Essay 7: Teams & Combining Functions

Besides hierarchy, another unfortunate design metaphor arose not from the army (and the church) but from industrialization: the assembly line. Graduates were to be manufactured like automobiles, to be moved from course to course and stamped, bent, drilled, screwed, painted, and polished. Each faculty member maintained his station, functioning like a well-oiled machine: Spoiled, wealthy young men in, sophisticated college graduates out.

A classroom with 500 students, in person and online, was a model of efficiency, where knowledge was poured into waiting, eager minds. Teaching was the responsibility of faculty. Learning, well, that just happened. Tests would tell us whether it did or did not. If it didn't, the students obviously weren't paying attention. The learning assembly line could not be at fault.

Even academic advising and registration could be modeled on the assembly line. The purpose of advising is to tell students what courses they must take. The purpose of registration is to move them from office to office until those courses are on the students' schedules and payment made. Each station has a check list. Each student is checked down the list.

The flaws of the assembly line model of registration should not be hard to see. Suppose that registration consists of ten steps for each student. Suppose that every student has a special requirement once out of twenty interactions. If these special needs are evenly distributed across registration stations, each station must deal with an exception once out of every twenty students. Since exceptions are not evenly distributed, some stations may be dealing with exceptions at higher rates.

Therefore, few people are engaged in efficient registration at the regular stations and many people must populate offices on the periphery of registration to handle exceptions, resulting in awful experiences for students. Every other student is sent, at least once, to a special office to handle their exception.

Standardized treatment of students doesn't work. Students are not commodities, but art works. Treating students as commodities results in chaos and dehumanization and is the result of a command-and-control mindset imposed on an assembly line systems metaphor. A lack of trust in the discretionary capabilities of the clerks in the registration line results in assembly line registrations. Their sphere of influence is so restricted that they cannot operate with humanist consideration.

I, however, believe that one person can handle all the functions of registrar, advising, financial aid, and billing. It takes training and people of superior abilities with higher pay rates. Students should have one person to whom they go for all these needs. I have created offices designed this way. They work well and are hugely scalable.

One design included a call center that handled thirty regular, easy questions. Anything beyond those questions was immediately referred to the clerk assigned to that student. I also surrounded these clerks with specialists. For example, there was one person who prepared state financial aid reports and answered difficult questions about state aid. The clerks, however, could not send students to this expert. Experts dealt only with the frontline clerks. A student might ask a question about state aid that a clerk could not answer. The clerk would be responsible for getting an answer from the expert and resolving the issue with the student based on that answer. Experts were "protected." Students were never sent away from their clerk (or that clerk's known backup).

The surprising result is that this system is more efficient than the specialization required of the assembly line model. With every student having one person to handle a wide range of problems, the system wasn't forever trying to resolve cross-office conflicts.

Another variation on this model replaced the call office with student workers, where the thirty questions were oriented toward avoiding making callers reveal things that must be kept private from other students. A few student workers might be assigned to a clerk and be the first line of contact for students with questions who were assigned to that clerk. Studies have shown that on-campus employment improves retention.

Teams are now also appearing in academic areas as more faculty teach online and with hybrid models. Learning is not achieved by pouring knowledge in, but by creating an environment where students capture ideas and make them their own. Experts in online course design work with technology gurus and with faculty to design, implement, and support instruction. The final member of the team is the learning assessment expert. Soon teams will also require an expert in artificial intelligence/natural language generation.

Many faculty have begun to fear that students can ask AI to write their papers. The expert might help a faculty member overcome this challenge. Why not ask students to have AI write a paper on a course topic and then have students

criticize the paper they requested from AI? AI experts can replace fear with innovation.

The future of education is personalization and teamwork, not specialization and silos.

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