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## Review Essay / Comptes rendus

Toma, J. Douglas (2010). *Building Organizational Capacity: Strategic Management in Higher Education*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 263. Price: 40.00 USD (hardcover).

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*“Many want to be president, but few want to do president.”*

These words from USC president, Steven Sample, quoted in the book’s Foreword, set the stage for this unique and well-researched look at the implementation stages of efforts to improve universities. Anyone who has been in a higher education leadership position will recognize the frequent gap between vision and reality, between setting goals and actually achieving them. While there is extensive literature on project management, its application to managing as complex an institution as a university is questionable.

Toma’s book addresses this concern directly by proposing a framework specifically designed for that institution, one grounded in theory and explored in practice through a series of case studies. His context is American, but the issues and most of the examples will be familiar to Canadian academics – the president’s vision for the institution that generated considerable interest at the outset but never reached fruition, the differentiating mission statement that ends up sounding like all the others, the new policies that were supposed to change faculty or student behaviour but never really did, or a great idea that never quite worked because no one took charge.

While there have been many books written on university leadership, the more nitty gritty administrative or management side has been relatively neglected. *Building Organizational Capacity* is a welcome addition to the literature, one that combines extensive research with case studies and a very practical and useful set of key questions to guide anyone trying to introduce change into an institution of higher learning.

The book is well structured, starting with a concise but comprehensive review of strategic management and systems thinking. Readers are given a quick reminder of the many approaches to project management introduced over the past few decades—program planning and budgeting systems, management by objectives, zero-based budgeting, total quality management, continuous quality improvement, re-engineering, and other manifestations of systems thinking which, according to Toma, too often offer “an illusion of certainty in an uncertain world.”

The author then looks at today’s issues in higher education and how the various system approaches might help leaders address the challenges of managing increasingly complex institutions. Whatever their impact in private and other public organizations, these have not worked very well in

academia where goals are more diffuse and fuzzier, stakeholders more diverse and numerous and where outcomes may be as much about process or values as more tangible measures of success.

In this context, Toma proposes a strategic management model, which he calls “building organizational capacity” (BOC), a framework specifically designed for the complex political institution that is the modern university. It consists of eight fundamental elements – purposes, structure, governance, policies, processes, information, infrastructure and institutional culture – each of which must be addressed if any specific initiative is to be successful. While the description of these is rather prosaic and hardly compelling in itself, the author brings the elements alive by focusing on each respectively in a series of case studies of an American university or college. Theory and practice are further integrated with the laudable innovation of including a mini literature review by a different author for each of the elements in turn.

Even more importantly, the crucial need of ensuring that all eight elements are aligned is reiterated in each case. Too often, leaders focus narrowly on the details of a specific initiative without fully thinking through its impact across and beyond the institution in ways that ultimately may undermine its success. Toma envisions the eight elements as integrated components, much like the instruments on an airplane control panel, any one of which will be ignored at the pilot’s peril.

The eight cases are designed to represent a broad range of academic and administrative challenges across a variety of institutions, from liberal arts and community colleges to research and regional universities. In each case, the institution, usually through its president, has a very clearly stated intention for change. The analysis of the challenge and how a BOC approach might be applied are based on an extensive series of interviews with the principals in each of the institutions and each study is concluded with a checklist of pertinent questions representing the eight elements and the extent to which they are aligned.

For each institution, the author selects one of the elements to illustrate its importance while demonstrating how the other seven must also be aligned to ensure successful change. For example, the first case study focuses on “purposes” in looking at the College of New Jersey’s efforts to redesign its curriculum to better align with the increasingly selective nature of the institution. It is quickly apparent that a failure to provide lighter teaching loads (policy), communicate broadly the purpose of the whole exercise (information) or develop a more collegial approach in a unionized environment (governance) might undermine the initiative even if it had broad support and fit into the institutional culture.

Once the reader understands the organization of the book, he or she can skip around, focusing on the issues and type of institution that are of most personal interest. As with most writings on higher education in the United States, the book assumes more power and influence in the position of president than is the norm in Canada, where university leadership is usually more transactional than transformative. Nevertheless, university leaders on both sides of the border would benefit from Toma’s strategic management approach, especially because of its flexibility and adaptability. Unlike many texts on systems theory, it avoids promoting a particular approach that is independent of the organizational context by offering one tailor made for the university environment.

If one applies Toma’s own BOC questions to his own book, he would fare well. His purposes are clear, the structure facilitates understanding, the information is presented in a highly readable style and all the components are well aligned. I do wish, however, that the author would resist the current tendency to assign singular status to the word “data” (what data **is** needed?) when it should always be followed by a plural verb (what data **are** needed?).

Some academics may fear that a book emanating from the management and administrative side of the university will value market criteria and revenue generation over traditional academic values and standards. Toma takes great pains to assert that the BOC approach is intended to strengthen the

administrative function of an institution but that organizational capacity can be employed for any set of purposes, including strengthening traditional academic values.

*Building Organizational Capacity* is a valuable resource for any academic leader who wants to achieve meaningful change on campus. It is a particularly refreshing contribution from those on the management side of university leadership, not only because of its clarity, but for the range of its literature review and especially for the author's conclusion that, notwithstanding all the efforts to systematize university leadership, effective strategic management is first and foremost an art. ♦