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# Rethinking the Corporate Partnership - a Focus on Corporate Needs vs. Traditional Institutional Silos

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# A focus on corporate needs vs. traditional institutional silos

## Abstract

Have you ever struggled to build and/or retain a corporate partnership?  Are there relationships you are trying to grow but find yourself unable to fully meet their needs?  Learn about an organizational structure that allows the needs of a company to be a primary focus for the university.  The structure and aligned goals allow internal University staff to focus on the needs of a corporation rather than on traditional institutional silos.

## Introduction

How do we meet the needs of industry while focusing on our academic mission?  This is a question often asked by faculty and administrators as we strive to find a balance between realizing our academic vision and meeting the needs of the corporate community.  There is often a feeling that there will need to be a trade-off of either accomplishing our goals or helping them accomplish theirs.  Should we ask ourselves if it needs to be this way?  Do we really have to choose?  At Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), we asked ourselves this question several years ago.  And, we decided that we did not necessarily need to choose.  We did, however, need to realign our thinking of how to reach our goals.  And, we needed to design an organizational system that was complementary, not competitive.

It all started with a clear vision – Define an organization built around the needs of our customers that provides value to all stakeholders.

## Building a new internal organization

With the stakeholders in mind, an organization was built to effectively meet their needs.  This included taking inventory of what was working and what wasn't working.  There needed to be a clear understanding of the current strategies, goals and reward structures.  By understanding the current state of affairs, a path forward was developed that highlighted the components which fit into the new vision and those that needed to be modified in order to build a common path forward.  The new vision needed to be communicated clearly and reinforced through action.  In order to transition from the current state to a more effective future state, an understanding of that dynamic was necessary.

*Understanding the Historical Dynamics*

For years, we had struggled to find ways to meet the varying needs of our clients. Internal information sharing meetings were set up and spreadsheets of data were provided. These efforts served to keep people more informed and knowledgeable but they did little to increase value to the corporation or the university. There were still silos and goals that were either misaligned or perceived as competing. And, there was a lack of coordination necessary to truly maximize the value of relationships for the stakeholders. While it was not the intent, it came across as though colleagues were more concerned about protecting their relationships than collaborating with other departments to grow the relationships for the university. And, there was a lack of general recognition of the value that could be derived by working to maximize the value to the customer. At the time, the rewards structure was not appropriately geared toward promoting this type of collaboration. And, there was no mechanism by which corporate partners were viewed at a strategic university level.
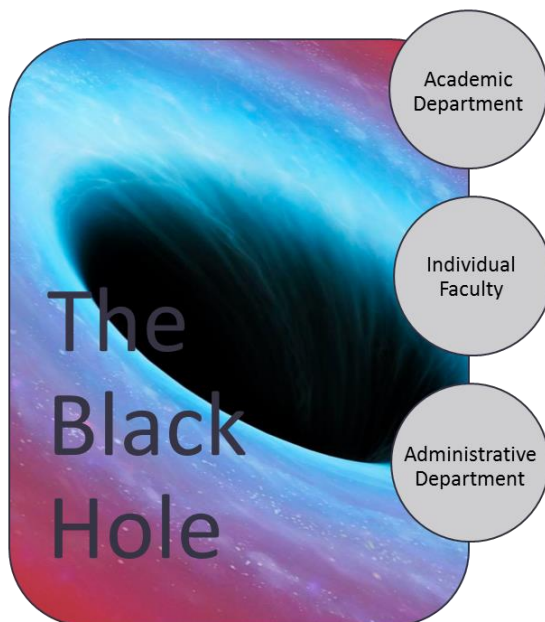


Each of the departments was performing well, however, there was no opportunity to significantly increase the value of corporate partnerships for the corporation and internal stakeholders. While we did not yet have the internal structure to support this new model, we did have some who strongly believed we could move away from our current model and create a new paradigm. This concept took some time to gain momentum and there was a great deal of work done to refine the idea and determine the most appropriate path forward for WPI.

The corporations trying to engage with WPI on multiple initiatives found that some of their requests would seemingly end up in a black hole. This may have happened for a variety of reasons. The corporate partner may have reached out to someone who was simply unaware of the services offered by another department. They may have also been transferred to so many different individuals on a quest to find the right contact that they lost momentum and decided to stop pursuing the idea. In other cases, they may have been a victim of timing, where faculty were focused on teaching and/or research and unable to respond to their requests in a timely manner. Whatever the reason, there was no central point of contact managing the relationship that was be able to navigate the internal organization in order to holistically meet the needs of the customer.

*Defining stakeholder needs*

To build a new organization, we needed to understand the needs of the stakeholders we were looking to serve. These stakeholders were grouped into three categories: corporate partners, students, and faculty. Through interviews, internal survey results, and external research

performed by organizations such as Eduventures and NACE, it was determined that these stakeholders were looking for:

| Corporate Partners | Students | Faculty |
|---|---|---|
| access to talent for interns and full-time hires | employment opportunities | access to industry expertise |
| employee development to enhance or develop new skills | experience with real-world projects | access to technology for use in research and teaching |
| project work by faculty and students | networking opportunities with industry | opportunities to further their research |
| connect with experts | cutting-edge research opportunities | opportunities to bring more applied research into their classroom |
| remain competitive in a demanding market | opportunities to find and explore their passion | |
| reduce time/effort to collaboration with the university | career advancement | |
| | career advice | |

In looking at how the needs of the stakeholders were currently being met, it was determined that most stakeholders had several touch points within the university before having all of their needs met. A corporation would have to speak with a minimum of 4 departments in order to engage on the needs listed above. Our students had less of a barrier because of their consistent interactions with campus departments and faculty, but also less opportunity was readily available to them. Because we were not maximizing the potential interaction with our corporate partners, fewer experience-driven opportunities were made available to the students. The same is generally true for faculty. They would only need to interact with a couple of departments. But, they were not aware of potential synergies between their needs and the needs of others because there was not a central way of managing the relationships with these corporations.

**Creating a new Organization**

After thoughtful debate, the university decided to build the Division of Academic and Corporate Engagement. Prior to formation of the Division, each of the components reported to a different administrative leader. After the division was formed, the departments were consolidated into one division and the Office of Corporate Engagement was formed. It wasn't until we were under one roof with a shared strategy and set of goals that we really started to focus on the holistic needs of the customer (and in parallel, the university). We moved away from forcing our corporate partners to navigate through our internal structure and toward a collaborative effort to

Prior Organizational Structure

New Organizational Structure
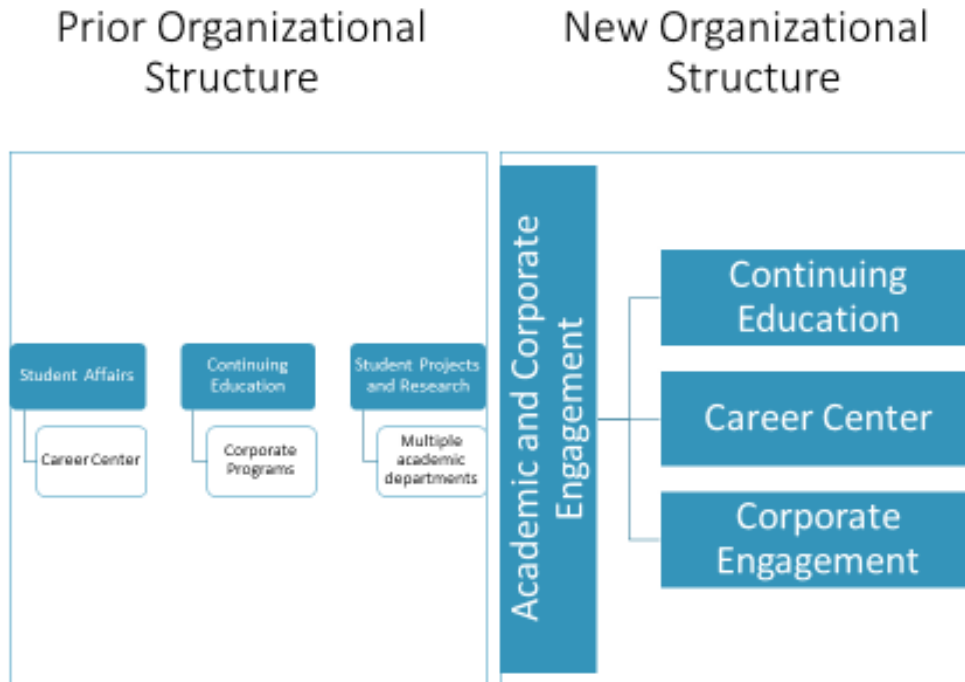
make the customer needs central to our processes. This adjustment allowed us to better serve our corporate partners, students and faculty. There were many elements necessary to make this transition successful.

The transition began by focusing the leadership team on a common vision. This vision was shared with the entire team and all had the opportunity to participate in discussions about the change. Beyond the vision, a set of shared strategic goals was also implemented with an understanding that the purpose was to enhance the work of the departments and not change them. Each of the departments was performing well and did not need to be restructured or repurposed. The goal was to maximize the investments we had already made in talent and leverage that talent to provide more value to our stakeholders. This led to more effective cross-training between the departments to allow for meaningful and holistic discussions with stakeholders. It also increased the communication between the departments because of enhanced awareness of available services and capabilities. In addition to cross-training, process and system alignment has been an evolution that has allowed for quicker and easier access to shared information.

The Office of Corporate Engagement was created to offer a concierge approach to helping a corporation navigate through the University. This office helps find alignment between the interests of the corporation, faculty and students regardless of the discipline or type of opportunity. They work to understand the needs of the corporation and navigate the university system to identify the appropriate department and/or faculty member interested in working with the corporation. To be effective and efficient, the office needed to build a strong internal network of support. This network was critical because the office was not designed to recreate services, merely to connect the right internal and external stakeholders. Concierge support has ranged from assistance with student project agreements to faculty research sponsorship to K-12 summer program development. This office has also been a critical link in connecting the various

## The new customer experience
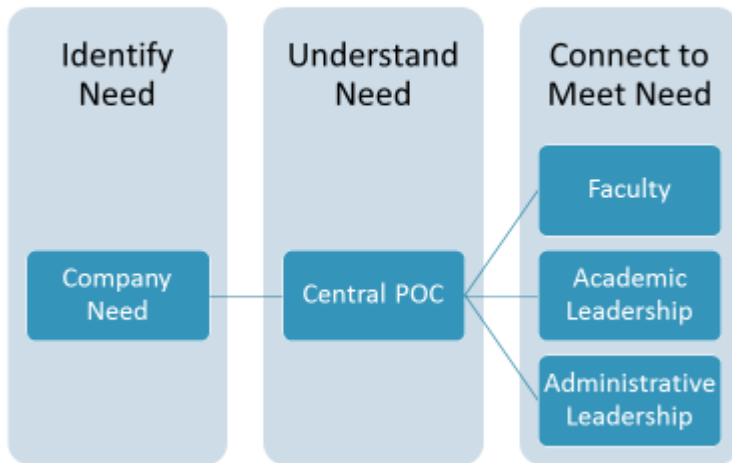


departments and individual faculty to maximize the opportunity for the university to meet the strategic needs of the corporate customer. They act as a thread throughout the lifecycle of the relationship and provide continuity. In addition to supporting corporate customers, the office supports faculty and students. They have identified opportunities for faculty who have expressed research interests that have aligned with corporate needs. And, they have supported students by closely working with the Career Development Center to identify potential experiential learning opportunities. This office also manages the contracts process with the corporate entities, removing that burden from faculty and protecting all parties.

Goal alignment was critical to the success of creating the new division. Each department had goals specific to their mission and all three departments had shared divisional goals that included a demonstration of alignment on specific corporate accounts, use of shared resources across the division, and a divisional marketing plan to highlight the focus on the customer.

*Meeting the Needs of our Customers*

The results of our efforts have been noticeable. There has been a reduction in effort for getting
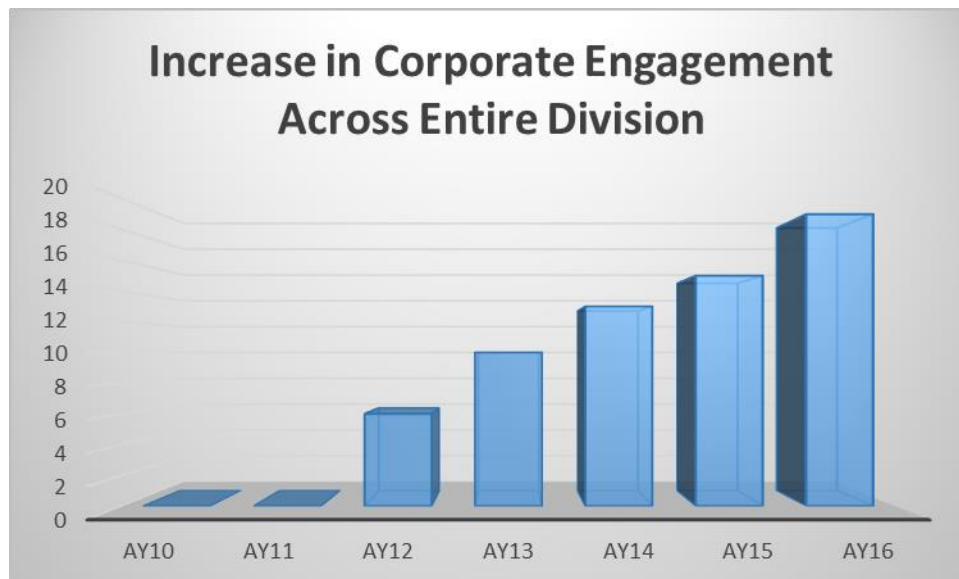


internal and external stakeholders to engage in a meaningful way. And, company engagement is being measured at a university level. When the division was formed, there were no companies engaged with all three offices in

Academic and Corporate Engagement. By 2015, there are 19 companies engaged with all three offices. Cooperation among the division with at least 14 of the 19 companies can be directly linked to the increase in overall engagement with the university. In 2010, only 7 of the 19 companies were involved with two of the three ACE departments.

Our customers now have a primary point of contact that is involved in the relationship regardless of the need. This primary relationship manager works with the customer to understand the need and brings in the right internal entities to discuss the need. We also utilize better communication systems and processes to continue to keep other internal stakeholders aware of efforts underway. Putting processes in place has helped internal stakeholders in replicating the model for multiple customers, reduced the burden on everyone by making it more efficient, and has led to a better level of customer service because the process can be easily explained and appropriate expectations can be set with the customer. No longer is it acceptable practice to 'throw something over the wall' to another colleague and hope for the best.

In addition to corporate customers, faculty and students are also treated in this manner. They hear about opportunities in a coordinated manner. And, they interact with the division based on their interests to make sure they have the best possible match with external customers. This has led to many successful engagements including on-going research initiatives, structured programs for building student leaders, and career opportunities.


**Future State**

While there has been considerable progress made, there is still a lot of room to grow. The increase in company engagement across WPI has been productive, leading to several companies partnering with the university in multiple ways. There still exists an opportunity to further develop and enhance this model. In aggregate, the division partners with hundreds of companies each year. Each of these companies has a set of strategic needs that present partnership opportunities. WPI faculty and students will continue to need support when building relationships with corporations that can help to advance their interests. These needs grow and change as research and technology evolves.

Challenges to expanding this model include:

- Faculty Capacity – Faculty expertise is a finite resource. They have limited availability and there needs to be an alignment of interests between the faculty and the corporation. In addition, the demand cycles for research and corporate needs is not always aligned. Therefore, demand can outstrip supply in many instances. WPI continues to add faculty to its ranks but that does not guarantee alignment. Also, the university may not choose to grow in areas of high demand for corporations. This is particularly true in areas that are seen to be short-term demands. In these areas, there may be an opportunity to develop temporary positions for industry experts at the university.
- Students – Companies are consistently in need of talent. STEM students are in high demand providing students with choices of internships, projects, and growth opportunities. It can be difficult to meet the demands of corporate partners in areas

where supply and demand are not well aligned.  It can be equally as difficult to adjust programs within a short time-frame to meet corporate demands.  These challenges can be overcome through sponsored projects, incorporation of industry expertise into classes, and educating students about career opportunities.

- Timing – Academic years and corporate cycles do not often align.  Hiring cycles for different industries can also create challenges for corporate partners looking to hire students with high-demand skills.  Also, corporations do not always have the time to wait for projects to be completed or research areas to be explored because of external market demands.  Understanding feasibility and remaining as agile as possible is key.  And, informing partners of the challenges they may face because of the incongruence of these cycles is an important part of the partnership.  Creating documentation for timelines, critical schedules, and processes for engagement can be great resources for productive conversations with customers.  They understand that you cannot change the university to meet their needs.  Providing clarity to allow them to understand the cycle can help with long-term engagements.
- Staff Resources – Professional staff positions can be adjusted at a reasonable pace as long as the organization is staffed to be nimble and responsive.  Though, hiring cycles and onboarding can be lengthy.  Providing opportunities for lateral moves within the university and/or special assignments outside of their domain will allow you to develop a more agile workforce.
- Alignment with Strategic Priorities – Learning to walk away from an opportunity that is not strategically aligned with the university mission and direction is difficult.  It is important to remember that you cannot meet all the needs of your customer at all times.
- Customer Service – Developing good relationships built on trust and a mutual understanding of the goals will allow for the open dialogue needed when you find yourself in service recovery mode.  A process for continual interaction with the customer is important.  It is vital to make sure these interactions are not always focused on the next opportunity to engage with the university.  Providing the customer with useful information that is germane to their business can help build a relationship focused on mutual benefit.

Focusing on the needs of the customer and aligning those needs with university priorities is not an easy task.  It will consistently present challenges as higher education and industry continue to evolve.  It will take a consistent vision with a customer-centric approach to produce a win-win result for all stakeholders.  Aligned goals are critical to keeping everyone in the organization focused on the customer.