Getting things done in data intensive inter-campus research initiatives

A social network analysis approach to understanding and building effective relationships between researchers and other university employees

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The Program Evaluation

This was an exploratory mixed-methods external program evaluation for a large scale multi-institutional research project.

The Situation

- Student data to be collected across many academic divisions
- Significant amounts of sensitive or confidential data
- Student success initiatives will require non-traditional collaborations
- Desire to institutionalize initiatives

The Promise

Researchers and Student Affairs Personnel work as equal partners on:
- Data Collection
- Development of student success initiatives
- Implementation of student success initiatives

The Focus

- Identifying the university personnel who must buy into the project
- Determining shared common understanding of the project's goals
- Understanding how well people trust one another
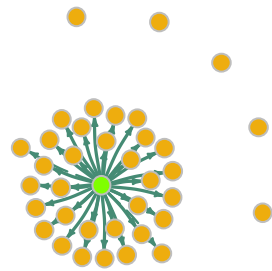
The Methods

- On site visits, interviews, observations
- Social Network Analysis (SNA) to determine Connectedness, Common Understanding and Trust

Social Network Analysis Institution A

- Project leader perceptions of trust
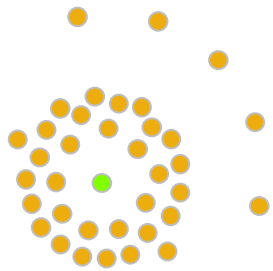
Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Poor Trust
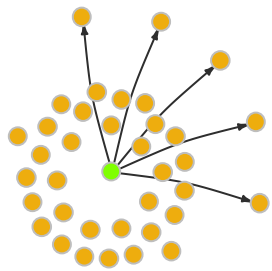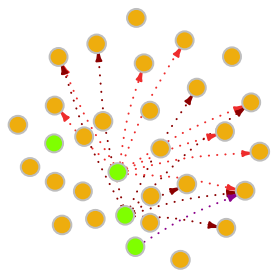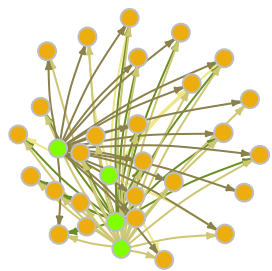
Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Ambiguous Trust

Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Strong Trust

Social Network Analysis Institution B

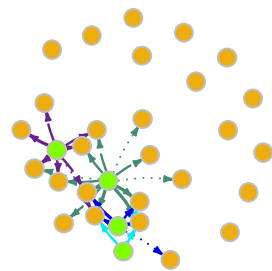- Project leader perceptions of common understanding

Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Poor Common Understanding

Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Ambiguous Common Understanding

Project Leader
Person Impacting Project
Strong Common Understanding

Benefits of the Social Network Analysis (SNA)

- SNA graphs became a deep reflective tool at each university
- Identified patterns of relationships
- Drew attention to how groups of researchers and staff interacted
- SNA graphs led to individualized personnel strategies for strengthening relationships
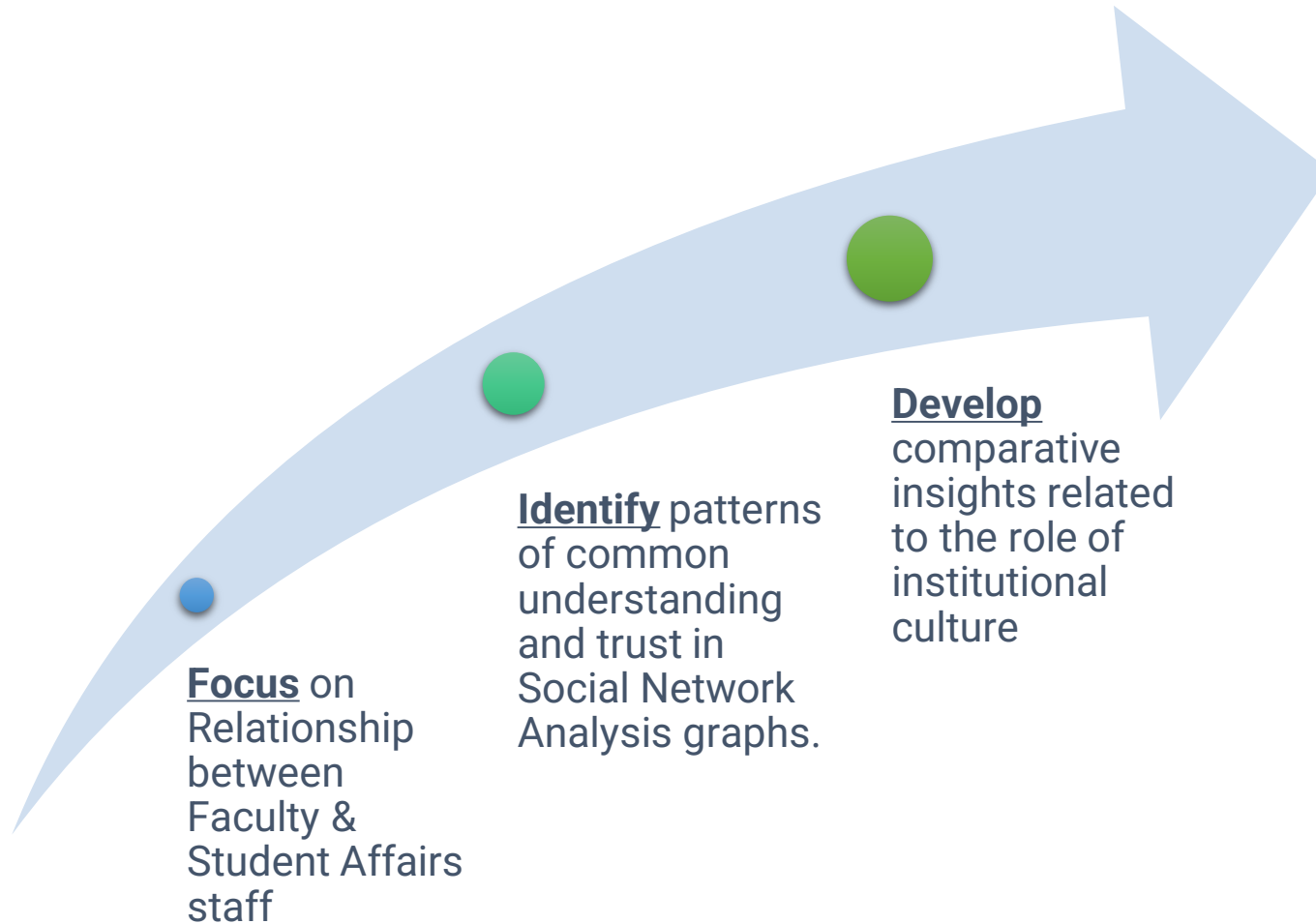
Making the Implicit Explicit

- SNA findings related to trust were consistent with institutional values such as high levels of trusting relationships at one institution
- Specifically, the findings accurately reflected faculty relationships with Student Affairs personnel
- Ambiguous Trust graph connections indicated either that the PI was unsure about how much to trust the person or that their level of trust was context dependent

Developing New Insights

- Project Leaders developed emerging insights while reviewing and discussing SNA figures which were related to the role of institutional culture. *Specifically:*
- Process of institutional decision making
- Autonomy vs. collaboration
- Ownership of innovations
- Communication norms
- Transactional vs Reflexive interactions

The Evaluation

Focus on Relationship between Faculty & Student Affairs staff

Identify patterns of common understanding and trust in Social Network Analysis graphs.

Develop comparative insights related to the role of institutional culture

Our Recommendation

Complete formal organizational culture analysis in order to understand and compare institutional culture insights and SNA findings