not always a lot of cooperation in deciding what and how something will be changed, what will be changed."

All five interviewees agree that student satisfaction is measured through two official channels (student course evaluations, and whether students return to school after a semester or summer break) and one unofficial channel (anecdotes about what students have said directly to Chairs or Deans). Ms. B describes this as "what I hear in whispers" and Ms. C has a perception that a lot of recent decisions have been based on student morale, but "I have no idea how they're getting that information."

Leadership

When it comes to the Dean and Assistant Dean of CCPA (the level I have designated as "senior managers"), all the employees appreciate that they are taking on big questions. This includes issues like "what it takes to change curriculum" (Ms. A), "accreditation and all the things I don't know about" (Mx. D), and "looking at the big picture" (Ms. B). The employees also would like to see more transparency and communication. Both Ms. A and Mr. E feel a disconnect – as Mr. E put it, "they are so disjointed from who we are as a program."

For the Chairs and Directors, all the interviewees value their collaboration and advocacy. Ms. B said, "They are so good at getting so much done with so little resources." They also cite the commitment to students. When asked what this level could do better, I receive multiple ideas: Ms. C would like "all of us to be more unified in an overarching goal", Mx. D would like more clarity on who is responsible for different topics and issues, and Ms. A believes that the existing gaps are due to being short-staffed.

Everyone interviewed is clear that communication between managers is handled primarily in regular meetings, but there is also consensus that conflict is not being handled successfully. Ms. B believes this is due to not having space or time "to sit down and have this larger discussion", while Ms. C believes conflict is simply "avoided."

Everyone agrees that their managers are good at building teams. Ms. B again credits this to theatre as an industry: "We built our small teams, we built our larger teams... and [we have] the singular goal. Theatre is such an easy instant community builder." Mx. D says, "I think we divide and conquer really brilliantly... When we need to get something accomplished, I feel like we pull together." The ability of managers to effectively manage change gets more mixed reviews. Much of this is due to lack of authority in the larger institution. Ms. A points out, "I feel like there is a lot that is outside of their control," and Ms. B feels that her own supervisor would do more "if they had actual power in it."

Environment

Interviewees have different senses of who the external customers for our organization are. Faculty members say "students and their families", while one staff member works consistently with outside organizations renting space, and so views them as her particular customers.

One of the challenges in the environment that several employees identify is marketing Roosevelt and CCPA as an educational option to students. Ms. A wonders, "I don't know the gaps of who doesn't know about us." Additionally, there is a feeling that CCPA has to also justify itself to the larger institution as a worthwhile investment. According to Mx. D, "Inside the organization... the view of it is kind of on the low end... in terms of what we bring in and the resources for what we bring in."

Feedback from these different sources seems to come in very informally. Mr. E says, "When they're not happy, we hear about it!" And Mx. D agrees, "I feel like [students] just state whatever they want, whether it's solicited or not." For her rental customers, Ms. C "equates positive feedback if they return as customers. They share negative feedback sometimes."

Employees see an important distinction between Roosevelt University and CCPA in terms of whether the environmental factors are understood. Ms. A perceives a divide "for some of our Music colleagues, and understanding of why some things have to change." Ms. B believes that student

experience issues are less understood by higher levels of administration “because it becomes so much about numbers.”

Part III – Barriers and Enablers of Change

All five of the interviewees see CCPA and the Theatre Conservatory currently undergoing a significant amount of change. In the last two years, some key administrators have left their positions, and some new senior managers have come in, or been moved into their positions from previous roles. The faculty has been working all year on a major curriculum revision, and CCPA has been consolidating administrative work that used to be done on the Conservatory level. Mr. E describes the situation as “a bit of a transition forward trying to figure out what the new world order is.”

Barriers to Change

Jill Romford describes the enablement of change as “the practice of preparing individuals and groups within an organization for and facilitating the adoption of change by providing them with the knowledge, resources, and emotional and practical support they need to adjust to and benefit from transformational shifts successfully” (Romford, 2023). From my interviews, there are challenges in each of these areas (knowledge, resources, and support) that could be barriers to change.

Providing knowledge requires clear communication. Ms. A’s perception of communication from the university is that “communication comes from the top, in unclear pathways. It is sometimes unclear to me who is receiving what communication, who the audience is, who knows it and who doesn’t.” One concrete example is the organization chart for CCPA: it was redone in the late fall of 2023, but one interviewee didn’t know his supervisor had changed until it was mentioned in passing, and when asked about the layers in the organization chart, two interviewees don’t remember seeing it at all. This is despite it being attached to an email broadcast to all CCPA faculty and staff a few weeks prior to these interviews.

When it comes to resources, all the interviewees see some stress in this area. Ms. A describes how she is using personal resources and connections to support the production she is directing, and Mx. D is bothered by the limitations placed on printed resources they can provide to students. All five employees describe a lack of personnel, both in professional staff and in available student workers to accomplish their group's work.

Regarding support, it's clear that all five employees feel supported by their immediate colleagues. They also express support for the hard work that the different levels of management are doing, even as they are frustrated with a lack of transparency. But greater support from senior management to their faculty and staff is definitely desired.

Enablers of Change

Despite these concerns, there are some bright spots when it comes to enabling change. All five employees describe their commitment to students and pride in the work they do. As Mr. E says, "Within us, at least our own system where we feel like we are going something good... we are in a functional place that actually is very positive, and we are getting things done. We've got each other's backs and I feel like we can continue to work no matter what the university does to us." Ms. C has a positive view of how recent changes can improve things in the college: "Organizationally, the roles and the structure has changed, and... for the better. Roles have been consolidated, so individuals maybe are taking on more work, but I think it's all with this bigger vision of inspiring more collaboration within the organization and also promoting a better student experience."

Conclusion

The five interviews I conducted illustrate a complex culture within the Chicago College of Performing Arts. To some degree, it appears to be a networked culture, where "all employees are friendly to one another, but everyone thinks differently and does their own thing" (Colquitt et al, 2022,

p544). It is also clear that, in the context of Roosevelt University, CCPA represents a subculture where “the overall organizational structure is supplemented by another culture governing a more specific set of employees” (Colquitt et al, 2022, p. 550). This subculture can be used to the larger organization’s benefit, by “challenging the values of the overall organization or signifying the need for change” (Colquitt et al, 2022, p. 550).

But supporting this culture while also navigating major changes is a challenge. Leadership in the organization should continue to encourage the commitment of the employees by clarifying how changes support the goals of an improved student experience and excellent training. Employees will also feel more supported by a robust and transparent system of rewards for excellent performance and accountability for performing below standards. All levels of employees in the organization of CCPA and the Theatre Conservatory value the community and collaboration they find in their work; these are excellent elements for leadership to build on as they move forward with improving the organization.

References

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Figure 1

*Question List for Interviews**MISSION/PURPOSE*

- What are the primary factors driving the business of our organization?
- Are the organization's goals understood at all levels of the organization?

STRUCTURE

- How is the organization structures for communication, decision-making and collaboration?
- How many "layers" are embedded in the organization chart?
- Do team members feel they can take action on their own or do they require multiple levels of approval?

PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS

- How would you describe the significant changes to the workforce in the last two years?
- What do you believe have been the drivers of those changes?
- How would you rate morale?
- What factors affect morale?
- How do you believe your salaries compare to other local organizations?
- Do people receive training to do their jobs?
- Do people receive training to move into promotional opportunities?
- How is performance measured in this organization?
- What do performance reviews look like in this organization?
- Are there opportunities to advance in this organization, and where is advancement most often seen?
- Are people happy working here?
- How do people demonstrate their commitment?

REWARDS

- How are people rewarded for doing good or exceptional work?
- How are people reprimanded or corrected for less-than-acceptable performance?
- Besides money, what do you believe is important to the workers here?
- How do we communicate good news?
- How do we communicate bad news?

HELPFUL MECHANISMS

- How is information communicated in this organization?
- How do we use information technology?
- How are decisions made in your group?
- Do departments work together? Where do you believe there are roadblocks?
- How are conflicts between departments handled?
- How do you identify processes or areas of focus for improvement?
- How is student satisfaction measured?
- Are there sufficient resources to perform one's work? Tools, time, people?

LEADERSHIP

- What do the senior managers do well in this organization?
- What do the senior managers need to improve on?
- What do the middle managers do well in this organization?
- What do the middle managers need to improve on?

- How do managers communicate?
- How do managers handle conflict?
- Are managers effective in building teams?
- Are managers effective in managing change?

ENVIRONMENT

- Who are the external customers?
- What is affecting the external customer?
- How do we gain feedback from external customers?
- How widely understood are the current dynamics in the organization's changing environment?

Table 1

Interviewees – this table has been removed for publication to preserve anonymity of participants.