

The “Evidentiary Model”: The Robust Learning Model™ in an Organizational Learning Context

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Tough-minded thinking for tough times

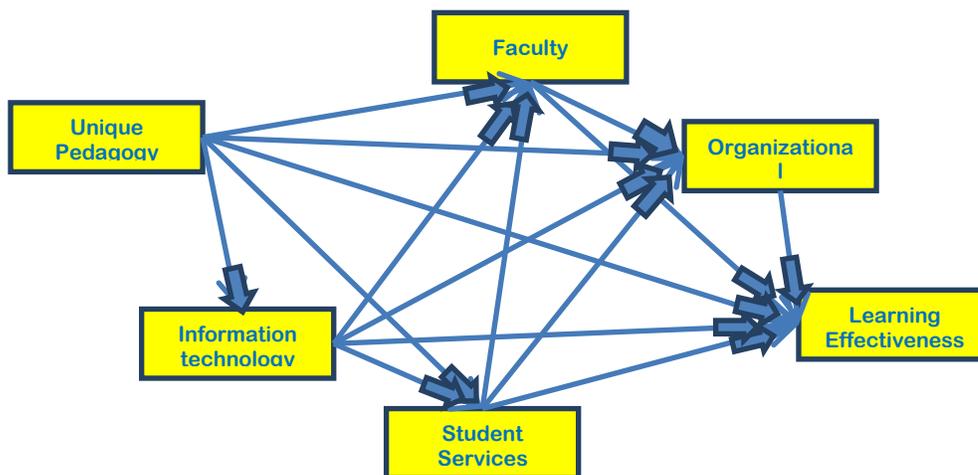
The “Evidentiary Model”: The Robust Learning Model™ in an Organizational Learning Context¹

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The Robust Learning Model™ (RLM) has been one of the characteristic features of TUIU's pedagogy since the earliest days. Originally formulated by Dr. Yoram Neumann in the late 1990s, it has served to structure many aspects of the University's operations and organization (Neumann & Neumann, 2010).

Essentially, it consists of six specific elements organized in a flowchart form, beginning with "unique pedagogy" and continuing through to "learning effectiveness". The arrows in this flowchart are presumed causal relationships, or at least indications of dependence of later elements on earlier elements. Figure 1 shows the basic structure of the model.

Figure 1: The Robust Learning Model™



At first glance, the model appears to simply connect each element to each of the others. On closer examination, an interesting feature of this flowchart appears; each of the arrows is clearly directional, indicating that certain elements are drivers of other elements. In fact, an interesting hierarchy appears when one compares the "in-

¹ This is a discussion paper prepared originally for use in the reaccreditation for Trident University in 2011. Since that process was later interrupted, this paper became mainly of academic interest, and contains no currently relevant university information. It reflects, however, how a learning model for online education can be put in a larger context. It is currently being submitted for publication. ©JD Eveland 2014

degree" (number of arrows coming into an element) with the "out-degree" (number of arrows coming out of an element) for each of the elements. As Figure 2 shows, the elements arrange themselves into a linear pattern, showing the overall causal priorities.

Figure 2: RLM Degrees

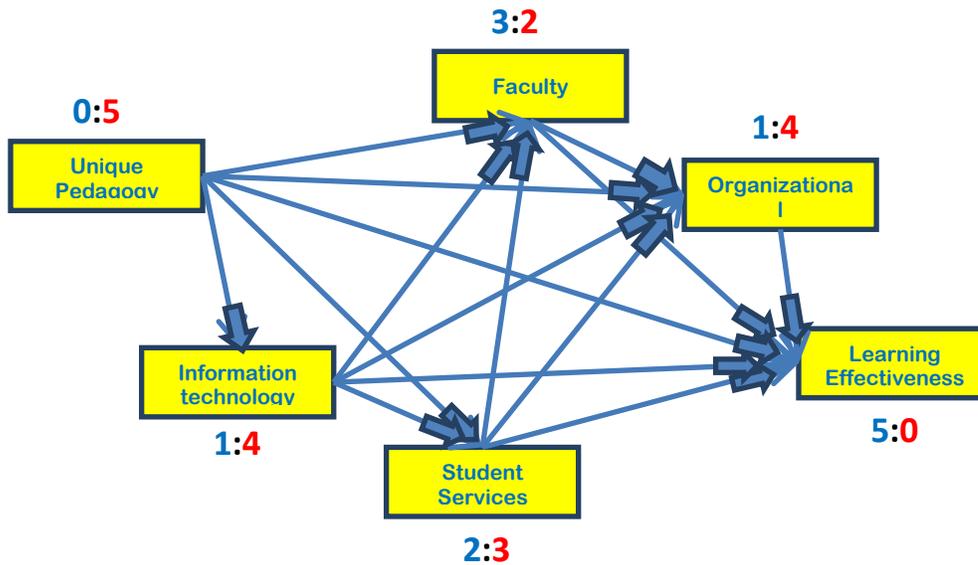


Figure 3 develops this concept further, indicating the six elements as an arrangement of six wheels in which the earlier wheels drive the later ones.

Figure 3: RLM Drivers



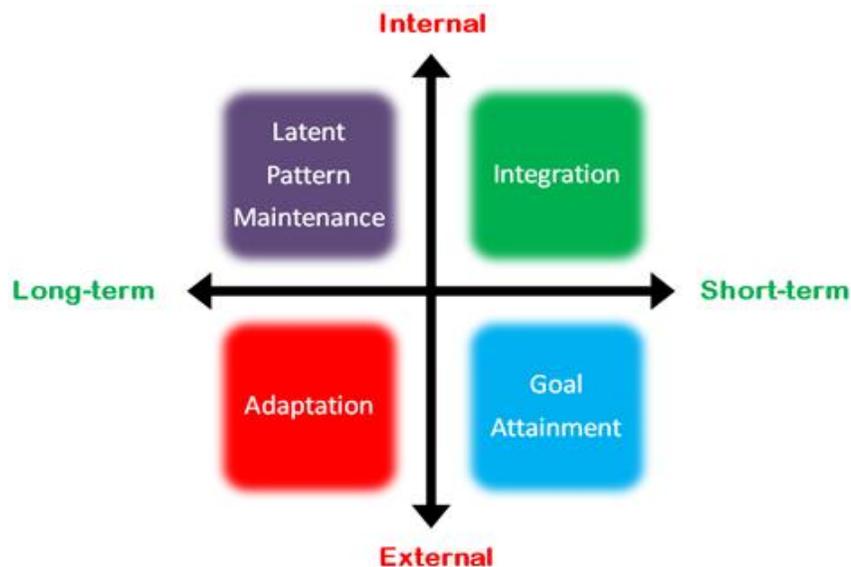
Although the RLM was based on a variety of *educational* theories, it was not directly grounded in any particular *organizational* model. It

is possible to map the RLM onto a number of organizational effectiveness models. However, the most useful approach is probably to apply the categories of one of the original multi-functional systems models; specifically, Talcott Parsons' (1970) "General Theory of Action".

This model has provided a general framework for a wide variety of later organizational models, but in its original form it expresses a simple but extremely powerful identification of four basic tasks that must be performed by any social system at any level -- tasks that are in turn a function of two fundamental category dimensions: internal/external locus of action, and short term/long term time horizon. In short, space and time.

Figure 4 shows the fundamental GTA framework, with the four sets of tasks broken out across the two dimensions. This framework is often referred to as the "AGIL Model", after the names of the four demands or task requirement sets: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent-pattern maintenance, often rephrased as long-term management. Parsons claimed that virtually all organizational activities - indeed, all social system activities any particular level - could be classified under one or another of these four headings.

Figure 4: The General Theory of Action Categories and Dimensions



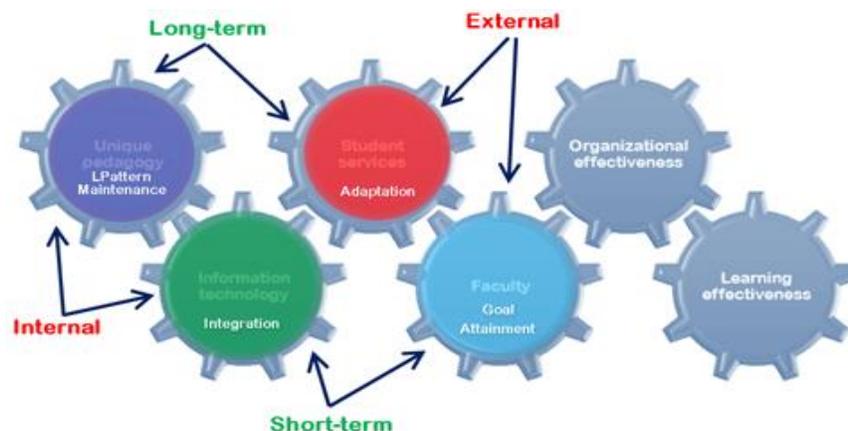
He also claimed that a great deal about the organization's behavior could be learned by examining how these activities supported or sometimes contradicted each other. He contended that all of these activities were equally valid and equally pressing, although the

organization might distribute its resources and activities across the tasks in different ways at different times.

One of the major insights that this model emphasizes is the need for the organization to attend to a variety of internal as well as external demands and needs. For a variety of socio-cultural reasons, attention to internal needs rather than exclusive emphasis on creating outputs for society is often seen as inappropriate, and therefore at least half the things almost every organization must do are somehow seen as of inherently lower social priority. Strange as this may be when put in these terms, the fact is that most organizations are ashamed of much of what they do and what they have to do. The General Theory of Action at least provides organizations a way to see that their maintenance activities are legitimate, and provided that they don't consume all the organization's time and resources, they ought to be as celebrated as its outputs.

So how does this apply to the Robust Learning Model? Figure 5 suggests that the four general tasks that need to be faced by any organization in fact map rather nicely onto the first four elements

Figure 5: GTA and RLM Mapping



of the RLM:

- pedagogy onto long-term pattern maintenance
- IT onto integration
- student services onto adaptation
- faculty onto goal attainment

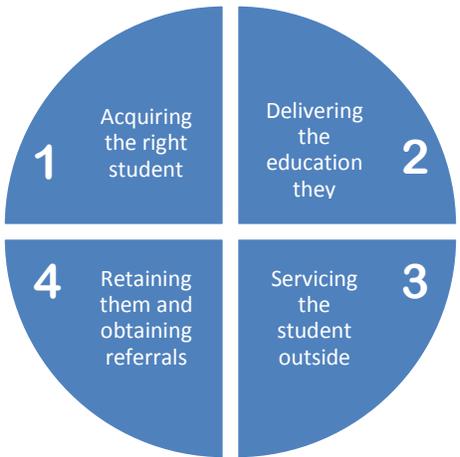
This is not to suggest that the RLM elements constitute the entire social system task quadrant in question. Certain elements of the RLM do, however, represent where the social system tasks are enacted

within the model. Overall, the RLM can be seen as reflecting the combined efforts of the entire organization to achieve the outcomes of organizational effectiveness and ultimately effective learning on the part of the students.

The first four elements can thus be seen as operating in both a linear and a combined fashion, feeding into each other in a logical progression. Parsons' GTA framework makes no claims about how the four sets of demands are to be prioritized or methods of addressing them to be sequenced. However, our framework suggests that in the case of implementing the RLM at least, there does need to be a certain causal priority in how the needs are to be defined and addressed. Internal drives external and long-term drives short-term – pretty much what one would expect in a well-formed model.

But this application of the GTA has several other payoffs as well. Figure 6 shows a description of TUI's data services plan, developed quite independently of the preceding analysis. It defines four specific aspects of the student experience at the University, in relation to specific data to be collected and analyzed at each of the four stages. While this model is useful in its own right as a guide to integrating different data collection methods and data sets, it also lines up well with both the RLM and the GTA.

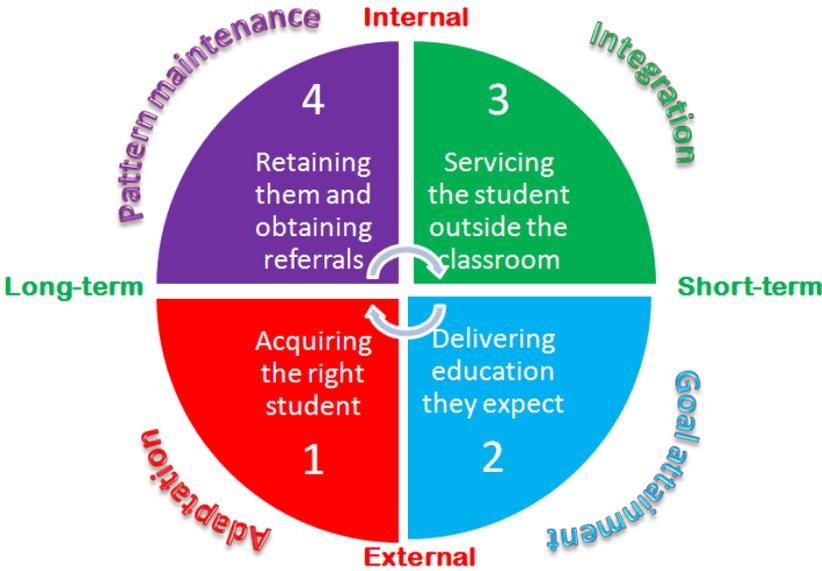
Figure 6: Student Engagement Model with Data Sources

	1	Brand Awareness & Usage Intention Research Priorities Survey for Online Learners Analytics on student data to understand persistence
	2	Course & Faculty Assessment Survey Student Satisfaction Tracker Develop measurement criteria & system to track student success Priorities Survey for Online Learners Analytics to support program effectiveness
	3	Student Satisfaction Tracker Complaint Resolution System Annual Graduation Survey

	4	Continuous Exit Survey Survey of non-persisting students Analytics on student data to understand persistence Alumni Survey
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Figure 7 shows how this model can be flipped and turned into another version of the GTA without significantly stretching or interpreting the contents.

Figure 7: Engagement Model mapped onto the GTA



Finally, the GTA framework also turns out to map quite well on to the four standards for reaccreditation applied by the Senior College and University Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the regional accrediting agency for the west coast (SCUC, 2013). Figure 8 shows how the four standards can be more or less equated to the four sets of system demands posited by the GTA. WASC formulated its standards on the basis of educational theory and research, not with any particular eye to the GTA, which in any event is somewhat out of favor in academic circles today. However, it is interesting and something of a tribute to the GTA that the standards, reflecting as they do the multiple and integrated tasks that any

university must perform in order to live up to presentation expectations, relate rather closely to the basic sets of functional demands described in the GTA. In short, the standards and the four elements of the AGIL framework reinforce each other's theoretical consistency rather elegantly.

Figure 8: GTA and the Four WASC Standards

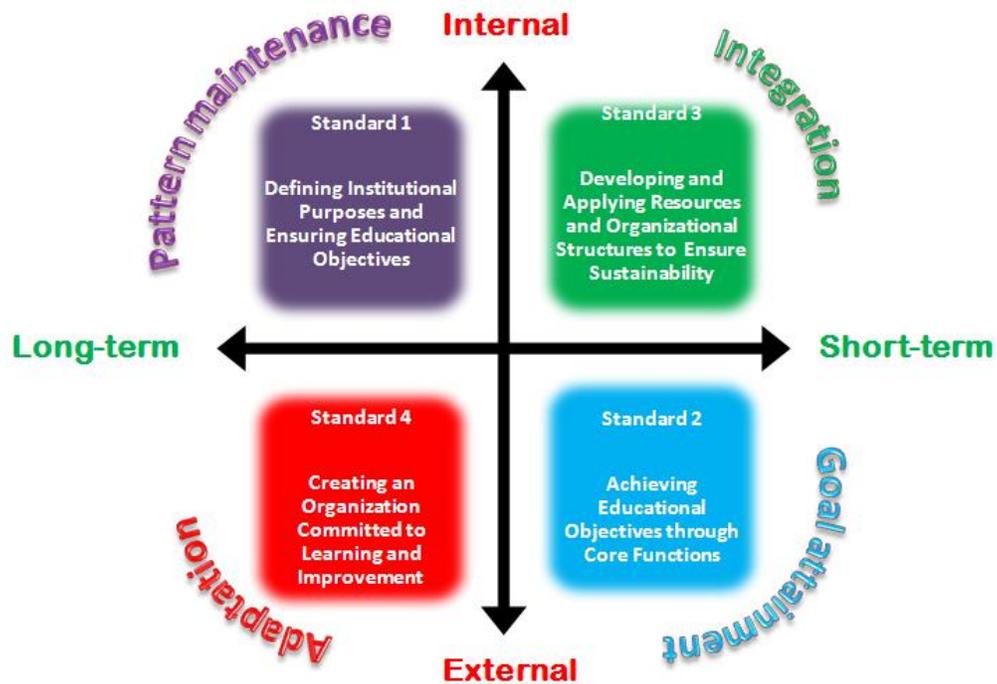
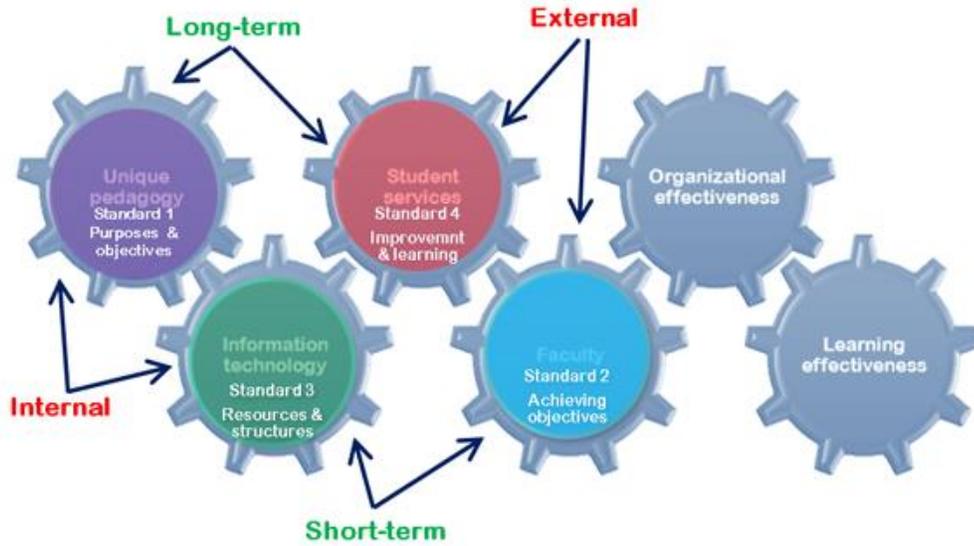


Figure 9 shows how this mapping of the WASC standards onto the AGIL framework and its RLM equivalent elements describes how the different RLM elements mesh nicely with the standards, as well as with the basic organizational requirements. Each standard emphasizes a particular element of the RLM; the RLM as a whole this folds nicely around the four standards, as well as the four basic sets of system tasks.

Figure 9: WASC Standards and the RLM



But it gets even better, from an organizational standpoint. The proposal for the Educational Effectiveness Review submitted to WASC by TUI described a number of specific research projects that the university would undertake in support of its EER report. Figure 10 shows how these projects would be connected to each other forming the inputs and outputs of a basic educational process model.

Figure 10: EER Projects in Process Context

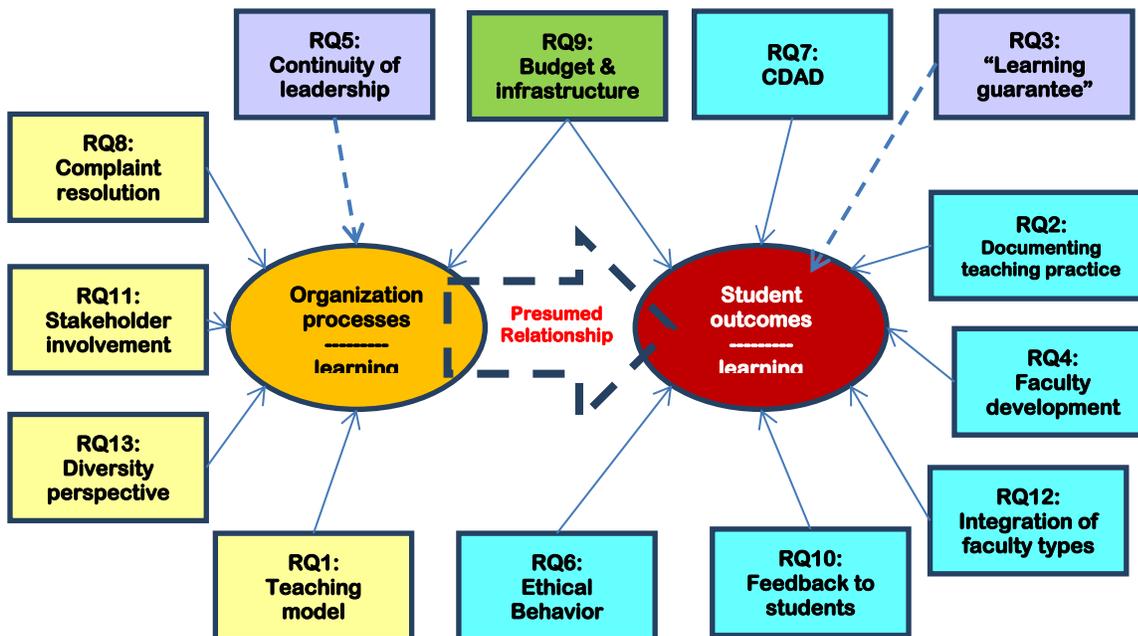


Figure 11 shows how these projects can be approximately grouped into the AGIL categories of the GTA model. The colors of the groups parallel the colors used to represent the different categories in previous figures. The “adaptation” category is mapped both into some projects on both the input side and the output side.

Figure 11: EER Projects by GTA Category

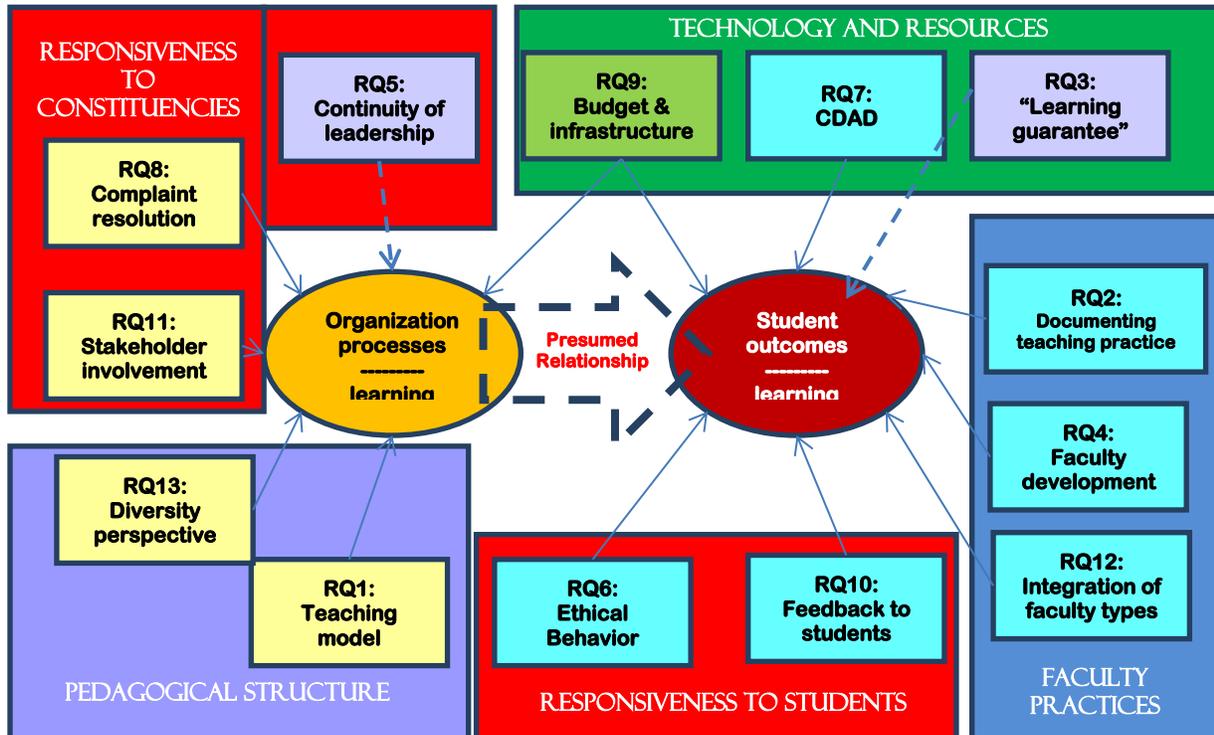
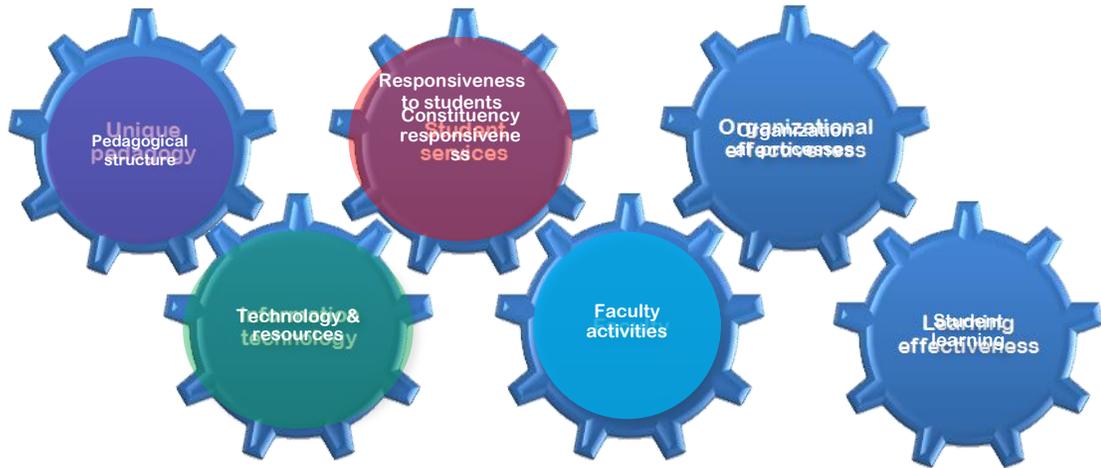


Figure 12 shows how these sets of EER projects can be mapped into the RLM, using the GTA categories as matching units. It provides further justification for the projects, clarifies how they relate to each other and to the achievement of university goals, and also connect to the long-term management of the university and its ultimate stability and position within an evolving system of higher education. It also connects the projects clearly to the WASC standards in a coordinated way.

Figure 12: EER Projects mapped onto the RLM



Finally, Figure 13 shows the mapping of the student data sources onto the RLM, and by implication the points in the RLM process where certain kinds of data would be most effectively applied.

Figure 13: Student Engagement Data Sources mapped onto RLM



In this brief discussion, we have linked in meaningful ways the elements of the Robust Learning Model, Parsons' General Theory of Action, the WASC accreditation standards, and the student engagement data sources used by the University. We believe that this combination

of several different sources can rightly be called an **Evidentiary Model** of organizational processes operating within the context of a model of how to facilitate student learning in accordance with standards set by an accrediting agency. Ultimately, it shows how research and analytics projects formulated as part of an educational effectiveness review link together and drive this Evidentiary Model toward educational and organizational success.

The mapping and linking in this model can obviously be pushed well beyond any reasonable application. However, the commonalities support the following general conclusions from this exercise:

- The “functional imperatives” terminology developed originally by Parsons has remained useful primarily because it reflects basic social/organizational archetypes, faced by all organizations; it is general enough to apply in a wide variety of situations, but specific enough to highlight particular kinds of decisions that need to be made
- The WASC standards, the Robust Learning Model™, and the data structures all reflect the same underlying functional dynamics, consciously or unconsciously
- Integrating standards, the RLM™, data plans, and EER projects can be accomplished by considering the underlying dynamics
- Finally, we need to remember that the important part of the model is dynamic interaction, not static categorization; while the mappings are useful to a degree, ultimately what matters is the effective integration of the different elements.

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