

Case History

Collaboration and Trust among Departments: Woodbury University, School of Media, Culture and Design

Background

Woodbury University School of Media, Culture & Design (MCD) is a thriving school within Woodbury University in Burbank, California, commonly known as the media capital of the world. The mission of the school, one of only three in the university, is to educate the next generation of creative professionals. MCD's mix of major degree-granting programs covers almost every facet of contemporary culture. In many cases students learn directly from faculty who work in the surrounding creative economy. They also benefit from small class sizes, new digital infrastructure, and enriching student life programs.

Issue

About seven years ago, governance was a significant concern for MCD, a concern that accreditation auditors echoed. Previous leadership, appointed by the University administration, had been unable to bring together the half dozen departments that now make up the School. The appointed dean resigned. There were no cross-disciplinary degrees, and student enrollment was decreasing. The department heads had a variety of management styles that frequently clashed.

Solution

One of the department heads suggested that they try Dynamic Self-Governance (DSG). The department heads plus other key faculty and the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs attended an intensive 1½-day training. During the training, they together elected a temporary head of School as well as a temporary representative to a special committee formed to oversee the School. The committee, with Senior Vice President, head of School, and representative as permanent members, began regular meetings that sometimes also included representatives from the nearby entertainment industry. Thus, the School gained its own board (aka "top circle" in DSG).

The department heads also began meeting as a general circle. There they began making policy decisions for the School, including setting procedures for the temporary director's administrative activities. They planned cross-department degrees and found ways to ensure that the rest of the MCD faculty had a voice in running the School. As they established these and other measures, the faculty accepted routine administrative direction much more readily.

