Case Study Analysis: Bryson College

Problem
The case study discusses a particular issue at Bryson College, which is a private institution located in the Midwestern United States. Bryson has a reputation as a highly political work environment, which is demonstrated in the handling of a situation that occurred soon after the board of trustees appointed a new president of the college.

Controversy arose when the new president made some provocative remarks at a convocation ceremony with which the majority of the board of trustees did not agree. Having already alienated many of the faculty by making a decision to heighten academic requirements for incoming students in order to rebrand the institution as an elite educational experience without asking for their input, President Briggs now had to defend herself to the board of trustees as well as the faculty. Much of the faculty agreed with her political statements, but did not agree with the way she was rebranding the institution, whereas the board of trustees disagreed with her political statements but were supportive of her goals for the college.

The case demonstrates a clash of institutional cultures among the various players. The board of trustees and the former president seemed to come from a tangible culture. This is shown by the fact that one of the main concerns the board had after the president made her political remarks were that fundraising would be harmed. They also seemed to believe in a more traditional approach to hierarchy in the institution; they did not give much weight to faculty opinions. President Briggs also seemed to come from a tangible academic culture which can be seen in the way that she aimed to rebrand Bryson College as an elite institution. She also demonstrated a belief in tangible culture by the way she made decisions and rules from an “ivory tower” with little input from her subordinates.

The faculty, however, appeared to come from collegial and possibly developmental culture. Their collegial culture was demonstrated by their desire for autonomy and their belief that their opinions should be taken seriously as faculty members of the college. They showed some aspects of developmental culture, as well, in that they took a collaborative approach to decision making among themselves and wished that the president would do so as well. Their collaborative decision making was shown when they met to discuss what to do after the president's remarks at the convocation ceremony.

Analysis
The former president of Bryson College seemed to use upward and downward vertical influence in the form of sanctions and with significant dominating charisma. The sanctions he used were the threat of blackmail if various factions stepped out of line.

Upon her arrival as president of Bryson college, Briggs employed several strategies to implement and maintain her power, particularly over the faculty. To begin with, she already had officially
sanctioned authority as the president of the college, but based on her discussions with the outgoing president, made certain choices about the type of power she would employ to demonstrate that authority. She entered her position as president with little trust in the faculty and therefore immediately used downward influence by insulation in that she limited faculty access to her office and only requested input from a small number of trusted advisors when making decisions. President Briggs knew that the faculty had already been alienated by the administration, specifically, the board of trustees who had issued sanctions (the elimination of tenure) and then removed them when faculty responded with constraints (threatening to resign).

After her provocative remarks during the convocation ceremony, President Briggs sensed that she may have been losing some of her officially sanctioned authority, so she turned to politics to regain her favor with the board of trustees, and with some of the faculty. She used upward vertical influence in the form of persuasion to bring the board of trustees back to being in support of her presidency. She did this by rallying celebrities, political figures, and other academics to her side and having them persuade the board to support her.

The faculty also tried to use persuasion by writing a memo to the board regarding their lack of confidence in President Briggs. The president's influence was more successful, however, because she used her celebrity acquaintances to exert cross-boundary power on the board, whereas the faculty did not have this tool. The faculty also had a tense relationship with the board to begin with, given recent sanctions and constraints made by each party and the fact that, for the most part, they had opposing political beliefs.

The president used downward influence in the forms of co-optation and participation with faculty members. She assembled a group of faculty to defend her, using participation with faculty who already agreed with her on the divisive issue of academic requirements and also supported her comments made at convocation. She used co-optation with faculty members who had disagreed with her previously, but were willing to set aside their reservations because they felt that defending her statements on civil liberties was more important.

In this decentralized academic system, groups of faculty, which are the partisans in this situation, vary on the continuum of trust. Those whom President Briggs hand picked to come to her aid in supporting her statements would be seen to have confidence in her actions. This can be seen based on the fact that some of the faculty members who supported her freedom of speech did so regardless of the fact that they disagreed with other decisions she had made. This shows that they had confidence in her authority and ability to be an effective administrator. They would not have supported her if they did not believe that she was ultimately acting in the best interest of the college. Other groups of faculty, however, remained alienated based on prior decisions President Briggs had made without consulting them regarding heightened academic requirements for admission.

After the controversy had blown over, President Briggs exerted downward influence in the form of sanctions on the faculty senate by removing those she deemed had not been properly elected and replacing them with faculty who had supported her during the crisis. She then rewarded the departments who had elected those supportive faculty by awarding them special travel funds.
Action Plan and Recommendations

Based on my analysis of the case, Bryson College would do well to make some organizational changes moving forward. President Briggs found the effectiveness in using participation and co-optation, which could continue to serve her well if used properly. She could use participation of partisans not just to placate them, but to actually take their input in the functioning of the institution so that they know they are being respected and involved. If possible, Bryson would also benefit from moving toward becoming a more professionalized organization. The institution is already decentralized, so some restructuring of how decisions are made could be useful. It would also be useful for Briggs to take a more collaborative approach to leadership so that there was more consensus within the college about goals for the institution.

President Briggs could have avoided some of the negative effects of this situation by employing different strategies to increase trust levels of faculty in her administrative authority. Upon her arrival at Bryson, faculty were initially very receptive to her and looking forward to the possibility of change in the way power was used in the institution. She could have begun her presidency by being open to suggestions by faculty and by including them more in decision making. Eliminating some of her insulation tactics and including faculty in decision making would have taken faculty from a neutral level of trust to a high level of trust because they would be confident that their president was making effective decisions on their behalf. A higher level of trust would have allowed President Briggs to use different tactics later on when the faculty senate made a vote of no confidence. First of all, with a higher level of trust, we could presume that the senate would not have even taken the vote in the first place, and would have been open to persuasion by the President, which can be used in cases where partisans have a high level of trust.

It is likely that continued similar use of power and politics by President Briggs would further alienate faculty. We can assume that the faculty are back to feeling disregarded as they were at the beginning of the case study, especially since they voted no confidence in the president and were ignored by the board of trustees. It seems that this would perpetuate the cycle of fighting for influence. Given that we know that President Briggs has rewarded particular departments with special travel funds, we might assume that other departments will feel disgruntled about the situation.

Changes would need to occur to make Bryson College a professionalized organization or a centralized organization. When President Briggs made the decision to heighten academic requirements for admission, she acted as though the institution was a centralized organization, however this decision backfired because of her lack of appreciation for the fact that the institution was in fact decentralized. As a result, she found that she could not act with the autonomy she had attempted. In order for the institution to become centralized, President Briggs would have to have more sanctioned authority. If this were the case she would have different sources of power and would not need to resort to the politics she used in the case study. She would have the power to make binding decisions that partisans would have to follow.

For Bryson College to become a professionalized organization, the partisans in the institution would need to become more collaborative. In a professionalized institution, there would be decentralized power, in that groups would make their own policies, but there would need to be a
high level of means and ends consensus, which means that all groups in the institution would need to reach a consensus and agree on what the best results for the college would be. In this case, President Briggs would also have different sources of power at her disposal. In a professionalized organization, we might assume that partisans have a higher level of trust in the president, since they would be in consensus about the desired results for the college. Therefore, President Briggs would not need to resort to the same politics she used in the case study. She would be able to use persuasion with the partisans, which is effective when trust is high, rather than insulation.

The issues in this case study would have an effect on international education for several reasons. First of all, the situation that is discussed regarding the president's change in admissions policy could affect eligibility of international students. International credentials specialists would need to identify how those new admissions standards relate to international students and it could result in fewer international students being admitted to the school. This would harm the institution and President Briggs' aim of rebranding, as part of what makes an elite college today is internationalization. One might also wonder about the fate of the study abroad office in such a highly politicized environment where factions are in constant battle over resources. Depending on Briggs' ideas about what it means to make Bryson more of an elite institution, the study