

# THE CONSTRUCT OF EDUCATIONAL INTEGRITY: MODEL COHERENCE, CONSISTENCY AND VALUES

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**Abstract:** Renwick College is a centre for postgraduate professional studies and research in the field of education for children with sensory disabilities. It is administered by the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children at North Rocks in Sydney, and is affiliated with The University of Newcastle. This presentation will provide a structured analysis of the meaning and use of the term 'integrity' as the term applies to the College as a discrete educational setting. Its author proposes that a clearer understanding of the term 'integrity' used in this particular context relates to (a) the coherent relationship of certain identifiable clusters of constituents within the educational program offered at the College, (b) the consistency of those offerings and (c) an interface of those factors with several identifiable values, principles and rules associated with the offerings and the setting.

**Keywords:** Educational integrity; coherence; consistency; values.

Academic integrity is a fundamental value of teaching, learning and scholarship. Yet, states the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University in the USA, there is growing evidence that students are cheating and plagiarizing in record numbers (Kenan Institute for Ethics, 2005). However, Educational integrity is a rather different and broader construct than merely a focus upon student dishonesty. This paper is concerned with the meaning of 'integrity', as the term is applied to educational settings. Giving meaning to 'integrity' as a word, is important, since it is the meaning of a particular term on which we depend for confidence to act. It follows that the ways in which people articulate their understanding of the term 'integrity' will profoundly affect what they do and how they do it. Suffice it to say that the word 'integrity' (as with such complex words as 'policy' and 'right'), has a variety of meanings. For example, the Online Free Dictionary (2005); provides its reader with at least three definitions of the term. According to that source, integrity implies the following:

- Steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code.
- The state of being unimpaired; soundness.
- The quality or condition of being whole or undivided; completeness.

The word itself, derives from the Middle English *integrite*, from Old French, from Latin *integritās*, soundness, from *integer*, whole, or complete (Online Free Dictionary, 2005). Completeness, or wholeness or soundness are together, important concepts when used in the context of educational service provision, as is the association of the term with moral or ethical practice. It is likely that integrity as an attribute is to some extent "in the eye of the beholder" and that ascribing the term to a person or agency is mainly a matter of personal judgement. However, it is important to the success of those who purvey Education, that their offerings as well as the agency that employs them, be said to have 'integrity'. In the Education industry, it might be argued, integrity is everything. The purpose of this paper is to propose as an explorative exercise, a framework for analyzing the meaning and use of 'integrity' as the term is applied to a representative educational setting. For purposes of the exercise I have selected the educational agency at which I am currently employed. It is important to those of us who work in the agency that the services we offer have integrity; that is to say, that they are characterised by (a) coherence, (b) consistency and (c) that they have a strong ethical base. The explorative exercise commences with a brief description of the setting to be examined.

## The setting

Renwick College is a centre for research and postgraduate professional studies in the field of education for children who have sensory disabilities and is located in Sydney. The College is administered by the *Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC)*, and is affiliated with *The University of Newcastle*. Situated in the grounds of the RIDBC among several schools and educational services, the College offers students unique opportunities for observation and practical experience. All degrees offered at the College are postgraduate awards of *The University of Newcastle*. Students enroll through the University and must meet its criteria for admission and progression. Program focus is upon research, professional training, and continuing professional development for teachers and allied professionals working with children who have impaired vision or hearing.

The College aims as an organization, at assuring post-graduate educational opportunities for professionals working, or intending to work in the area of sensory disabilities through four integrated areas, (a) the provision of high quality initial and on-going professional education, (b) provision of ongoing professional development, through a range of seminars, conferences, and workshops conducted by national and international experts; and by (c) conducting research on any aspect having to do with the education of students with sensory disabilities. Research infrastructure at the College includes: a modern, highly specialised library that also provides access to print and online resources; access to a modern local computer network for word processing and graphics packages and access to the University of Newcastle computer network for data processing and statistical packages.

During the 2005 academic year, the College has eight full and part-time academic faculty, eight adjunct and sessional lecturers, six general staff and a membership of 147 full and part-time postgraduate students. Studies are available on campus, through part-time or full-time study, depending on demand. Part-time studies are also available via distance education. Some candidates for coursework degrees have received NSW Department of Education and Training Cadetships. In addition, the College also provides specialised professional preparation to Orientation and Mobility Instructors from the NSW Guide Dogs Association.

A great deal of information about the College is presented on the RIDBC website, at <http://info.ridbc.org.au/> For example, a current copy of the College Handbook is available there, as well as detailed information about policy and procedural matters, and a campus map. A more complete understanding of the College, its mission and its organization as these relate to notions of its integrity, would be gained by visiting the facility, meeting with faculty and staff, and observing it in operation. The exploratory study continues with a succinct description of the model used in analysing the 'integrity' as a construct.

### **An analytic model**

As mentioned above, integrity, with regard to educational programs is both a desired and a desirable characteristic. In spite of the currency of the term, very little has been written about analysing integrity as it relates to human service organisations. What does it actually mean when one claims that this or that educational program has integrity? In this paper, my goal is to contribute to filling that vacuum by proposing a framework useful in analysing the term, and then to elaborate and explain the relationships between the several constituent parts which together complete its meaning.

Figure 1 presents constituent parts of the framework that is the basis of the analytic process later described in this paper. In the diagram, the College is represented in its organisational entirety; (students, faculty and staff, the facilities, its offerings and its various procedures), as a large rectangle. The College becomes the platform on which three focal areas stand, within a triangle labelled integrity. For purposes of this exploratory study, the College becomes the setting (analogous perhaps to a *goldmine*), that is to provide the requisite data (*the ore*) from which the meaning of 'integrity' (*the gold*) is derived (or *refined*). On the rectangle (the College), are superimposed the three constituents that together comprise a framework for better understanding the term integrity. These constituents of integrity are: (a) coherence, (b) consistence and (c) value.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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The three components of 'integrity' are analogous to mine shafts that lead to the gold deposit. The shafts will become the vehicles through which analysis of the term integrity becomes possible. Each of these components is now discussed.

### **Coherence**

Within any such human service enterprise as the College, the issue of organisational coherence can have a significant effect on the way the agency operates in carrying out its mission. The issue of model coherence is of considerable importance to an agency's administrative process, since it affects the manner in which major administrative tasks may be executed. The College, as a human service delivery agency, might have been established as a product of careful planning, during which a clear purpose or mission has guided its creation, or it might, on the other hand, merely reflect in its day to day activity, traditional patterns following lines of least resistance. A structured analysis of its coherence will enable the reader to discover which of the two options is the case.

Model coherence analysis (Cocks, 2001), as an effective tool of human service administration is concerned in this instance, with whether or not a number of important factors or variables within a particular program (the College),

combine harmoniously to meet the specific needs of individual clients (postgraduate students) at a particular time of their lives. The model coherence analysis protocol requires managers and planners to collect data to answer the following questions. Within the College and its several offerings:

- Are the right people,
- working with the right clients,
- who are properly grouped,
- doing the right things,
- using the right methods, and
- consistently so?

The key issue within model coherence relates, in this example, to the needs of the students as service users and the extent to which what the College as a human service agency does, is consistent with addressing those needs. The process of model coherence, therefore, involves describing and analysing the assumptions upon which the College as a service model is based, the identification of the needs of its service users, the content or purpose(s) of the program, and the ways in which the program actually delivers its services, (i.e. the program processes via provision of physical settings; methods and technologies; language about the College and its clients; the people who provide the service; and miscellaneous images and symbols that the College associates with its clients).

Sources of incoherence that affect the College as a human service might derive from a mismatch between the assumptions underpinning the services it offers, the identity and needs of the clients, what the service chooses as its purpose, and/or any aspects of the processes adopted by the service. A model coherence analysis is likely to bring such incoherencies to the fore (Wolfensberger, 1973).

The framework for analysis is presented as Figure 2. The diagram shows a model coherency hexagram comprising six data collection areas that have been depicted as circles. Data from observations and College records are assigned to each circle as appropriate. Data collection areas are as follows:

Circle 1: Data concern numbers and types of client. For example, in this circle, labeled Who are the students?, is reference to the 147 postgraduate students attending the College during the 2005 academic year, broken down by age and if possible, gender and by professional specialization (either vision or hearing impairment).

Circle 2 (Depicted with dotted lines) relates to the needs of the students by specialization category. In the case of the College, numbers of students studying in the areas of vision and hearing impairment, on campus and by distance. It attempts to answer, what is it that these students need from the College?

Circle 3 relates to student groupings, e.g. classes and tutorial arrangements. It attempts to answer the question – how are these students grouped, in order to receive the services offered by the College?

Circle 4 collects data on the program content delivered to the students. It attempts to answer the question – what is it that these students actually receive from the College?

Circle 5 relates to data on methods of program delivery (the delivery process). It attempts to answer the question – how is the College program actually delivered to the students? and

Circle 6 relates to faculty and staff numbers and professional identity. Who are the faculty and staff? What are their specialty areas?

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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The process of model coherency analysis, once data have been aggregated in the appropriate category, consists of relating the information in each circle to that in the other circles. The process requires, for example, such questions as: (1) How does who the students are (according to their identified needs), relate to their groupings?; then (2) How does who the students are relate to the program they receive?; then (3) How does who the students are relate to the way the program is delivered?; then (4) How does who the students are relate to the professional identity and numbers of those delivering it? The goal of this exercise is to answer the several questions outlined above, with

regard to the central question, namely; are the right students, grouped in the right way, receiving the right program, delivered in the right way, by the right staff?

It is necessary to continue the co-relational exercise by working around the hexagram, relating each cluster of information to every other, so that judgments are made about the coherence of the College, with regard to an interface of its several most important constituent variables. Thus questions are raised that require answers from relating information in each circle to that in each of the other circles in the diagram. The result will indicate the relationships that promote coherence, and bring out the relationships that lean towards incongruence and incoherence. Description of the entire analytic process proceeds with consideration of the two other components of the model; namely, consistency and values.

### **Consistency**

Consistency is, like integrity, another complex word with a variety of definitions, several of which are so similar in meaning to the term coherence, that coherence and consistency are often used together when describing programs for persons with disabilities. However, used in the context of the present exploratory exercise, the term simply requires that the College perform its several major functions in a relatively predictable and repetitious fashion, so that its programs are consistently offered, rather than being of the once-off sort. Whether or not the College is consistent in its offerings can be ascertained by observation and from examination of its literature. Further, consistency also relates to course content, methods of student and course assessment weightings from year to year. It in fact relates to the information captured in each of the model's circles.

### **Values**

This facet of the analysis model focuses on the ways that practices, beliefs and values interact to maintain social controls within the agency. Values, as Carroll, (1997) has pointed out, are the most dynamic elements of culture – more strategic than organizational symbols, communication rituals, work rituals, patterns of assumptions, and rules of the game. For example, in addition to the fact that students have a moral right to receive good teaching, faculty have a moral right to be evaluated on the bases of effective teaching. Major decisions about course content, pedagogy, and even scheduling, as Kovac and Coppola (1997) have pointed out, involve choices in competing priorities, and therefore communicate a sense of values. Values espoused by the College can be ascertained through observation and from examination of the associated literature produced by the College and its two sponsoring bodies; the Royal Institute for Deaf & Blind Children, and The University of Newcastle.

### **Assembling the framework**

The purpose of the exploratory process described above is to answer the question; Is integrity one of the characteristics of the Renwick College program (as a representative educational program)? The question's answer, for purposes of this paper, is the product of the following three-phased analysis.

Phase 1: Is the Renwick College program coherent? For example, are the right clients, grouped in the right way, receiving the right program, delivered in the right way. Figure 3 presents results of a rudimentary model coherence analysis of the program:

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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By following the co-relational protocol described above, it becomes possible for the researcher to ascertain that there is a relatively high level of coherence in the program. Types of student and their career needs relate well to the groupings employed by the College, the curriculum focus and modes of delivery. Faculty and staff numbers and professional identity relate well to student type, need, groupings and the remaining facets of the model.

Thus the researcher, employing a simple three point Likert-type scale, with a low rating = incoherent, middle rating = some features of the model are coherent, some incoherent, and high rating = congruent, it becomes possible to rate the College in the middle to high category with regard to the coherence of its offerings.

Phase 2: Is the Renwick College program consistent? In 2005, the College celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and its 250<sup>th</sup> graduate. Over the decade of its operation, courses and schedules have remained reasonably similar from term to term and year to year. Changes have involved periodic supplementation with new offerings, and an annual upgrading of individual course content. It becomes possible for the researcher, employing a three point Likert-type scale to rate the consistency of College offerings in the upper range.

Phase 3: One of the several definitions of integrity has to do with "adherence to moral and ethical principles; honesty." (UCDavis, 2005). For purposes of this analysis the salient question becomes: Is the Renwick College program an ethical one? With regard to the College's commitment to the highest standards of professional and academic ethics for students, faculty and administration, a statement in the current College Handbook claims that in partnership with the University of Newcastle, the College is committed to continuous improvement and review in its provision of high quality teaching and learning opportunities in the area of Special Education for students with sensory disabilities, research in this area and professionally-related community service (Renwick College, 2005). It is the aim of the College (claims the Handbook), to contribute to the assurance of high quality educational opportunities. All courses receive annual student evaluation, with the results made available to faculty for improvement purposes. The Handbook also contains a section on academic integrity, mostly aimed at reduction of plagiarism. The statements in the Handbook are an important indicator that the College intends its practice to be ethical, and to this end it should also receive a reasonably high rating by the researcher.

## Conclusion

Educational enterprises, of which, for purposes of this exploratory study, Renwick College has been used as a reasonably typical example, are at their core concerned with processes of transformation. Any organisational approach to the goal of human transformation must be concerned with the integrity of its operation. Educational integrity, however, is a complex concept, and difficult to define. Yet the term is so axiomatic to the work of higher education, that for many institutions the meaning and definition of integrity literally go without saying. Such organisations simply state that "integrity is essential to the educational mission of the university" and go on to other policy and procedural matters. Those that do attempt a definition of the term generally declare that integrity simply means "academic honesty," or define it by example, listing prohibited cheating behaviors and/or required honest and fair behaviours (Center for Academic Integrity, 2005). In this paper, the author has proposed that the term, as it is applied to educational services and settings is comprised of the following three components:

- Steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code.
- The state of being unimpaired; soundness.
- The quality or condition of being whole or undivided; completeness

It was the purpose of this paper to describe a three phased analysis of the term 'integrity' as it might widely be applied to educational settings. Analysis of the term was dependant in the analytic model, on data-based judgements, made by an observer or researcher and related to the educational program's (a) coherence, (b) consistence, and (c) ethics.

No educational community can flourish without integrity. Without appropriate ethics, the free exchange of ideas is distorted, and the willingness to engage collaboratively in the learning process becomes stunted (Center for Academic Integrity, 2005). Without coherence, important program elements will not combine to deliver the right program, to the right students, in the right way. Without consistency, gains cannot be sustained. For College administrators, faculty and staff, supporting and affirming these three constituents, is essential to promoting and maintaining a high level of educational integrity. The three interrelated constituents provide reasons and motives for action. While these three components of the model overlap one another to some extent, each expresses a key and separate aspect of educational integrity.

Educational integrity, thus defined, becomes intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. The educational mission of our Australian colleges and universities entails a belief that **integrity** is a value in and of itself, and a commitment to integrity yields certain tangible benefits in, for example, maintaining the reputation and credibility of an institution's students and faculty, as well as the meaning, value and validity of the degrees it awards. The continued growth and success of such educational establishments as Renwick College will continue to be based on the confidence that their attempts at ensuring **integrity** inspire.

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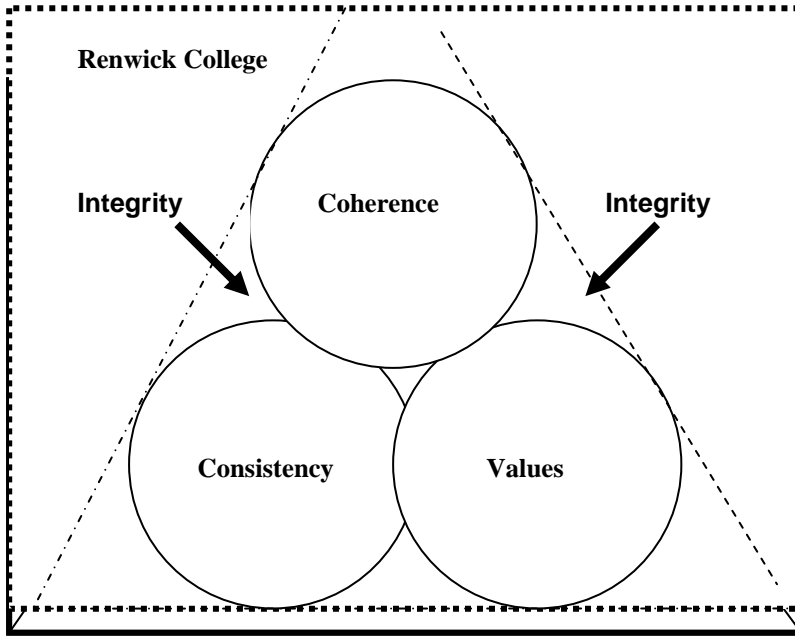


Figure 1: The basic analytical model

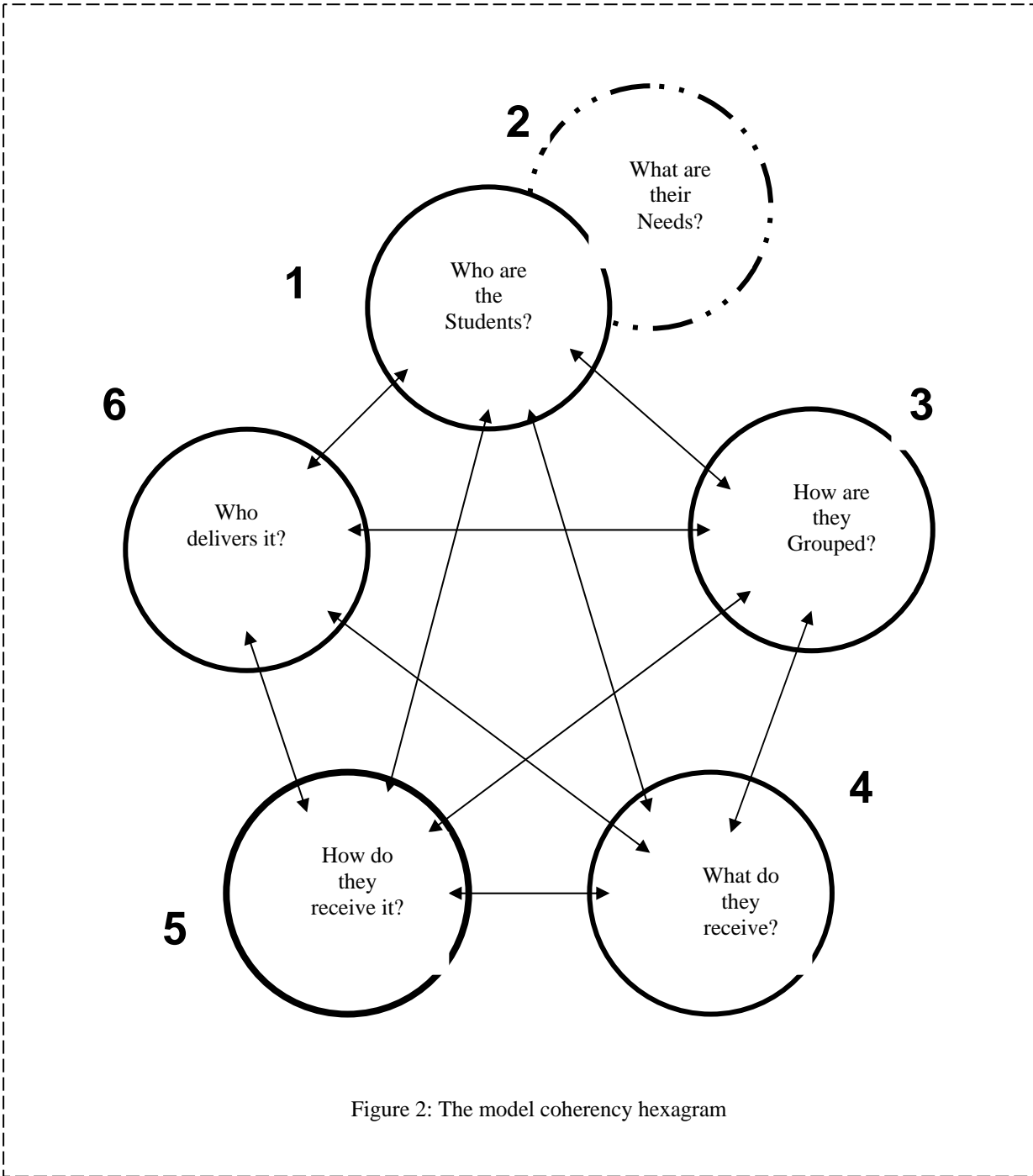


Figure 2: The model coherency hexagram

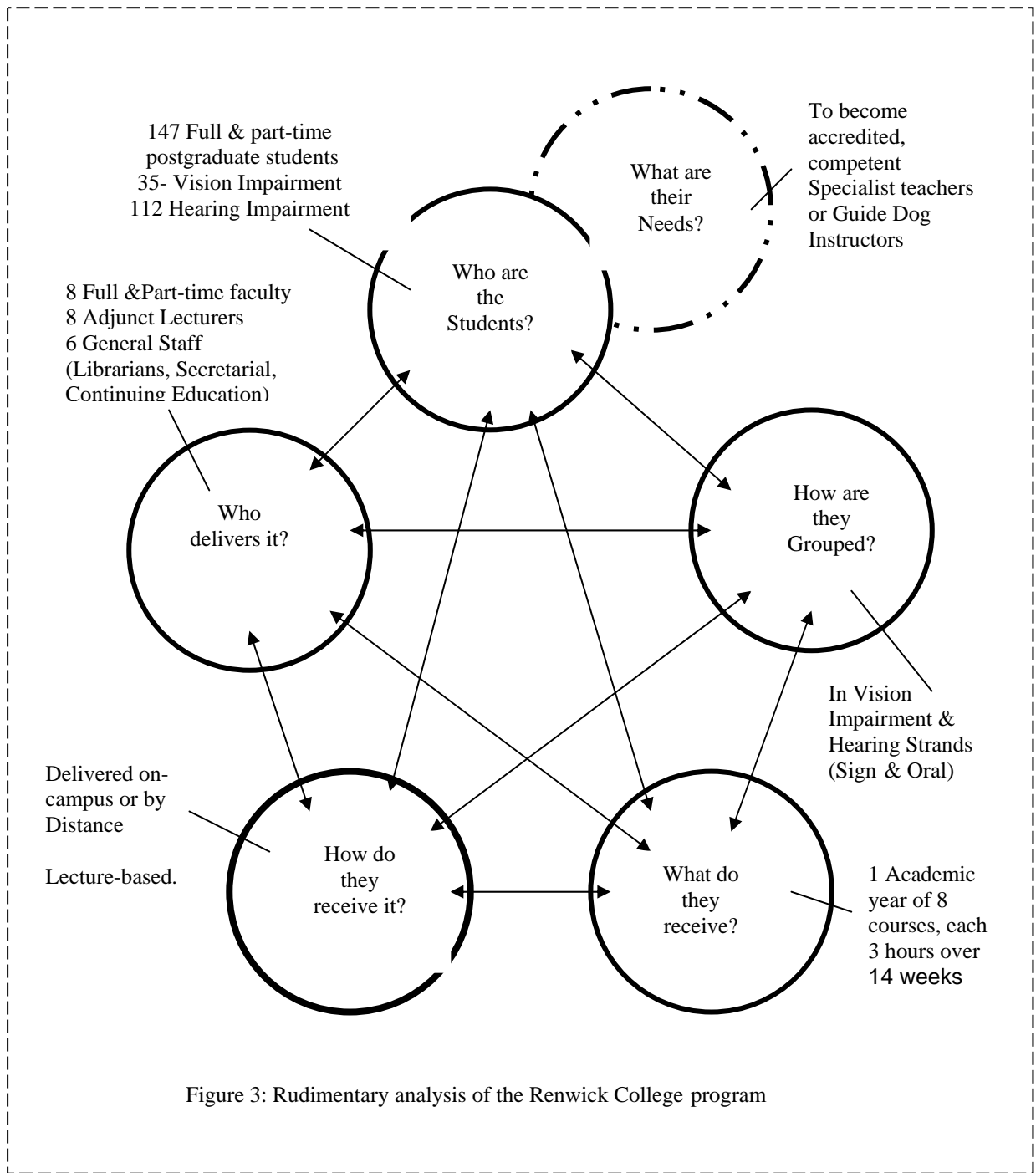


Figure 3: Rudimentary analysis of the Renwick College program