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Academy of the Redwoods

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Communication

Academy of the Redwoods

Abstract

In this academic research paper I will be analyzing the procedures and practices of the high school that I attended, Academy of the Redwoods. Academy of the Redwoods is an early college preparatory high school located amongst the redwoods in Eureka, California. It was a very different school in comparison to average high schools around the country and thus, a unique experience. Therefore, I will be comparing the dynamics of Academy of the Redwoods in conjunction to normal high schools using academic journals and sources. Some of the areas that I focus on are the school atmosphere and student life, advantages and disadvantages of attending early college high schools, attending college courses as a teenager, and class sizes. I also talk about the relationship between Academy of the Redwoods and the community college that it exists on, College of the Redwoods. Additionally, I will be looking at Academy of the Redwoods using theoretical communication approaches such as human relations approach, organizational culture, bureaucracy, organizational communication, and the systems perspective.

My high school experience was very different to most teenagers. That is because the high school that I went to was unique. The organization that I will be studying is my high school, Academy of the Redwoods.

Academy of the Redwoods, or “AR” for short, is an early college high school. This means that the students are dual-enrolled in both high school and college and take college courses in addition to high school ones. Also, our school was located on the campus of a community college, College of the Redwoods. Therefore, our student life and campus atmosphere was very different than most high schools because we mixed and learned alongside college students.

Going to an early college high school like AR has many advantages and disadvantages that I got to experience. The biggest and most obvious advantage is that we get to graduate high school with most of our general education requirements completed. Another advantage from my experience at AR is being immersed in the college atmosphere and teaching methods from a young age so that when I went to HSU, I was familiar with many things and adjusted a lot easier. A disadvantage of going to AR is that we didn’t have sports. Also, at times it was hard to stay connected to the “high school experience” at times when most of our peers were college students.

For this paper I will be examining my high school, Academy of the Redwoods, from the different organizational perspectives we discussed in class. I will also be comparing AR with both different high schools and with the college atmosphere to see how it is a similar and different organization to them. A few concepts that I will be looking at AR with are the human relations approach, organizational culture, bureaucracy, organizational communication, and the systems perspective.

As I stated earlier, Academy of the Redwoods is an early college high school. In *Case Study of a New Engineering Early College High School: Advancing Educational Opportunities for Underrepresented Students in an Urban Area* by Cindy M. Gilson and Michael S. Matthews, early college high schools “are public schools of choice that have emerged across the United States over the past two decades in response to concerns about at-risk and underrepresented groups’ low graduation rates and the rising demand for qualified professionals in the U.S. workforce”(Gilson and Matthews 1). It also states that early college high schools “aim to provide students with a rigorous education”(Gilson and Matthews; 1). Having participated in an early college high school for four years, I can say with experience that this information is true. I knew that

attending AR and taking part in college classes, in addition to my high school ones, would be significantly more difficult than going to a “traditional” high school.

Educational Resilience at Risk? The Challenges of Attending an Early College High School by Yolanda Calhoun, Virginia Snodgrass Rangel, and Hilary L. Coulson details some of the difficulties associated with attending an early college high school. They say that “Research suggests students in [Early College High Schools] may struggle to adapt to the different and higher expectations of college courses, do not know where to look for help with their academic work, and, as a result, fail their courses”(Calhoun et al, 301). I have found this to be true. There are many students that were not able to the higher expectations of academic achievement and ended up transferring to a traditional high school. In fact, AR had an unofficial humorous motto which was “adapt, migrate, or die” because anyone who came to AR would either “adapt” to the school’s culture or, if they were unable to adapt, “migrate” to a different school.

However, despite these difficulties, many students still decided to attend AR from throughout the entire county. Some of my classmates lived as far away as Piercy or Willow Creek and commuted over one hour every day to go to school. Also, students of all different socio-economic backgrounds came to AR because, in spite of its educational advantages, it is still a public high school and completely free for all students. Therefore, some kids that normally could not afford to take college classes now had the ability to do so without having to worry about the financial burden of college tuition.

Early College High Schools: Model Policy Components. Policy Analysis by Jennifer Zenith and the Education Commission of the States argue that early college high schools can be a solution to “diminishing percentages of high school graduates enrolling immediately in postsecondary education”(Zenith et al, 1). I think that early college high schools like AR are a great way to increase the amount of graduates moving on to post-secondary education. I never felt pressured into going to a four year university at AR, but my teachers strongly encouraged some form of post-secondary education whether that may be a trade school or apprenticeship in order to learn more about the specific field that I wished to go into.

In *“This Is My Family Outside of My Family”: Care-Based Relating in a Model Early College High School* by Omer Ari, Teresa R. Fisher-Ari, Jim Killacky, and Roma Angel, the student well-being at an early college high school is a top priority. A key concept said “through small class sizes and other deliberate structures such as weekly Focus Group meetings, Homework Clubs, and after-school Academic Support sessions, teachers come to know students as individuals, developing an understanding of their knowledge, skills, background, and out of school lives...In turn, students respond to such overt displays of care by working to live up to high expectations by doing their best”(Ari et al, 8).

Although we were on a very large college campus with lots of people, our actual high school population was less than 200 students and 10 teachers. Therefore, our high school felt like a small community. We called our teachers by their first names, joked with them, and got to know them personally. In addition, they treated us with respect, care, and always wanted the best for us. Due to this type of relationship, we the students returned that respect to them and always strived to do our best. This type of behavior is a good example of the human relations approach to organizations.

The human relations approach believed that organizations “were created and maintained through cooperation and that treating workers humanely could lead to increased productivity”(Cahyaningtyas, 72). Since we were learning in a happy environment where we knew that our opinion mattered and we had the ability to speak freely to our teachers, we were more productive because we were more willing to work.

In addition to the human relations approach at AR, as with any school there is also a bureaucracy. Many high schools consist of the principal, teachers, other staff, and students that all have different roles and responsibilities. *Early College High School Principals as Democratic, Socially Just, Culturally Responsive Leaders* by Hattie Lee Hammonds studied how principals in early college high schools “promote the success of the first generation, students of color and low-income students they serve”(Hammonds, 2).

The principal is arguably the most powerful position in the school, and how they manage their school can have a big affect on how the entire school operates. This article describes early college high school principals as “democratic, socially just,

culturally responsive leaders who promote the academic success of traditionally underserved and underrepresented students in three ways: increasing access to higher education; removing barriers to student learning using innovative solutions; and increasing opportunities for traditionally underserved and underrepresented students to attend ECHSs and earn both a diploma and a 2-year degree”(Hammonds; 3).

I can attest that during my four years at Academy of the Redwoods, I had two very different principals that exhibited different methods of management. My junior and senior years, I had a great principal that truly understood our community and worked amazingly with the teachers and students alike. This principal was formerly a math teacher and would allow students who needed help with math homework to stop by his office any time to get some help. However, during my freshman and sophomore years, the principal at AR was the complete opposite. She was a stereotypical “bureaucrat” who did not engage much with the students and did not share our school’s particular beliefs and principles.

Academy of the Redwoods exists as an organization within another organization. As I previously stated, AR is located on the College of the Redwoods, or CR, campus. Therefore, we as students are a part of the AR organization and the CR organization, which are two very separate and different organizations. AR tries to maintain its own community while also promoting interaction within the CR community. AR tries to create an atmosphere of a small family and a welcome gathering of like-minded people that are similar but also very different. It encourages these differences while also allowing inclusivity. We call our teachers by their first names and have a personal connection to each of them. CR’s culture is more formal and less personal. CR is a commuter college, therefore many students simply go to class and then go home. Furthermore, for this reason it is pertinent that we gather our sense of community from AR because it lacks at CR.

A Communication-Rules Approach to Organizational Culture by Maryan S. Schall is an article I found that talks about organizational culture. It says that “Organizational culture is characterized by universality and uniqueness ... Though they often have surface similarities, they are essentially unique in identifiable ways--they are marked by different “rules”. The unique characteristics of any given organizational culture will often

be those most important for new members to learn in order to hold appropriate expectations of others and to fulfill expectations others have of them”(Schall, 2).

I find this definitely to be true for Academy of the Redwoods. AR puts all students through an “orientation” on their first day in which they detail all the ways that they are unique compared to a traditional high school. Also, during this orientation, we are told by older students and teachers the rules that we must follow if we want to continue to go there be successful at AR. For example, we are given a lot of freedom at AR because the campus is so big and there are so many people. That means that we are held to a much higher standard and need to be respectful, responsible, and don’t make bad decisions that could affect the school.

In addition to AR as an organizational culture, it also practices inter-school communication effectively. At AR, there are multiple channels of communication amongst students and the many resources available. Similarly to a university, AR uses email daily as its main form of communication. Students and teachers are taught to check their school administered email multiple times a day to communicate back and forth about assignments and school inquiries. Also, every day each student is emailed the “daily announcements” which details everything that is happening at school that day including events, meetings, notices, and much more. In addition to internal communication, AR also exhibits effective communication externally with CR as well as other schools in our district with representatives, email, and monthly meetings.

However, communication at AR is not just limited to media-based mediums. Also similar to universities, the teachers at AR have office hours in which students can visit them and talk about anything, whether it be academic or personal problems. *Three Investigations Exploring Relationships Between Perceived Teacher Communication Behaviors and Student Learning* by Janis F. Anderson, Robert W. Norton, and Jon F. Nussbaum says that “Teachers who were perceived as having greater interpersonal solidarity and a more positive communicator style (more dramatic, open, relaxed, impression leaving, and friendly) were perceived as more effective”(Anderson et al, 377). Teachers at AR always have their door open and are willing to listen and give advice. They incorporate office hours and email into our routines as another aspect of college readiness. When I went to HSU, the idea of visiting teachers at their office hours

or emailing them directly were not scary or foreign to me as it can be with a lot of incoming college freshmen.

Academy of the Redwoods can also be related back to the system's theory that we have discussed in class. We see the system's theory as "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" and that it focuses on the relationships among the parts of the system. *The Role of Organizations in the Modern Society: An Outlook from the Perspective of Systems Theory* by Anna Theis-Berglmair describes system's theory similarly, discussing the relationships between organizations and their social environment.

This can be tied back to AR as an organization because we constantly were socializing with not only each other at AR, but also amongst our peers at CR as well. For example, AR has their own building in which students can go for lunch and are free to be just with other high school students, or they can go to the CR cafeteria to mix with the CR students. Also, there are numerous dances, clubs, and other extracurricular activities throughout the year that are created just for AR students to build a strong sense of community and interact amongst our peers.

These dynamics between AR and CR strongly correlates back to the dynamics of open systems and closed systems of systems theory. In some ways AR was a closed system, wanting its independence from CR and having its own identity. Being a separate entity, we wanted to not only be known as "the high school at CR", but as a great high school with many different aspects of it that are worthy of admiration. However, for the most part, AR operated as an open system working together and co-existing with CR. As we share a campus, it is pertinent that we have a good relationship with one another.

Conclusions

Analyzing *Academy of the Redwoods* and its role as an organization has led me to a greater understanding of the high school that I attended and how it is a great option for future prospective students. Through the application of various communication

perspectives such as the human relations approach, bureaucracy, organizational culture, bureaucracy, organizational communication, and the systems perspective, I am confident that *AR* works as a successful organization.

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