The traditional organization for the university is an institution divided into colleges comprised of departments. Universities are headed by a President supported by an administrative staff including a Provost for academic affairs. College operations are the responsibility of Deans. Department Heads assume leadership for individual educational programs within colleges. The entire university is overseen by a board of trustees, regents or governors.

Since the early 1970s, there has been extensive expansion of academic offices at the upper levels of the university through the addition of Vice-Presidents, Assistant Provosts, Associate Deans, School Directors and Associate Directors. At the same time, the position of Department Head in the visual arts has been disappearing.

Art and design programs at most state universities now operate under severe and unrealistic conditions for faculty members resulting from current administrative practices and policies for institutional and academic management. Administrative actions of recent years have steadily eroded faculty commitment, and there is no relief in sight. The impact of organization and organizational definitions on faculty productivity generally is ignored by administrators.

Perhaps management goals have been given a higher priority than educational goals. A shift in priorities has seeped down from the top creating new administrative policies, practices and objectives which are quite different from those in existence immediately after World War II. By and large, change has occurred because of directives from Boards of Trustees, Governors or state legislators. Change with time is to be expected, but it is anticipated that it would be directed toward improving the institutional mission of education more so than its operation.

Of the many events since World War II that have shaped higher education, two stand out as having most influenced the management of educational institutions. These were student activism during the 1960s and the sudden reduction of government educational subsidies during 1970s. While there were additional social/economic factors which affected educational management, these two were at the root of most change.
The period of student activism when administration lost control of students accompanied by destruction of institutional property clearly demonstrated that academic governance was unable to control institutions under extreme circumstances. The response of boards and legislators was to expand administrative offices, increase administrative control, and to hire more professional administrative personnel. Within a relatively short time, administrators and staffs proliferated to a point where eventually they outnumbered faculty, and institutional resources such as budget and space have been diverted from academic use to administrative expansion. Universities today are over-managed with administrations being badly out of balance with the other segments of the university, and this imbalance is detrimental to faculty and student interests because the managerial values of the majority tend to dominate academic values of the minority.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a sudden shift in the national economic base from manufacturing into service and technology. During the same years, the federal government reduced title and other grant programs to a trickle of what they had been previously. Reduced funding was an outgrowth of the Viet Nam war and inflationary trends. During the 1970s, educational costs skyrocketed with tuitions increasing dramatically and enrollments went into decline. At first, educational institutions believed the situation to be a temporary retrenchment, and that when the economy recovered, federal funding would resume at its previous levels. It did not.

American industry was in dire need of research because of rapidly developing technologies and a new world economy. American universities were in great need of new sources for funding to fill the vacuum created by the withdrawal of government support.

University faculties held the potential for research and development so desperately needed by industry. To meet competition for research grants, universities cranked up the faculties through reinstatement of the old Publish or Perish policies from the 1930s. Incredible pressures were put on new and senior faculty members for research, publications or professional practice. Retention, promotion and salary are often dependent on research or obtaining project funding rather than teaching. The strength of educational programs are frequently judged by how much institutional funding they generate rather than by academic standards. The pressures continue to this day as universities have become increasingly dependent on research grants. Government and industry are interlocked with universities in research at many levels. While this does enrich the educational environment for students and provide operating funds for the institution, it need not be as oppressive for faculty as it is now.

Problems connected to the combination of over-management, emphasis on research and pressuring faculty were extended by an infusion of MBA business values during the period of financial stress in the 1970s. Efficiency, bottom line, cost effectiveness and other such notions injected into both operational and academic aspects of the university have distorted traditional academic definitions. Education as a service with faculty as employees and students as customers is perhaps the most devastating. Applying business practices to organizational responsibilities...
and redefining academic positions according to managerial values have been debilitating for faculty members. Over a longer period of time, some business practices and values might prove detrimental to the institution itself.

An additional factor is the presumption that everyone and anyone can be a manager or a leader. This has resulted in considerable ineptness at both administrative and academic positions, and incompetence is neither recognized nor is it being promptly dealt with as it should be. In some instances, what traditionally have been leadership positions now have more emphasis placed on managerial functions. There is no question but what many traditional positions or roles have changed or been eliminated. The one of most interest to me is that which formerly was a Department Head.

Within my experience, the Department Headship is perhaps the most crucial position in education for faculty and students because it is directly involved with the educational process. Even during its heyday, the role of the Department Head was never fully understood or consistently implemented. Job descriptions for the position rarely make clear whether the Department Head is the representative of the program, faculty and students to the administration, or whether it is the last outpost of administration. I always considered it to be a little of both with the main emphasis being to represent the best interests of program, faculty and students.

The traditional definition and role for a Department Head

1. The position was listed in the institutional table of organization.

2. Each major discipline had a Department Head. In some instances, several closely related disciplines might be combined into a single department, i.e., Fine Arts, Crafts, etc.

3. It was a position filled by appointment, and the appointee served at the will of the Dean. At a few institutions, the Head was elected by the faculty.

4. There was a financial remuneration connected with the position.

5. The Department Head was expected to provide leadership and had responsibilities for records, budgets, etc. and was spokesperson for the faculty and students of that program.

6. The Department Head served with other Heads as an advisory body on a college council with the Dean as Chair.

Within the department context, each major discipline had fixed-use space restricted to departmental programs and some multi-use space shared with other programs. Each department was given an operational budget which was spent at the discretion of that Department Head and faculty members.

My first encounter with alternative management at the program level was during 1976 – 1977 at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. I went there to interview for a position. The university had just built a new school for art and design and only recently moved into the new facility. I met with the
Dean of the School of Art and the interview was going well until I asked who was Head of Graphic Design. He explained to me that although the school had various programs of study, there were no headships or other designations of responsibility by discipline other than as teachers. I inquired about leadership, supervising budgets, keeping records, who spoke for faculty and students, etc., and I was informed that all matters for all disciplines were handled by the Dean and Assistant Dean with staff.

I met with faculty, and generally, they were disgruntled, cynical and very uncommitted to teaching, the school or the Dean. At the end of my visit, I was offered a position. I told him that frankly I had never seen such a ridiculous educational situation in my life. It was so incredible to me that all I could do was laugh. Needless, to say there was no more communication between the Dean and myself.

Currently a large number, if not actually a majority, of programs for all the arts at state universities are managed very nearly the same as the one described at Ann Arbor. I have worked within this type of educational management, and I am even more convinced now than in the 1970s that the concept is totally contrary to faculty productivity and commitment. Where, when and why this organizational concept without department heads was conceived is not clear, and its origins can only be speculated.

It is believed that elimination of departments began during the period of financial duress in the early 1970s. The new organizational scheme usually began with establishing Schools composed of a variety of programs that formerly had been separate departments. Within a short time there were Schools of Art, Design, Music, Drama, Dance and Architecture. School heads were identified as Directors, and in most instances, their organizational status was about the same as a Department Head. Only in a few instances were schools headed by a Dean.

The Director holds responsibility for operational and academic matters including budgets, school policies, educational leadership, teaching assignments, etc. The Director has an office staff for maintaining records and other clerical tasks. School Directors form an advisory council for the Dean. Faculty participation varies among Schools. A common form of faculty involvement is for the Director to establish an advisory committee drawn from the faculty at large. This is most typical when the School incorporates a large number of different programs—such as a School of Art which might have ten to fourteen distinct programs. Faculty constitute the standard academic committees for hiring, faculty review for retention, promotion and tenure, curriculum, etc.

The main distinction between Department Heads and Directors, and at the same time the most disturbing, is that Department Heads rose from the teaching ranks and most had years of teaching and professional experience. There is a tendency today to hire Directors from other administrative positions, and they simply do not have in-depth experience in design. They attempt to force directions on the faculty which are often contrary to faculty objectives.
A very serious drawback to the School concept is its negative impact on professional education. Directors often promote esoteric programs when students are concerned with practical ones. The majority of students enroll in Design as preparation for a professional career as a designer. With the current institutional obsession for research, professionally based programs and faculty are frequently under pressure if not attack from Directors and Deans.

Because Department Heads had a singular program responsibility, they could provide educational leadership in addition to executing certain operational responsibilities. Directors having responsibility for two or more programs are in no position to provide educational leadership, and they would do best to concentrate on being a good manager and facilitator.

School organization and practices vary from institution to institution, but all have in common that departments per se have been eliminated. In the instance of Schools with only a few disciplines, or those that have a substantial number of faculty members within a single program, the Director might improvise by appointing a faculty member as a Coordinator, Program Head, Senior Professor or some other such title. These positions are not listed in the institutional table of organization nor is there financial remuneration for discharging the responsibilities that go with the appointment.

Some perceived benefits for an institution to be realized by eliminating Departments and Department Heads might be:

1. By phasing out Department Heads there is a reduction in salary budgets as the additional pay for Department Heads is eliminated.

2. Without Departments, the number of total faculty can be reduced because faculty and courses for one program can service other programs. This almost always leads to serious reduction of credits in the major required for graduation with a corresponding increase in elective credits. There is almost always an increase in graduate teaching assistants and part-time instructors.

3. By consolidating all Department budgets into a single School budget there is savings, and also there is more control over how budgets are spent.

4. By creating a central school office in place of departmental offices, there is consolidation of record keeping and other clerical tasks which reduces the number of support staff.

5. By eliminating Departments as such, there is greater administrative control in assigning space. Multi-use space can be increased and fixed-space reduced or eliminated. From a managerial point-of-view, this is more efficient, but teachers consider it as being less effective from an educational standpoint.

6. By eliminating Department Heads it is easier for administration to exercise control over educational as well as operational activities. Without program leadership, it encourages divisiveness among faculty members. A divided rather than a unified faculty insures administrative control over personnel and operational as well as educational matters.
Elimination of Departments and reduction of hours in the major is consistent with university notions of liberal arts education.

Perhaps the strongest consideration for eliminating departments was not financial, but rather to make the managerial operation fluid. For institutions over-loaded with administrators, a smooth managerial operation is a high priority. Accountability at universities today more nearly approximates corporate organization with managerial hierarchy than academic organization which traditionally is based on division of responsibilities with checks and balances between managerial and educational functions.

At most state universities, departments have always been under attack, and especially the professional programs as universities favored the liberal arts approach to education

1 Education within a departmental system was considered too focused, narrow and insulated from other learning experiences.

2 Department Heads were perceived as being jealous of one another, not able to work cooperatively; they were viewed as empire builders in terms of constantly pressing for fixed-space, budgets, staff and faculty members. Department Heads were believed to be inflexible. It was much easier for a Dean to work with three administrative Directors than with three to six contentious Department Heads representing their programs, faculty and students. (When threatened with loss of faculty lines, budgets or space, Deans exhibit exactly the same traits for which they condemn Department Heads.)

The weaknesses of schools without program leadership positions are

1 Without leadership positions by discipline, isolation of faculty members within disciplines is encouraged. There is no formal structure to promote unity among faculty members serving each program. This discourages curriculum development, planning, and faculty interaction. It therefore diminishes the educational experience for students within those programs. A unified faculty compared to a divided one reflects the Gestalt principle of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The most successful educational programs have always been those with a unified faculty sharing common values and goals. All in all, programs without appointed leadership are bound to have a negative impact on educational quality, and they are destructive to faculty commitment and sense of well-being.

2 There is over-reliance on graduate teaching assistants and part-time faculty. Once a School moves into this trap, it is nearly impossible to escape because of the cost of replacing teaching assistants and part-time instructors with full-time faculty.

3 There is absolutely no way that the Director can provide educational leadership for two or more programs. At best, the Director can function only as an operational manager.

4 The establishment of a School and Director with the latter serving as advisor to the Dean removes the Dean from any direct, structured contact with educational programs. This is compared to the Department Head system where all program Heads as members of the College Council had regular contact with the Dean.
Within Schools without appointed leadership by program, the professional identities of individual programs begin to blur as the operation of the school takes on the qualities of a single entity rather than as a combination of distinctly different programs of study.

Programs without appointed leadership have no representation—no spokesperson for the program, faculty or students. The Director’s role is unmistakably an administrative one, and it is representative only in terms of what the Director chooses to represent. Faculty from each major discipline do not have an unencumbered communication channel to the Dean.

Schools without appointed leadership and program budgets are overly paternalistic. (Administrators are parents and faculty members are children.) At many Schools, there are no annual operating budgets for each program. If funds are required, they are disbursed at the discretion of the Director. Individual or program funding is available only by personal request.

Too much decision-making is removed from program or faculty level and invested in the Director.

The Director is responsible to the Dean but not accountable to faculty under his supervision.

The organization of educational programs into a School is beneficial but with a few modifications it could function with greater effectiveness. At the same time, the educational environment would be improved and faculty productivity increased.

The most important changes would involve

1. Making schools into Divisions within the College and retaining Department Heads for each program in the School.

2. Educational leadership positions should be filled with a Department Head appointed by the Dean or elected by the faculty. The Department Head would be listed in the table of organization, there would be financial compensation, the Head would serve at the will of the Director and a majority of faculty in the program.

3. The Director is an administrative position, and serves at the will of the Dean, but should be accountable to Department Heads. At such a time as a majority of Department Heads vote no confidence in the Director, the Director should be replaced. If the Director does not have strong incentive to represent faculty and programs, they invariably end up representing only their best interests and serving the Dean.

4. Each program should have an operational budget to be spent at the discretion of the Program Head and faculty.

5. Department Heads serve as an advisory council to the Director.

6. Department Heads should have structured access to the Dean that would not be interpreted as circumventing the Director. There should be a direct link between the Dean and the educational programs.

Whatever Happened to Department Heads?

A unified faculty compared to a divided one reflects the Gestalt principle of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

– Rob Roy Kelly
It is time to review the present organizational structure and definition of responsibilities by position. Hopefully, there can be some enlightened modifications to the present system that will better balance operational and educational matters, and establish a more favorable situation for faculty. Reform can only benefit the educational environment for faculty, students, and in the end, the university itself.

It appears that the departmental system is being eliminated for reasons based on financial considerations and establishing greater administrative control. It is more reasonable to make decisions that favor the institutional mission of education. There can be no question but what each program should have appointed or elected leadership, some degree of financial autonomy and some restricted studio space. The conditions are essential and most conducive to the best interests of faculty and students. It can be presumed that what is beneficial for faculty and students should result in a more productive faculty and effective educational experience for students.

Notes
For the sake of brevity and in order to better communicate the larger picture, I have only touched on many aspects of the situation described. I have not provided a detailed outline of events and conditions leading to, or resulting from, changes nor a complete description of the impact on education, students and faculty. These matters have been dealt with more thoroughly in other papers.

If faced with the situation of no program leadership or spokesperson, my strategy today would be to borrow from history the Revolutionary adage, United We Stand, Divided We Fall. The first step would be to bring the faculty together to ask if they are willing to unite. If so, the next action would be for faculty members to elect a spokesperson and next a secretary. Using Roberts Rules of Order as a guide for conducting meetings, the faculty would meet on a regular basis to discuss all matters pertinent to the best interests of the educational program. It is important that the Director does not attend. All issues would be voted upon, and minutes recorded for each meeting. The minutes become a very important paper trail in dealing with administration if any future difficulties occur.

The faculty would request a meeting with the Director where the faculty action would be communicated, and the Director would be informed as to whom was the spokesperson for the program and faculty. A copy of minutes from every meeting would be sent to the Director. It is of utmost importance that the Director be forced into dealing with the faculty as a whole as it pertains to program matters. This protects any individual faculty member who might be more outspoken or critical than others. It is extremely important that the Director not be able to manipulate or divide faculty members.

Regarding important issues, the entire faculty should request a meeting with the Director so that it is totally clear that the Director must deal with the entire faculty and not just the spokesperson. Whenever the Director becomes intransigent on an important issue, I do not think it to be out of line to ask the Director to set up a meeting with the Dean, Director and faculty members.
Whatever Happened to Department Heads?