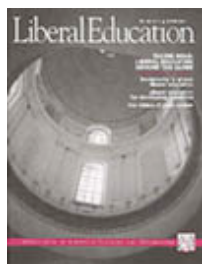


# *American Association Of Colleges and Universities*



## **LIBERAL EDUCATION**

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## **MY VIEW**

### **CHANGE FROM WITHIN: THE CHALLENGE OF SHAPING THE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE**

*By Leo I. Higdon, Jr.*

Thousands of colleges and universities are competing in a society that is changing at an ever faster rate. Regardless of their level of success, all institutions will at some point face the implementation of a change initiative, if only to maintain their strengths and distinctiveness. State appropriations and endowments are decreasing, shifts in student populations demand greater program diversity, and economic instability results in higher costs. And as they find that the tuition for public institutions has increased 38 percent in the last decade (*NY Times* 2002), students and parents are expecting a higher return on their investment. In the face of these challenges, today's institutions must change, and to be effective, they must begin that change from within. Before effective change can take place, the *culture* of an institution – its accepted set of beliefs and standard way of doing things, normally practiced within the continuum of tradition – must be understood and addressed. Any discussion of change in higher education that focuses on monetary issues alone is troubling. Instead, intentional change within colleges and universities needs to center on institutional renewal and adaptability rather than on financial gain. The need for change and renewal, profiled in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' study *Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College* (2002), takes note of the devolution of higher education into a vocational revolving door:

In a world of turbulent changes, every kind of occupation has seen a dramatic increase in education requirements. The majority of jobs considered desirable are now held by people with at least some college, and jobs for the best educated workers are growing the fastest.

The study argues that higher education must produce informed and responsible learners who are prepared to exhibit sound communication and critical thinking skills, intellectual depth, and ethical behavior.

Responding to these challenges with various approaches, universities often overlook the one area that can make or break a major initiative: the management of change within the institution itself. These initiatives can develop, for example, from the need for a curriculum change or an organizational restructuring, or, perhaps, by a new strategic plan for enhancing the institution's reputation. Regardless of the cause, however, one thing is certain: If the institution's stakeholders don't support the change initiative, it won't work. So, how exactly do we manage this change from within? How do we muster the support necessary for institutional change while preserving the values that sustain it? Throughout my experience in both business and education, I've found

that the internal management of change can be incorporated into seven steps:

*First, listen, learn, and keep an open perspective.* Universities operate from within a set of customs and beliefs, which is linked to the *performance* of the particular institution. If the institution's culture is interfering with its performance, then change is necessary. And the only way to determine whether the culture, or belief system, is at odds with the success of the institution is to first learn all one can about the culture and its role in the institution.

For example, when my wife and I joined the Peace Corps in the 1960s and were sent to Africa, we had never heard the phrase "change management." Africa was not a place where we could walk into a village and impose an alien set of values. We, not the villagers, were the students. So, as we worked, we became constant learners. If there was one thing we could be sure of, it was that keeping an open perspective was essential to learning.

An open perspective proved just as important in my later roles in business. Just as in the larger world, change in business was not only necessary, it was inevitable. Change kept corporations from becoming stale, complacent, and eventually obsolete. As in Africa, I found that success in business was directly related to my understanding of culture, only this time it involved a *company's* culture. In order to assist a company to follow a particular course, I had to determine the connection between the culture and the direction it wanted to go.

*Second, determine the values to be preserved and emphasize them.* Not everything has to be changed. In fact, there will be many things within the culture of an institution that are important assets to be preserved, indeed emphasized. So before beginning an initiative, it's advisable to examine the reasons behind it and determine both what needs to be changed and what doesn't. Then emphasize those enduring values that set it apart and are important to the success of the institution. Look for ways to send the message that certain values are critical to the institution's success.

*Third, regard early actions as opportunities to set the tone for change initiatives.* This is an area littered with squandered opportunities. In any change initiative, people are looking for guidance early on, and those who will be affected by the change will quickly note empty rhetoric. In other words, people are very good at noticing when words are not being followed by actions. For example, at one traditional institution, diversity was proclaimed as a goal of the institution, but the appointment of senior-level administrators from diverse backgrounds was not the usual mode of operation. Within my first year I added individuals from different backgrounds to high-level positions, rewarding their superior work. In addition, these appointments sent the message that a diverse community required an equally diverse leadership team. These early actions were successful because they clearly showed that we believed in diversity in senior management, and, more importantly, we were going to act on that belief. The appointments also sent a clear signal that diversity included all facets of the institution, including senior administrators. The fact that these individuals were successful in their new positions overcame any initial concerns, and the point was made that the institution "walked the talk."

Early actions can also prepare the *foundations* for change, actions in which presidential visibility is a key component. At each institution, for example, presidents should meet with those affected by the change, establish a collaborative style, and demonstrate openness and a willingness to listen. This sets the tone of a new administration and paves the way for a continuing dialogue on managing change from within. The more a president and senior administrators meet with the people affected by a change initiative, and the more they understand the issues beforehand, the more the barriers to that change initiative will break down. One stratagem I have followed was to meet with faculty and staff (sometimes in their offices), ask their opinions on the institution's values, challenges, and opportunities, and discover what issues needed tending. This initial demonstration of collegial style set the right tone for collaborative leadership and built trust. Moreover, the more people opened up, the more I learned.

*Fourth, change, especially cultural change, takes place over a substantial period of time.* Unreasonable timetables can kill a good change initiative, which is one reason why change is so difficult in higher education. One needs to proceed at a pace that assures visible success without destabilizing the community. Because people often fear change, they must see the need for it; otherwise they lose confidence in the institution's direction and leadership. And it is the president who has to be most mindful of this balance, for it's the

president's job to orchestrate that change. Such a balance will always require being open to adjustments, mindful that changing cultural beliefs comes in stages. One builds on each success, one layer at a time, in order to move forward.

*Fifth, support change agents and stay involved.* Identify genuine change leaders *whose opinions are valued*, and then win them over. Find the people who can both verbally support the changes and have the skills to carry them out. Then, once these change agents are on the team, align the reward system and support them for taking the risks.

One institution I worked for, for example, was well known for curriculum innovation. As time progressed, however, reform became more difficult because of the institution's overall success. In other words, because the early innovations had been so successful, there was strong argument among the faculty for staying the course. It was necessary to obtain complete buy-in from the faculty for any major curriculum reform. When it became obvious to some, including myself, that changes to the curriculum were long overdue, we established a committee that included a cross-section of faculty members and administrators. It was a difficult process to undertake, one fraught with problems and some resistance. But steady encouragement was offered to the group, and the change agents were supported through each phase. We worked continually with both the committee as a whole and with individual members: learning, lending support, listening to critiques and opposing views, and encouraging the change agents.

It was important to remember that supporting change did not mean we could ignore those who were resisting the change. On the contrary, we had to be open to their criticisms because these often were our best indicators of when mid-stream corrections were necessary.

The process took tremendous patience on everyone's part, including viewing the changes as "pilot programs," allocating the necessary funds for curriculum renewal, and agreeing to assessment goals beforehand. But gradually the plan was accepted, approved, and well received by the students, and the school's reputation for innovation was further enhanced. And I believe, too, that our efforts made the next curriculum change much easier to accomplish.

*Sixth, don't declare victory too early, before the change initiative is complete.* Otherwise, the initiative could be derailed or fail entirely. At the outset, determine what outcomes are essential so that people won't think the job is complete when it isn't. Have milestones to gauge success. When running into problems, be flexible and adjust. Be data-driven to the extent that these determinations can easily and accurately be made. Most importantly, be careful of public statements that lead people to believe that no more changes will be necessary. Although unexpected events will happen, as long as the institution can correct its course and not prematurely declare victory, future changes will not be jeopardized. Most importantly, it's important to remember that adaptation to change is what gives an institution its strength, not its vulnerability. Peter Senge, in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990), refers to the importance of maintaining this adaptability and open perspective:

Nothing undermines openness more surely than certainty. Once we feel as if we have "the answer," all motivation to question our thinking disappears. But the discipline of systems thinking shows that there simply is "no right answer" when dealing with complexity. For this reason, openness and systems thinking are closely linked.

*Seventh, communicate clearly and often.* This is probably the single most important obligation of the institutional president. It's imperative to be personal and approachable, and make sure senior administrators and supporters are personal and approachable as well. The entire management team should be in alignment. Listen and learn how they are communicating with each other and with others in the institution. Together all can look for new ways to get leadership's message across; together all can determine if the message is reaching the target audience. Check with each other to see how the effort is being viewed. Agents of change need to be constant learners, with an ear close to the ground. One good way to foster this communication is through the creation of common experiences. For example, convocations, senior capstones, or service learning requirements are all effective ways of communicating values while renewing the commitment of faculty, staff, and students to the vision of the institution.

Complacency, or following the status quo, is no longer an option for higher education. The demand for

change and renewal is too obvious. Not only do we have a different generation of students; we have a different set of expectations for graduates, a different view of educational objectives, and a very different world in which to accomplish them. It is imperative, then, that we learn new and better ways to serve this new generation of students, while at the same time preserving the better parts of the tradition and culture on which our institutions are based. An institution that has experienced a successful change of its culture will be more flexible and adaptable and will more readily tackle these future changes.

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