Examining the Continuous Innovation and Learning among Academic Administrators and Students in Lower Margibi County, Liberia

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Abstract

Public high schools in rural Margibi County, Liberia face series of related challenges, including a decline in academic performance among students, stagnated instructional innovations among administrators and deteriorating infrastructure. One vigorous perception is that understanding innovation necessitates a multi-level perspective. Anderson et al. (2004) list a large number of factors at the individual, group, and organizational levels that researchers have established to influence innovation in organizations: Individual level: personality, motivation, cognitive ability, job characteristics, mood states. At the group level: team structure, team climate, team member characteristics, team processes, leadership style; at the Organizational level: structure, strategy, size, resources and culture, Learning is a continuous process and cannot be adequately achieved with a stagnated innovation. Learning needs to meet up with the 21th century standard. Academic institutions are usually seen densely populated in rural Liberia. The curricula, Instructional materials, personnel, students and the physical structures are the major ingredients of any academic institution, new ideas and methods of doing things to meet the need of any given society or institution will be of necessity, schools in rural Liberia have for many years remain unchanged, same deteriorating structures, limited personnel, and inadequate instructional materials. This paper therefore examine the professional level of administrators in improving the learning opportunity of student and infrastructural growth. The targeted population for this study was all the administrators and students from high schools (Public and Private) in the lower Margibi community and the sample size was administrators and students from five public high schools. A self -structured questionnaire was distributed to administrators and students from public high schools in the lower Margibi community. A Descriptive statistical analysis of sample gathered was implemented with a simple descriptive method. The result shows that though there are ideas of innovation within the schools system, administrators, and students are not effectively applying innovation to improve learning and infrastructure. Innovation needs to be supported, budgeted for and continuous.

Keywords: Continuous Innovation, Learning, Academic Administrators, Public High School, Infrastructure, Margibi County

Introduction

According to Rom Schrift a marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Innovation could probably be referred to as a condition in which a certain impression that needs inventiveness must possess two major components. The primary component is newness, something that haven't been seen in the institution. The secondary component is that the new idea must be expedient, because if it is just something new, but doesn't offer any advantage, it is not automatically an innovative idea.

Innovation can be understood as a progression of learning and knowledge formation through which new difficulties are defined and new knowledge is advanced to resolve them. Central to philosophies of institutional learning and knowledge creation is the inquiry of how institutions interpret individual sensitivities and knowledge into combined knowledge and institutional know-how. Whereas some researchers uphold that learning is essentially an individual activity (Simon 1991; Grant 1996), most philosophies of institutional learning focus the significance of collective knowledge as a groundwork of institutional competence. Combined knowledge is the accumulated knowledge of the organization kept in its guidelines, processes, procedures and shared standards which guide the problem-solving activities and patterns of interaction among its members. Combined knowledge look like the memory or united mind of the organization (Walsh and Ungson 1991). Accordingly, it can either be a stock of knowledge stored as inflexible information; or represent knowledge in a state of 'flow' emerging from interaction.

Continuous Innovation in education institution is required to bring new thinking and solutions to the problems facing education and to engage in professional and system learning. Innovation involves seeking and discovering new perspectives, which requires a problem solving capacity and capability. For teachers, this involves engaging them in problem identification and problems solving through generating, testing and developing ideas.

Innovation also involves the ability to synthesize, or what Albert Einstein called "combinatory play," which is creating new combinations by drawing on data, perceptions and practice. To engage in such creativity requires self-assurance and the ability to take risks. It requires a passionate interest and self-confidence. This creative work can be subversive, disrupting existing patterns and thought, a theme explored by C.M. Christenson. Innovation is necessary if we are to perceive things in a new dimensions. Ken Robinson has argued that environments need to be created in which every person is inspired to grow innovatively. This is true for academic administrators and teachers. Robinson further identifies two features, aptitude and passion, and two conditions, attitude and opportunity. The features reside with the individual. The conditions can be created through policy and by system leaders.

In the same vein Innovation is a creative endeavor. There is a significant difference between innovation and systemic attempts to improve by building on good practice. Innovation is a creative response rather than an adaptive response. Engaging the teaching profession in innovation can provide improvements that penetrate classrooms and develop necessary practices within a culture of continuous improvement. There is an increasing awareness that cultivating innovation as part of systemic reforms and engaging teachers in the development of innovation is an essential part to improving learning outcomes for all students. (Fraiser, 2006)

The ability of the administration and its professional staff to innovate requires internal innovative capabilities: both for adopting, modifying and implementing innovations that have been developed elsewhere and to develop unique innovations in-house. These innovative capabilities are similar to those used by private sector firms in the service sector or by public sector agencies to innovate. Consequently, the methods that have been developed for measuring innovation in the private and public sectors should be applicable for measuring innovation in the educational sector, although these will need to be modified to capture the unique characteristics of the educational sector and to collect data of relevance to academic institution managers.

Institutions and education systems operate very much within a globalized environment with nations' education systems being compared through international testing. There has also been a rise in government testing of key areas, such as learning and proficiency. This desire to improve standards has led to a range of national policies, systemic reforms and initiatives largely involving greater external accountabilities, a focus on student performance, the development of teaching standards, prescription of practices and school review and improvement processes.

Current school improvement practices improve a school but don't always improve learning in the school. From this, serious disparities develop between different groups of students. In addressing the issues facing schools, an innovative spirit seems to be absent. Policy makers and system administrators are often wary of innovation in education (Fraser, 2006)

Reorganizational innovation and initiatives have resulted in enhancement of the learning consequences for many students, however, they have also resulted in some unexpected outcomes, including:

• Plateaus in student performance in reading ability and math, after some preliminary improvements.

• De-professionalization of teachers, as many see themselves as implementers of policy reforms and initiatives determined outside the classroom.

• The improvement of a philosophy of dependency, in which school leaders and teachers look to others to provide direction and resolutions to the problems facing school education.

• Practicality, which is concentrated on instantaneous and temporary improvements, usually related to the administrative sequence.

Ideologies of teacher-led innovation

The framework of innovation described is supported by a set of principles for engaging teachers in disciplined innovation. These principles were identified as part of the Churchill Fellowship project. Teacher-led innovation has the following characteristics:

• Teacher-led innovation has a strong moral purpose.

• Teacher-led innovation is focused on students, their needs and aspirations.

• Teacher-led innovation is undertaken on behalf of the profession.

• Teacher-led innovation is oriented toward learning (student, teacher and system learning).

• Teacher-led innovation has precision of purposes and objectives linked to the professional needs of teachers, the broader needs of the profession and the school's improvement agenda.

• Teacher-led innovation Builds on and develops professional knowledge.

• Teacher-led innovation is an integral part of the professional life and work of teachers.

• Teacher-led innovation is most effective when context based and develops teachers' knowledge, skills and understandings as learning professionals.

• Teacher-led innovation takes an approach which ask the question "what's next?"

• Teacher-led innovation involves networked learning to build professional knowledge, such as innovation creativity and quality.

• Teacher-led innovation needs to be closely monitor and is evidence based, adopting a development and research approach, ensuring data guides decision making and continuous improvement. (Fraser, 2006).

Teacher leadership of well-organized innovation

The following have been identified as requirements for successful teacher leadership and engagement in disciplined innovation:

• Building the capacity of teachers to effectively engage in improving their practice.

• Developing sustainable cultures of continuous improvement.

• Valuing philosophical enquiry to inform thinking and practice.

• increasing school autonomy and teacher authority for improvement

• Reclaiming teacher professionalism within a public accountability framework.

• Engaging teachers in school improvement in professionally meaningful ways.

This well-organized innovation will require emphasis on the following:

• Developing a learning orientation with teaching as a profession and across education systems nationwide and worldwide.

• Building teacher capacity to problem identify, problem solve, analyze, synthesize and do research from within the context of their classroom.

• Engaging teachers in school improvement through developing and innovating good practices.

• Establishing networks of learning moral purposes.

• Building professional knowledge.

• Transferring new professional knowledge to other sites and teachers so it becomes new professional practice.

• Identifying and developing the most creative, innovative and ingenious teachers.

Developing innovation in education raises some questions. Should the teaching profession engage in innovation? Does the teaching profession want to engage in innovation? Can the teaching profession be trusted

with innovation? How can more powerful models of teaching and learning be uncovered through innovation? How might you use your expertise to contribute to the development teaching as the learning profession? The answers to all of these questions lie with the profession (Fraser, 2007).

The Connection between Continuous Developments and Strategic Planning

What role does continuous development play in strategic planning? Both continuous improvement and planning are organizational learning processes. They share the principles of data-driven decision making, broad communication across the organization, and assessment of the needs of multiple stakeholders, benchmarking, and strong leadership commitment. Both require critical thinking and attempt to transfer the thoroughness of learning in the classroom to the larger organization. According to George Keller, an educational writer, editor, and planner, the twenty-first century academic institution leaders will be responsible primarily for three things:

1. Managing change, financial controls, and quality of service. Leaders will manage new administrative arrangements, changes in tenure, networks of colleges linked through technology, five to six years classroom activities, different departmental structures, and interdisciplinary academic programs.

2. Academic institution leaders will devote more time and ingenuity to controlling costs, increasing productivity, finding additional revenues, and evaluating expenditures.

3. Maintaining quality of service, require administrators to vigilantly watch over the quality of teaching, advising, student services, administrative actions, and campus facilities and equipment as never before. Keller's words are ringing true. The strategic planning processes in academic and academic support units reflect these new ways of managing change, controlling costs and improving quality. Continuous quality improvement tools and processes provide strategies for management of change and a framework for effective strategic planning.

When continuous quality improvement informs the planning process several results emerge:

1. Mission and vision statements are based on the needs of external and internal stakeholders. Faculty, staff and administrators share common understandings and commitments about what it is they wish to accomplish together for their stakeholders.

2. Feedback is regularly solicited from students, faculty, staff, employers, parents, and alumni and then best opinions and observations are used to improve quality and respond to new conditions.

3. Casual, political, and crisis-oriented administration is replaced with information-grounded, strategic innovations.

4. Quality improvement efforts focus on the core processes of the institution. Strategic planning identifies which processes and sub processes must be optimized and CQI improves those processes.

5. Close oversight and supervision of daily affairs is delegated by top administrators to vice presidents, directors, and department chairs, who in turn delegate more responsibilities to their staff.

Methodology

Sampling

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design which employed the questionnaire for the purpose of data collection. All administrative staff of government high schools within the lower Margibi area constitute the population. The purposive sampling method was used in the selection of all accessible samples within the given population. The sample was made up of fifty (50) government school administrators and administrative staff from lower Margibi County (for some reason the names of the schools are withheld), and fifty (50) students. A total of ten (10) administrators and administrative staff were sampled from five (5) schools. Fifteen women (15) and thirty-five (35) men and ten (10) students from each the same five schools. Twenty-five (25) of the students were female while twenty-five (25) were male. These figures made up the sample.

Instrument

The instrument used for the data collection was a questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire consisted of two sections, section one and section two. Section one sought for the demographic and general information of the respondents. The name of the institution, the position and gender of the respondents were items included in the first section. Section two sought to obtain opinions of respondent on their perception of the Continuous Innovation and learning among Academic Administrators and students in schools. Each question was responded to using one of the three options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. This method of rating was adopted to clearly project the varying degree of intensity of the respondent's opinion on the scale of preference on the scale from Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Strongly Agree is regarded as the highest while Strongly Disagree is regarded as the lowest. This will help in eliminating the element of doubt and unnecessary vacuum which could be caused be some other methods.

Procedure

The researcher was assisted by student research assistant from the College of Humanities, Adventist University of West Africa, Margibi County, Liberia. The research assistant distributed and immediately collected the questionnaire from respondents. All the one hundred (100) questionnaire were analyzed using the Descriptive statistical analysis of the sample gathered with the SPSS statistical package.

Results

Research Question: What is the level of Continuous Innovation and learning among Academic Administrators and students in lower Margibi County Liberia?

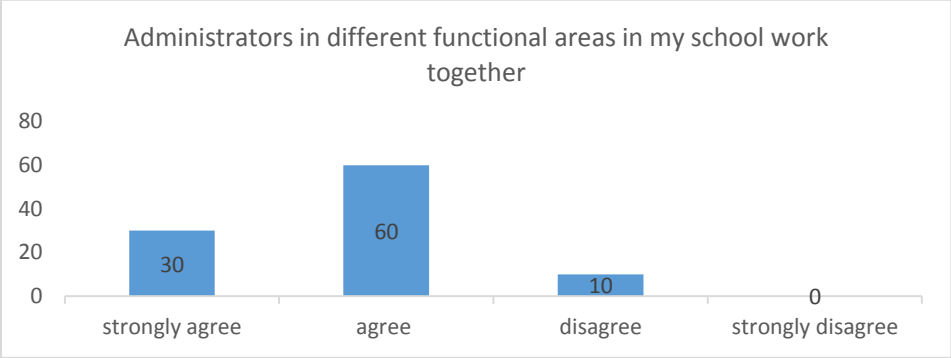

Figure 1

The results in figure 1 shows that out of the one hundred respondent thirty percent strongly agree that there is a working harmony among administrative staff of their institutions. Sixty percent says they agree while ten percent of them disagree. There were no respondents who strongly disagree.

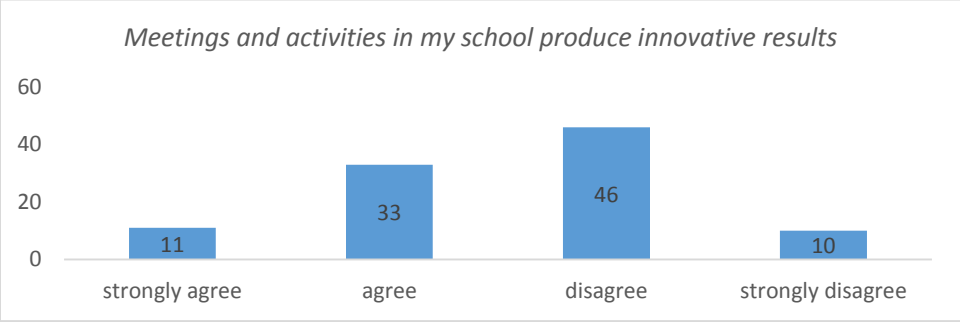

Figure 2

The results in figure two indicates eleven percent of the total respondent strongly agreeing that meetings and activities in their institutions result into innovation. Thirty-three percent of them say they agree, forty-six percent of the respondent disagree while ten percent of them strongly disagree.

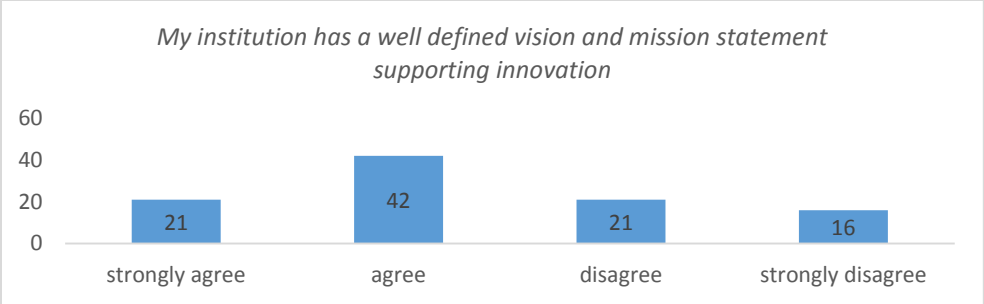

Figure 3

The results in figure three revealed that there is a higher percentage of the respondents who agree to their institutions having a well-defined vision and mission statement supporting innovation. Twenty-one percent strongly agree and twenty-one percent disagree. Sixteen percent of the respondents strongly disagree.

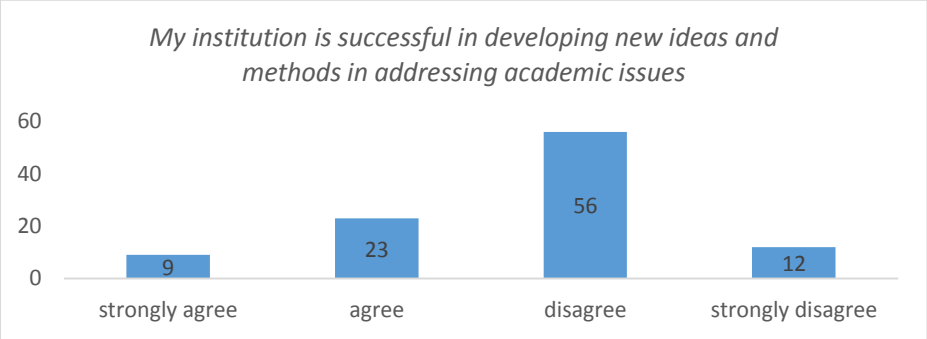

Figure 4

The results in figure four shows that there are more persons who disagree to successful new ideas in their institutions. Nine percent of the respondent says they strongly agree, twenty-three percent agree that their institutions are successful in developing new ideas and methods in addressing academic issues. Fifty-six percent of the respondent disagree while twelve percent strongly disagree.

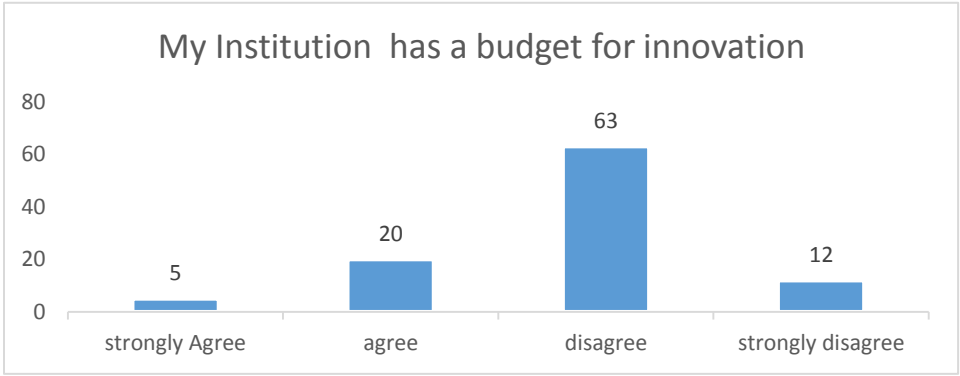

Figure 5

The results shown in figure five indicate a high percentage of respondents who disagree on their institution having budget for innovation. Five percent of one hundred respondents strongly agree, twenty percent agree, sixty-three percent disagree, while twelve percent strongly disagree to budgetary allocation for innovation.

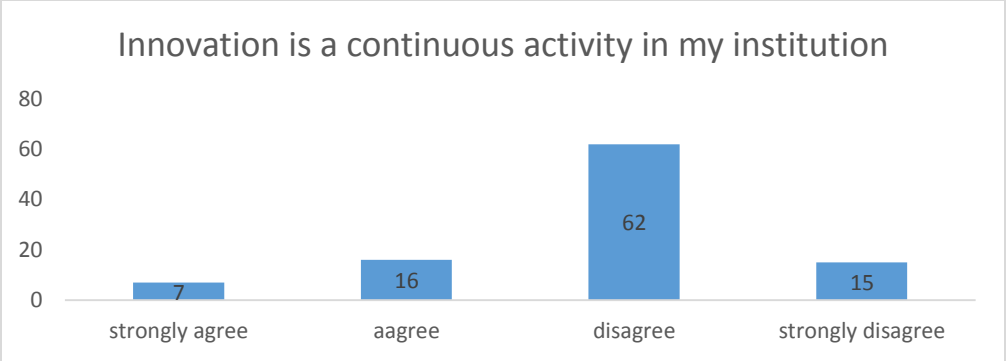

Figure 6

The results in figure six shows that seven percent of the one hundred sampled strongly agree that innovation is a continuous activity in their institutions. Sixteen percent agree, while sixty-two percent of those sampled disagree to innovation being a continuous activity in their institution. Fifteen percent strongly disagree.

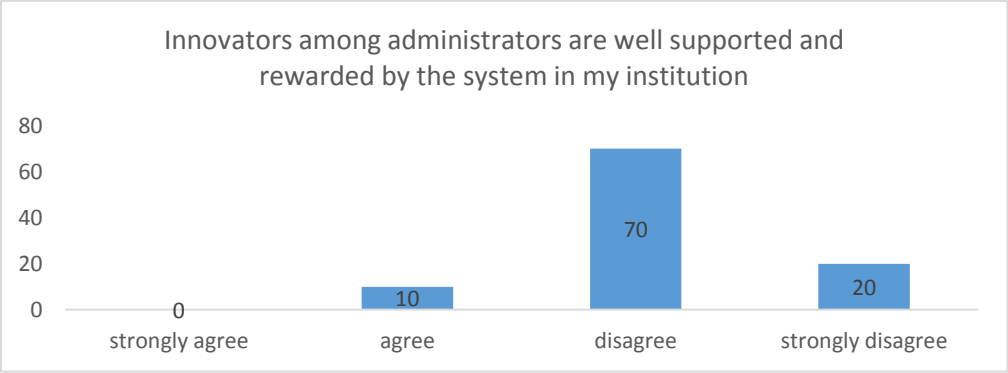

Figure 7

The results in figure seven revealed that no one of the respondents strongly agree that innovators in academic institutions are supported and rewarded. Ten percent of the respondents agree, while seventy percent disagree. Twenty percent of the total strongly disagree.

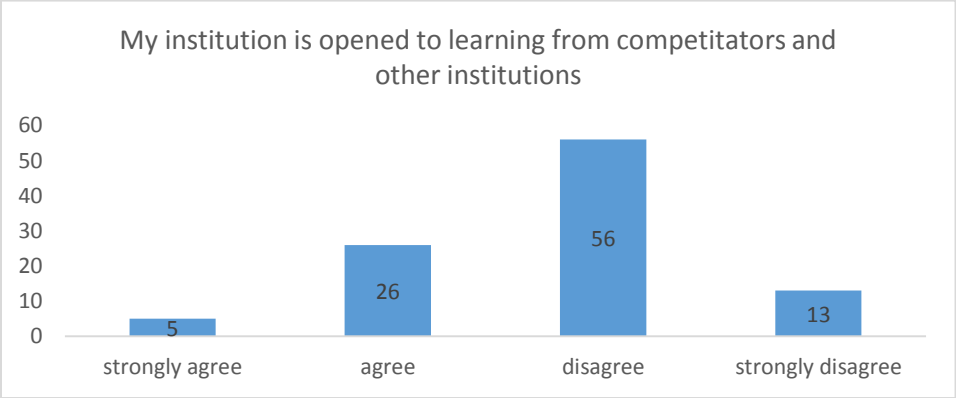

Figure 8

The results in figure eight revealed that five percent of the respondents strongly agree that their institutions are opened to learning from competitors and other institutions. Twenty-six percent of the respondents agree, while fifty-six percent of them disagree to their institutions being opened to learning from competitors and other institutions. Thirteen percent of the total strongly disagree.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study are discussed in accordance with the research question. One research question was raised to identify the factors that can improve the learning opportunity of students and infrastructural growth. The outcome of the study revealed that (a) administrators in academic institutions are highly united in the cause of their duties. They are usually united in maintaining the status quo within the institution. (b) Programs, meetings and activities do not promote innovation. Academic activities, social activities, staff and students meetings, and other forms of activities are routinely done in most institutions. (c) Most academic institutions claim to have well defined vision and mission statement which promotes innovation. The curriculum and policies of the institutions are well structured, giving room for innovation. (d) administrators and students in most institutions are not successful in developing new ideas and methods, (e) administrators in most academic institutions do not have budgetary allocation for innovation, (f) innovation is not a continuous activity in most academic institution, (g) there is usually no support and reward for staff or students who come out with innovation, (h) administrators in most academic institutions are not opened to learning from other institutions and competitors.

Conclusion and recommendation

It could be concluded from the findings of the study that continuous innovation is lacking in public schools in the Lower Margibi County. This was reflected in the perception of the effect of the predictors of various administrative staff and students with different responsibilities.

Based upon the findings of this study it would be recommended that budgetary allocation be made for innovation in all public schools. Administrators, staff and students be encouraged and supported to innovate on a continuous basis in order to improve the learning and infrastructure of the schools.

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Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is strictly academic.

Please tick in the space provided the option that best suits the following questions.

Section one:

1. Name of school _____
2. Gender : Male _____, Female _____
3. Position in the institution: Principal _____, Vice Principal _____, Registrar _____, Bursar _____ , Dean of Students ____, Counselor ____, Librarian ___ Others ___, Student ____

Section two:

4. Administrators in different functional areas in my institution work together.
   Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
5. Meetings and activities in my institution produce innovative results.
   Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
6. My institution has a well-defined vision and mission statements supporting innovation.
   Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
7. My institution is successful in developing new ideas and methods to address academic issues. Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
8. My institution have a budget for innovation
   Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
9. Innovation is a continuous activity in my institution.
   Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
10. Innovators among administrators are well supported and rewarded by the system in my institution. Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree
11. My institution is opened to learning from competitors and other institutions.
    Strongly Agree ____, Agree ____, Disagree _____, Strongly Disagree