



Change in Higher Education: Not Enough, or Too Much?

BY ADRIANNA KEZAR

*Adrianna Kezar is an associate professor at the University of Southern California and associate director for the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis. Her most recent books are *Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders* (2009) with Jossey-Bass and *Rethinking Leadership in a Complex, Global, and Multicultural Environment* (2009) with Stylus.*

The common belief is that change in higher education is both desirable and elusive. Trustees and presidents try to get faculty and staff to adopt new pedagogical techniques, increase prestige, improve services, assess and measure learning outcomes, use technology, and/or become more student- and learner-centered—all, they fear, to no avail. Federal and state policymakers declaim about the importance of access, the alignment of K–12 and higher education, workforce training, community engagement, and economic development—all of which, they believe, are ignored by colleges and universities. Faculty leaders bemoan how their own colleagues will not do more interdisciplinary work and adopt new modes of teaching. New staff and students often are disappointed at the lack of interest on campus in the green movement, sustainability, diversity, service learning, and environments in which students are empowered to learn. National associations and professional societies urge administrators, faculty, staff, and policymakers not to ignore globalization, performance improvement, leadership development, and equity issues. The public and the policymakers who speak for it are concerned that campuses are not accountable, lack transparency, and cannot contain costs. Alumni worry about the quality of the education, reputation, athletic programs, and cultural programs at their alma maters.

In this article I will argue that the notion that change is not of interest to higher education is a myth that prevents needed progress. I argue that it is not a lack of interest in change but the large number of stakeholders and multiple initiatives that are constantly being introduced into higher education that destroy the capacity to implement meaningful change. I draw on research I have conducted over the last 15 years on leadership and change and my experience as a change agent in a variety of initiatives locally, regionally, and nationally to support this assertion, but this is largely a conceptual argument. This article describes a variety of conditions that lead to initiative-overload, including too many stakeholders, a lack of synergy among similar efforts, an inability to prioritize, turnovers in leadership, and institutional isomorphism.

I do not mean to suggest that too many simultaneous change initiatives are the only obstacle to change. Resistance, lack of vision, poor implementation strategies, lack of long-term planning, ineffective communication, poor or non-existent succession planning, bureaucratic structures, and weak leadership also impede deep change. But I have noticed how a lack of understanding about the degree to which change is being promulgated—constantly, innumerable, and duplicatively—creates a host of problems that I think can be addressed with greater awareness on the part of stakeholders, leaders, and change agents. I also hope to shed light on what is leading to this overload and suggest ways it might be better managed.

TOO MANY STAKEHOLDERS AND CHANGE INITIATIVES

The common wisdom is that business welcomes change more than higher education does. This may be true, but it is important to look at the types and number of changes that businesses need to make, which are fairly limited and standard: improving customer service, introducing new products, using new technologies, increasing efficiency, and/or cutting costs to be more competitive. Moreover, their goals are convergent—all are in pursuit of the bottom line. And while businesses have multiple stakeholders with different interests (shareholders, customers, sometimes government agencies), they do not have the wide array that colleges and universities do.

When stakeholders in higher education are aware of other projects that vie for resources and attention with theirs, the competition to move their issue up in the pecking order can lead to paralysis, especially as leadership turns over and priorities shift. But more often, faculty, administrators and staff are unaware of the various initiatives on their own campuses. Because I study change, I meet with different groups that are interested in making progress on various fronts. Stakeholder groups that are interested in, for instance, sustainability, diversity, interdisciplinarity, cost-containment, or access typically see their change initiative as one of the few, or the only, being undertaken.

In fact, on any given campus—particularly the larger ones—there may be no individual who knows about all of the various change initiatives that are underway. Consequently, it is not unusual for a single campus have, for example, several simultaneous and often duplicative interdisciplinary or access initiatives.

In my research on faculty and staff leaders, I found that their focus is often very narrow. Even if they know about , for example, a diversity initiative, those interested in helping gay and lesbian students may not see the relevance of it on campus. People interested in learning technologies often do not see the relationship of what they are doing to student-centered learning, of which they may or may not be aware. Students interested in a recycling program may not see the connection to an environmental movement on campus. This insularity makes it difficult to create broader, more powerful movements for change.

In my research on national reform movements and campus leadership (by presidents, provosts, and trustees), I have seen larger-scale opportunities for making connections squandered. For example, a campus may be pushing for greater access and diversity but not connect these goals to resources or personnel. A science reform initiative to use more active pedagogies is segregated from a service-learning initiative and from one focused on problem-based learning in the humanities. On a single campus, the National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Health will fund eight or ten different, yet related, initiatives that never or work together or even be aware of each other.

AN EXAMPLE OF SYNERGY

Synergy is rare, yet possible. One university I studied decided that it could no longer afford to have so many competing innovations underway. A campus committee made up of faculty, staff, and administrators was set up to examine the possible consolidation of efforts related to diversity, technology, and community engagement. The participants mapped the activities of every school and program and found 75 different diversity-related programs and activities. They recommended ways to consolidate duplicative programs and to combine their staffs. While greater efficiency was an important consideration, the committee's major aim was to find more effective ways to meet the goals of the initiatives.

It established common assessment strategies for the initiatives as well. Assessment has not progressed without obstacles: consolidated programs need time to demonstrate their effectiveness, and people worry that they are not always measuring the right outcomes and that results are often skewed or altered. Peggy Maki's (2004) *Assessing for Learning* is a helpful resource for addressing these issues when they arise.

LOSING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYNERGY

If change agents and leaders made it a priority to better understand the multitude of initiatives already happening on their campuses and across the academy, they could consider a variety of options for creating greater synergy. For instance, related efforts could be fused to create greater human and financial resources and reduce infrastructure expenses.

That this does not happen may not be simply due to project leaders' obliviousness to other, similar projects, but also because they have become invested in an initiative or program they have created and feel is unique. Consequently, administrators worry that such a merger may create bad will or stifle the energy of the change agent. The culture of higher education that rewards and reinforces individual accomplishment reinforces such behavior.

Grassroots innovation often generates the kind of deep change that people buy in to, so it is understandable that administrators are wary of discouraging such initiatives. But

campus leaders need to create mechanisms to connect faculty or staff with similar ideas. Networks, informal groups, and collaboratives can secure more buy-in for ideas and make similar projects more viable by creating allies across campus to support them, synergies among them, and broader leadership for them.

Many teaching and learning innovations are similar in their emphasis on experiential or collaborative learning, for instance. Typically a variety of equity and diversity initiatives could also be meaningfully combined for greater collective good. Changes related to campus engagement—such as workforce training, school partnerships, community-based research, and economic development—could bolster each other. A variety of initiatives related to social justice (peace education, diversity, sexual harassment) or political progressiveness (sustainability, the green movement) might be linked.

But some faculty and staff worry that a diffuse vision will be difficult to understand. Moreover, my research suggests that leaders fear the difficulty of working in large groups or intergroup strife. But business has moved toward team-oriented reward structures, and higher education needs to do so as well. More research is needed to better understand effective ways for collective efforts to merge within the academy.

AN EXAMPLE OF DYSFUNCTION

One campus I visited had a Board of Trustees that was splintered into different interest groups. Some board members wanted the university to focus on community engagement and had started to reach out to local non-profits, health agencies, and governmental groups. Others were intent on research excellence and championed university/ industry partnerships.

The president too wanted to enhance research and was pursuing government grants while also trying to further partnerships with industry. At the same time, he felt that community engagement was also important and had launched several initiatives focused on improving local schools, healthcare, and the environment. Meanwhile, alumni were providing funding for innovative professional programs.

Faculty were largely engaged in teaching improvements such service learning, yet these programs were unconnected to the board and president's effort to increase community engagement. Some faculty were trying to pursue new research directions as well, again largely unaware of the board and president's interest in increasing the research stature of the institution.

The campus was mired in all these disconnected and fragmented efforts.

CREATING PRIORITIES

Once leaders get a handle on the change initiatives on a campus, their range often makes priority-setting difficult. How is a campus or a unit within it going to advance the causes of assessment, technology, access, community engagement, internationalization, diversity, and cost containment at the same time? The difficulty of doing this means that typically, no clear choices are made about what the campus will dedicate its finite human and financial resources to at any given time.



For example, on one campus administrative leaders told me about their efforts to assess student learning, increase diversity, increase technology use, develop the regional workforce, and create greater partnerships with the community. Mid-level administrators (deans and department chairs) both echoed calls for more diversity, assessment, and technology and spoke about creating more interdisciplinary teaching and learning and increasing their units' quality and prestige. Faculty noted the importance of improving student learning and increasing research, and staff described the imperatives of technology and diversity. Even in the rare case where leaders create clear priorities around several agendas—typically in a strategic plan—people who do not clearly see their set of priorities in the one or two items chosen pursue their chosen interests anyway.

One way to get a diverse group of individuals within a complex organization such as a campus to focus on a finite set of changes is to generate a long list of changes in priority order so that greater numbers of people can see themselves on the list, even if their issue is slated to be addressed in the future. Working toward the collective good may not be their short-run interest, but their change initiative will move up on the list of priorities only as the campus is able to make some progress on earlier items.

CHOOSING PRIORITIES

Campuses can and should choose what to focus on. One university I visited had a president who had worked with the board and campus community to create two priorities: to become more interdisciplinary and to internationalize the curriculum. The campus had engaged in a strategic planning process that included two years of discussion, data collection, and community-building around these issues. Faculty and staff, while largely supporting the efforts, also wanted a focus on diversity; the president added this item to the short list of priorities.

They gave themselves a long timeline to achieve their aims, and the board agreed not to push for new agenda items for seven years. So the president made a pact with the board and community to stay on campus for ten years in order to shepherd the changes.

LEADERSHIP TURNOVER AND THE DESIRE FOR INNOVATION

Because presidents and other administrative leaders may be among the few individuals who are aware of various change initiatives on campuses, they become pivotal in creating change. These leaders, with the support of their boards, are also the only individuals who have the authority to set priorities for the campus, who deploy significant human and financial resources, and who can communicate with various groups to create a sense of urgency.

Yet presidents and administrative leaders' terms in office are relatively short. Presidents have averaged seven years in office over the last thirty years (ACE, 2007), while trustees'

terms, particularly in public institutions, are often only two to four years.

This makes it difficult for them even to understand the range of initiatives on their campuses, let alone to create greater collective commitment and activity or to engineer partnerships to accomplish their aims.

On campuses I visited that have made strides, presidents and administrative leaders had realized the need to delegate more authority to those who are on campus for a longer time. By deputizing faculty and staff to lead reform efforts, they had created a greater likelihood that those reforms would occur and be sustained. Without more interface between those with formal authority and trusted long-term leaders, campuses will continue to struggle. To make such decentralized change efforts work better, we also need processes for monitoring them and indicators to measure progress (see Smith, 2005).

We know that deep change typically takes 10–15 years, so if presidents and other high-level administrators have not delegated authority, and if they turn over every five to seven years, they are unable to create meaningful change unless their successor carries on the initiative.

But incoming presidents feel pressure to create new initiatives rather than implement existing ones, since campus stakeholders and trustees frequently regard innovation as the sign of an effective and dynamic leader. So rather than continuing the work of their predecessors, they generally launch new programs, which take about a year to introduce. By the time implementation has gotten very far, they leave.

The tendency to start new initiatives rather than continue the implementation of existing ones needs to be addressed by trustees in particular. While some trustees look for leaders who will sustain existing efforts, the tendency is to look for visionary mavericks. We need instead to expect leaders to be *both* visionaries and implementers.

TURNOVER

While presidential turnover can interrupt reforms, it can be just as disruptive at other high levels of the administration. One campus I visited had had eight different provosts in twelve years. Two presidents had been on the campus during this time and had tried unsuccessfully to get a number of initiatives off the ground, because each provost had come in with a new idea for change.

Learning communities were the darlings of the first provost, the next brought student-centered pedagogy, and the next was interested in service learning. Campus change agents characterized the environment during this time as one in which it was "impossible to create any meaningful initiatives." Only one has gotten off the ground there within the last 15 years—learning communities—because a group of faculty across different departments collaborated to bring them to fruition. But in general, the campus's hierarchical structure prevented change because authority was never delegated to those who stayed there.

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES: INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM

Discussions about which changes should become priorities often devolve into efforts by those in positions of power to increase the institution's prestige by adopting the innovations of its aspirational peers. But such innovations may not be best aligned with the institution's culture or mission.

A disturbing trend identified by various researchers, particularly since World War II, is for institutions to become increasingly alike even though they have differing missions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The classic example of this institutional isomorphism is colleges that have traditionally focused on teaching now directing their efforts toward research in an attempt to mimic the universities with which they would like to be grouped.

A state college with a mandate to meet the needs of the regional community and focus on teaching might be led by a president who is trying to redirect faculty effort toward world-class interdisciplinary research. Undergraduate research programs might be undertaken on a campus with no capacity to do the job well. Initiatives such as these can deplete financial and human resources, undermine institutional missions, and short-change the public good.

PURSuing PRESTIGE AND MONEY

Internationalism is a hot trend in higher education. Even community colleges have become entranced with bringing students from all over the world to their campuses. Community colleges disproportionately serve low-income students, and they need to expose those students to international students and experiences as much as other campuses that serve middle- and upper-class students. Yet internationalization as a road to prestige and income can lead community colleges away from serving their primary mission.

One community college I visited had begun to enroll so many international students that they were becoming the campus's first priority. Since those students paid higher tuitions than the in-state ones the college was designed to serve, they were also a very important source of revenue. The incentives to continue to attract them and to create numerous international partnerships were thus significant, while there were few rewards in working with local students and in fostering community development and the regional economy.

The campus had changed its character, for which it was recognized nationally and internationally, but was this the right sort of change? Whose interests did it serve? In this case, low-income students and the local community lost out to well-funded international students and interests. And even if this was the right choice, there was no discussion or debate about it. As taxpayers provide less funding to postsecondary institutions and increase the incentives to pursue prestige and money by whatever means, these sorts of discussions need to occur.

BUILDING A TRUE CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

If the coexistence of numerous change initiatives is one reason why higher education has difficulty making progress on any one of them, campuses need to agree on a small number of priorities that are aligned with institutional mission, regional needs, and the collective and shared interests of internal stakeholders and create greater synergy and partnerships between them. This will help ensure that the financial and human resources need for change are available. And as an industry and profession, we need to hold people accountable for advancing them.

We also need to change the common perception that change is not of interest to campus constituents, because that perception prevents people from acting, particularly faculty and staff leaders. While there are always individuals who are optimistic and who diligently work to create change anyway, those individuals are few and far between.

In recent years, many foundations and government agencies have stopped funding change initiatives in higher education because they were not seeing the payoff for their investment. For all the reasons I have laid out here, projects funded by outside groups do not progress at an appropriate rate. Higher education would benefit from demonstrating that we can make the type of hard choices that would allow us to improve what we do.

In his classic book *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr warned about the increasing number of stakeholders on campus and the various interests that they represent. He noted how in earlier times, alumni, the government, parents, community groups had a much smaller stake in higher education. In addition, the faculty was a less fragmented group, and staff and administrators were less numerous and diffuse. Kerr worried about the university's ability to maintain its integrity and fulfill its mission as it became more fragmented and was called to respond to more stakeholders.

We continue to face this dilemma today. By making it more visible, though, we might begin to address and rectify an ongoing and pervasive problem. ☐





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