

CORPORATE UNIVERSITY REVIEW

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Corporate university or corporate college - which is right for you?

By Dr. Charles I. Levine

Corporate universities have become very popular over the past few years - with good reason. Often, when describing this training model, people use the words "corporate university" and "corporate college" interchangeably. There is a distinction, however, and understanding it could well mean the difference in the growth - and even survival - of your training organization.

First, two definitions. A college is usually perceived as a teaching organization focused on one subject. In a college, all of the energy pours into a specific set of subjects grouped around one theme, such as a College of Pharmacy or a Business College.

In contrast, a university is usually thought of as a collection of colleges or as an interdisciplinary organization that teaches many different subjects. The interaction between the various subjects provides a cross-fertilization and spark that may give rise to new ideas and new ways of looking at the world. Colleges tend to produce graduates who are focused on a specific set of skills, while universities tend to produce graduates who are interdisciplinary and proficient at several different types of skills.

Let me ask a question. Is your corporate university a true interdisciplinary university or is it really a college? Within any corporation, there should be a tremendous diversity in the types of training programs offered. Programs may range from management, supervisory and financial training for both lower and executive levels to sales and marketing training; from on-the-job manufacturing programs to computer training and other skills training programs;

from customer service training programs to reading skills, math skills, communications techniques and presentations skills programs. And let's not forget the train-the-trainer programs for all of the trainers in the corporation.

Who coordinates and develops all of these programs? Who designs, budgets and offers the programs? In a corporate university, one central training organization would have this responsibility. In a company with several corporate colleges, the responsibility would be allocated to each functional organization. If your training department focuses almost exclusively on one type of training, you have established a corporate college, not a corporate university.

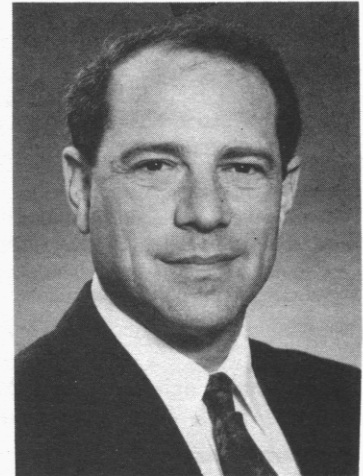
What difference does it make? University of college, who cares.

We are moving into the next century with decreased product lifetimes, increased competition and constant chaos in the marketplace. Corporations that are nimble and can assimilate new information and technologies the most efficiently will be the winners. Compartmentalization is out; teams, interdepartmental communication and data warehousing are in.

Corporate colleges may actually be hurting your corporation's future growth by reinforcing departmental barriers and information hoarding

Think about your training programs. do they generate carefully focused "tree people" trained in single minded skills, or do they cultivate curious "forest people" who understand the corporation and its vision in addition to the specific skills that they need to be successful on the job? during training programs, do the trainers ask their students to look for new mental models, or are the trainers reinforcing the current models, however inconsistent and narrow they may be?

Trends in training tend to mirror corporate culture and management training



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trends. Cultures that are hierarchical and have a rigid chain of command usually result in fragmented training operations. In these companies training is delegated to each functional organization, and as a result, few of the training organizations will know about each other, let alone talk and work with each other. In less rigid, more flexible companies, training functions may be combined (usually under human resources), but there still are chunks of training that act independently. In a true corporate university, there is only one training organization, and it responsible for serving all of the training customers within the corporation.

Before we go any further down the corporate university path, I'd like to offer several words of caution.

First, corporate universities can't just be "assembled" by arbitrarily combining several corporate colleges (or training

departments) under a corporate university umbrella. In a true corporate university, all of the training disciplines work together, sharing a common corporate philosophy, trainers, programs and students. Barriers have been broken down, and the training organization works together as a team serving the entire corporation.

Second, corporate colleges should not be viewed negatively. As in any corporation, some departments provide more value than others. Corporate colleges, or stand-alone training departments, do provide a significant value to the organization. However, corporate universities provide more value per dollar than a corporate college by breaking down barriers in addition to training skills. The only negative return will derive from a "corporate college" that does not know it is a "corporate college." This organization provides negative value by perpetuating barriers, teaching their students confining mental models and pushing the organization backward rather than pulling it forward.

During my training career, I have worked as an employee in many different

types of companies. I have worked in both corporate colleges and corporate universities. I feel that I am very fortunate to have experienced that activity, energy and creativity that a corporate university can cultivate. I have seen the excitement, nervousness and satisfaction in technical service trainers when they have taught their first marketing product knowledge sales training course. I have seen salespeople, managers, executives, service personnel, and unionized manufacturing personnel all gather together in new hire training programs, discussing products and breaking down barriers. I have seen manufacturing developers and management trainers share training materials so that both manufacturing and management personnel will be aware of the same corporate goals, products and competition. The excitement can be electric and result in an environment where synergy is rampant and where 1 + 1 truly equals at least 5 or 6.

On the other hand, I have also experienced the divisiveness that can exist when a corporation has several corporate colleges, each specializing in a specific

area. I have seen products fail because marketing training would not share materials with service training and as a consequence the service training courses did not have adequate information. I have seen manufacturing training programs canceled because engineering refused to allocate the requested training resources. I have seen engineers refused attendance at service training programs because "they work for a different department." Organizations that train their employees in this single-minded, compartmentalized manner will have a very rough time in the next century.

Now, lets go back to my second question, corporate college or corporate university - what difference does it make? In my mind the distinction between a college or a university makes a significant difference. Corporate colleges may actually be hurting your corporation's chances for future growth by reinforcing department barriers and information hoarding. Corporate universities help to encourage information sharing and provide a significant resource through which to leverage success.

It is important to remember that students in a training center learn more than just the information taught in the class. They receive very strong messages about their company culture from the environment in the classroom, the environment in the training center, the attitude of the trainer and the types of exercises conducted during the class. These messages in a corporate university are very different from the messages found in a corporate college.

As you no doubt know by now, I perceive corporate universities to be more than just "big training centers." Corporate universities do not simply "house" training programs conducted by different functional organizations - they take a proactive role in helping to design the programs in order to ensure that every program presented to the employee population helps to reinforce the corporate culture and vision.

Corporate universities should be an integral part of any corporate strategy for success, and they will play a vital part in ensuring that success. Training is not immune from the new management philosophies sweeping the corporate world and within the training and development world, the corporate university is our response to those new management philosophies. It is here to stay and, in my opinion, truly represents the next step in the evolution of the corporate training organization.

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