Organizational Structure and Culture in Korean Higher Education

Jeong-Kyu Lee

J. K. Lee is on the staff of the Division of Education Information & Research, Korean Educational Development Institute. Address: Umyeon-dong, Seocho-ku, Seoul, S. Korea. E-mail: <jeongkyuk@hotmail.com>.

During the rapid expansion of its higher education system since 1945,[1] Korea has drawn on American higher education models and on its own strong tradition of Confucian values. Based on these values, Korean higher education has sustained a hierarchical structure of relationships between administrators and subordinates, with authoritarian interaction patterns.

In faculty meetings, seating arrangements are usually determined by status—based on rank, age, and sex. Additionally, younger faculty members use honorific forms of address when speaking to senior faculty.

Interpersonal relationships between senior and junior faculty members can be viewed as reciprocally obligatory. Thus, junior faculty generally defer to senior faculty, and senior faculty usually deal leniently with junior faculty. Confucianism asserts the concept of *in* (love or benevolence) as essential for cultivating the self and for building social harmony.

Likewise, relationships between faculty members and students follow Confucian ethical principles. Faculty members generally control their students through both legitimated authority and moral norms that are somewhat analogous to those between parents and children. Students believe that they are indebted to their teachers for the benefits bestowed—principally, teaching, advice, encouragement, and moral guidance—just as daughters and sons are indebted to parents.

In sum, the organizational culture in Korean higher education has been characterized by formal authoritarianism and traditional collectivism, based on Confucian values. In the author's view, Korean postsecondary educators now need to implement the radical reforms that will create a new organizational culture in colleges and universities. The process of change will not be simple, given the many foreign norms, values, rituals, and assumptions already flowing into Korean higher education.

Unless it changes from the current closed system into a natural or open one, Korean higher education will continue to function as a mechanical bureaucratic organization. If they persist in not sharing power with their subordinates, college administrators in Korea will perpetuate authoritarian leadership patterns. They will rarely attempt to create a democratic climate and introduce participative forms of leadership. The strains between traditional and adopted cultures will worsen, causing conflicts between the old and the young as well as between the traditional and the new paradigms. Ideally, however, a healthy organizational culture in Korean higher education would draw on both the traditional and the adopted values.

On the basis of the above discussion, I suggest several general approaches to improving Korean higher education. College administrators as opinion leaders rarely open communication channels to faculty members and students that would allow the latter to participate in the process of innovation as change agents or change-agent aides, emphasizing instead the formalized old order. To transform the mechanical bureaucratic organizational structure, administrators must become change agents. In order to achieve this goal, the formal, bureaucratic, and closed system of political and administrative reality should evolve into an informal, decentralized, natural, or open system that allows subordinates to participate in the decision-making process.

The organizational culture in Korean higher education has been characterized by formal authoritarianism and traditional collectivism, based on Confucian values.

To change organizational behavior, college or university administrators need to share power with their subordinates to create mutual trust and a positive climate, under democratic leadership. Additionally, to enhance autonomy and diversity in Korean higher education, the uniform control of the Ministry of Education should be gradually discontinued or diminished.

Finally, both government and college administrators need to move away from bureaucratic authoritarianism and collectivism based on rigid Confucian values and principles and emphasize the restoration of a humanitarian open system. To create a strong organizational culture within Korean higher education, those in authority should begin to share responsibility with subordinates and establish communication networks for them. With these changes, a new model for organizational structure and culture may emerge that is appropriate to the current challenges facing Korean higher education. ■

Note

1. Between 1945 and 1998, Korean higher education expanded from 19 schools, 1,490 teachers, and 7,819 students to 350 schools, 54,185 teachers, and 2,950,826 students. (*Education in Korea* [Seoul: Ministry of Education, 1998], 32; *Statistical Yearbook of Education* [Seoul: Ministry of Education and Korean Educational Development Institute, 1998], 158–60.)