Diana Rodgers
MicroChange Project
Element 3
Cultural Analysis


<u>Things I believe about the college application process</u>
- It should be educational and about self-discovery
- It can be fun
- It should be student-driven
- A good college process involves some rejection
- Students should focus on the college that fits their academic and social needs and be less hung up about specific rankings
- There is a life-long advantage to attending a highly selective college
- Strong mentoring and organization can alleviate stress in the process of applying to college
- Any student with at least a 3.0 GPA can find a college to attend with minimum debt and debt management needs to factor into the process


   As of right now, while Fit Education Consulting is just me, I think my beliefs about the college application process set the institutional culture to some degree. All of the above are my espoused values which I state to prospective families during their initial contact point with me or in our initial session. Schein writes that espoused values are "[a leader's] sense of what ought to be, as distinct from what is" (2017, p. 19). I believe that this perfectly encapsulates my sales pitch and the expectations that I try to set up for both me and for the students and his or her family. By reputation, the college application process is stressful, sad, and a slog to get through. It supposedly causes incredible tension between parents and students and is about a means to an end.

   I, on the other hand, try to present an alternative perspective in my sales pitch and service. The college process should be an exciting, joyful, and growth-oriented process. I always tell families that getting a rejection letter means that we applied to the right tier of colleges. If, for example, a student gets in everywhere she applies, I will always wonder if I didn't push her hard enough with reach options. If, the student gets mostly acceptances, is rejected at her reaches, but gets into one "high match" (somewhere between a reach and a match), I know that we found the right sweet spot for where she can be successful but push herslef. Essentially, I am trying to incorporate into my culture that rejection doesn't equal failure.

   In brainstorming the values that I hold about this process which define my institutional culture, the only place where I align with the general public is the belief that where you go to college matters. I do believe that there are smart and motivated students at every college across America and that a highly engaged student can get an equally great education at a community college as at an Ivy League institution. However, I believe that it is easier to get that life-changing education and first-rate opportunities at more selective colleges. Further, the student body as a whole at more selective colleges are more academically and socially engaged, which leads to their long-term success in diverse fields and the opportunities of a

lifelong professional and social network. With that said, I don't believe that the *US News and World Report* ranked 7 school this year is inherently better than the ranked 15 school. Instead, I try to encourage parents and students to think of colleges in tiers of selectivity and national brand.

Where I fall short of my espoused values

As mentioned previously, my curriculum and forms were created in a piecemeal fashion. I claim to believe in the power of organization, but I think we can be a lot more organized. I think part of the culture that evolved as Fit went from me after school in a Starbucks to my full time professional endeavor is that we fix problems as they arise and not anticipate what something should look like. This needs to stop.

I also believe, after this course, that just mentioning these values in a sales pitch or an introductory meeting are not enough. Our readings last semester about mission statements and the sample readings of Mark Nordenberg's communicating culture at values at the University of Pittsburgh makes me realize how important it is to have these foundational values written down for my students, their parents, and future employees. I want my employees to know what it means to be on the Fit team and my students and parents to know what it means to be a Fit client.

This is particularly urgent to me as I set out to hire my first employees this spring and a more complex culture evolves at Fit Education Consulting. Schein writes that many startups that begin with a single founder with a unique vision develop a culture based on the founder's beliefs and practices (2017, pp. 130-131). At this point, I don't believe that I am the next Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos, but I might be, and the prospect of our current culture which includes poorly communicated values and slapdash organization terrifies me.

Adaptive challenges of hiring for Fit

The adaptive challenge that I am thinking about most is that of forming an employee culture with geographic decentralization. One of the selling points for my parents is that all of our college counseling meetings are over FaceTime or Skype. This means that I am not geographically limited by where students are (although this too was a haphazard development as my original process took place in coffee shops). Further, it also means that I can potentially hire the best people for the job, not just the best people in my geographic area.

However, I currently work as a subcontractor for a company that largely serves applicants from East Asia. Besides sending in reports after each meeting in order to receive payment, I feel totally detached from the organization, and as a result feel somewhat less engaged with these students. I think that if I was connected with other counselors who work for the company, I might feel more invested.

While I don't find Schein's writing about geographic decentralization to be terribly helpful in helping to identify how to have a culture in this way, I keep thinking back to our EdD program. Despite only being in the same place once a month, my Higher Education Management cohort has a strong collaborative culture. I think a lot of this is because of our constant GroupMe messaging thread. I know where everyone is in their mental PoP development, can ask questions about course expectations, and receive the emotional support and cheerleading essential to the EdD. I think that I will be trying to take this and encourage my employees to check in regularly with each other in ways that both include and exclude me.

The second challenge that I am thinking about is that of divisionalization. I have decided that the best way for me to hire would be to hire specialists instead of full service counselors. That as, at this point, I don't want to replicate me. Specifically, I am looking to hire a writing coach, an interview coach, and a scholarship search coordinator. I want people who are highly skilled in their chosen area who can work with students on their piece of the application. I will be faced with the challenges of allowing these specialists to develop methods that work for them but that are also consistent with the Fit mission. Schein gives the example of a company with which he worked that had multiple divisions. The leadership determined that only some things need to be common across divisions as long as other parts of the institutional culture were consistent (2017, p. 218). In my case, I think this is likely to be billing and reporting.

## References

Nordenberg, M. (2009). University update: Super Bowl "celebrations." University of Pittsburgh

Nordenberg, M. (2010). University update: Lessons from the past and the present. University of Pittsburgh

Schien, E. H. (2017). *Organizational culture and leadership,* 5th ed. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons