## Case History

# **Collaboration and Trust among Departments:** Woodbury University, School of Media, Culture and Design

## **Background**

Woodbury University School of Media, Culture & Design (MCD) is a thriving school within Woodbury University in Burbank, California, commonly known as the media capital of the world. The mission of the school, one of only three in the university, is to educate the next generation of creative professionals. MCD's mix of major degree-granting programs covers almost every facet of contemporary culture. In many cases students learn directly from faculty who work in the surrounding creative economy. They also benefit from small class sizes, new digital infrastructure, and enriching student life programs.

#### Issue

About seven years ago, governance was a significant concern for MCD, a concern that accreditation auditors echoed. Previous leadership, appointed by the University administration, had been unable to bring together the half dozen departments that now make up the School. The appointed dean resigned. There were no cross-disciplinary degrees, and student enrollment was decreasing. The department heads had a variety of management styles that frequently clashed.

### Solution

One of the department heads suggested that they try Dynamic Self-Governance (DSG). The department heads plus other key faculty and the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs attended an intensive 1½-day training. During the training, they together elected a temporary head of School as well as a temporary representative to a special committee formed to oversee the School. The committee, with Senior Vice President, head of School, and representative as permanent members, began regular meetings that sometimes also included representatives from the nearby entertainment industry. Thus, the School gained its own board (aka "top circle" in DSG).

The department heads also began meeting as a general circle. There they began making policy decisions for the School, including setting procedures for the temporary director's administrative activities. They planned cross-department degrees and found ways to ensure that the rest of the MCD faculty had a voice in running the School. As they established these and other measures, the faculty accepted routine administrative direction much more readily.

The following year, the original representative to the School's board became the School director, and a new representative was elected. Progress in organizing continued as the departments started having their own circle meetings and found ways to involve students in the circle structure. The accreditation auditors praised the School's governance systems as "unconventional and successful... worthy of study by other schools." The next year, the faculty general circle and the board collectively decided to appoint the second temporary director, Dr. Eddie Clift, as the permanent dean.

#### Results

Today the School is running very efficiently, and the department heads have a sense that they have a voice in its administration. In the fall of 2010, tuition revenue for MCD increased 10% from the year before versus a university-wide 1% drop. In 2011 it increased again by 5%, and in 2012 it jumped 26% above 2011. By the fall semester of 2014, this year over year surge in school enrollment has yielded a cumulative increase of 100% by growing to nearly 500 students. The size of the faculty has doubled during these years as new teachers were hired to handle the rapid growth. The School has brought in significant new grant funding of \$4 million from Federal agencies and private foundations. Dr. Clift believes that the improvements in work environment and academic quality flowing from the implementation of Dynamic Self-Governance significantly contributed to these improved results.

According to Dr. Clift, DSG creates a culture of respect and provides a new way to look at problems. "DSG allowed people to focus on the reasons they came to work here in the first place—education and innovation. We saw improved quality of life for the faculty, including better work/life balance. We know—through increasing student enrollment, and increasing student placements in the industry thanks to a clearer connection with the industry—that we are providing a valuable education for our students. And best of all for me, my faculty and chairs are so effective now; they're confident and satisfied with their work. The School basically runs itself. That makes my job a pleasure!"

Thanks to Eddie Clift, Dean of Woodbury University School of Media, Culture & Design, and to John Buck of The Sociocracy Consulting Group for assistance with this article. The Sociocracy Consulting Group, a division of The Sociocracy Group headquartered in Rotterdam, Netherlands, helps organizations implement Dynamic Self-Governance / Sociocracy. To arrange personal contact with the School of Media, Culture & Design about their experience with the method or to learn more generally about how it can help your organization, write to contact@sociocracy consulting.com.

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