Overcoming the Obstacles to Change within Urban Institutions: The Mobile Framework and Engaging Institutional Culture

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Abstract

Many commentators have noted that higher education, and urban institutions in particular, have to respond to unprecedented amounts of change that is qualitatively different from earlier times. This article introduces the mobile model of change that guides transformation change efforts in urban institutions, while remaining sensitive to their institutional context and culture. The framework is based on a five-year national study conducted by the American Council on Education.

Historically, urban institutions have responded to changing educational needs. As more adult learners returned to school, urban institutions provided more varied educational opportunities. As traditionally under-represented groups were embraced by the higher education system, urban institutions led the way, enrolling disproportionate numbers of such students. This tradition of changing to meet new educational needs continues: urban institutions are being asked to respond to alterations in the community, decaying public confidence, new financial situations, and revised missions. As Daniel Johnson noted in the earlier issue of *Metropolitan Universities* focused on leadership: "We are in the throes of an historic transformation driven by technological, economic, and societal forces over which [higher education] presently exercises little control" (1993). Many commentators have noted that higher education, and urban institutions in particular, must respond to unprecedented change that is qualitatively different from earlier times.

Although urban institutions have been leaders in change, higher education institutions have had difficulty in responding quickly to emerging issues. This is partly due to weaknesses in the research and literature available to guide leaders in making these difficult decisions. Leaders of urban institutions need to be savvy in navigating their institutions through the change process. There are several flaws in the literature that were addressed in a study conducted by the American Council on Education. First, change strategies tend to be generalizations: such as a willing president or strong leadership; a motivating vision and mission; or aligning values and policies (Cowan 1993; Kaiser and Kaiser 1994; Taylor and Koch 1996). Suggestions such as "involve the faculty" and "improve communication" are not very useful for leaders faced with implementing deep and pervasive change. A second issue is that much of the literature presents change strategies as isolated actions, not viewed systematically, as is deemed

essential by many researchers (see, for example, Birnbaum, 1991). A way to examine organizations systematically is through theoretical or conceptual frameworks. This article describes a framework for understanding change, called the mobile framework, that was developed in the ACE study and which aims to overcome the flaws in the literature. A third difficulty with the popular change literature is that it suggests that all strategies can be used within each institution similarly. Recent research has begun to challenge this belief. In fact, several dimensions that impact change strategies need to be taken into account, such as the type of change initiative undertaken, institutional type, and perhaps the factor that has the most impact on successfully creating change—institutional culture.

In this article, I examine the importance of leaders utilizing a change framework as they begin engaging transformational efforts and challenge the premise that change strategies and principles are universally applicable. In particular, I examine the implications for urban institutions that have distinctive cultures. Two case studies are presented of institutions undergoing the change process. One is an urban institution, while the other is rural. The purpose of describing two distinctive types of institutions is to illustrate how their particular or unique cultures impacted the change process and successful strategies. I conclude by recommending that urban institutions need to utilize a change framework such as the mobile model and engage in an institutional culture assessment process before beginning any major strategic planning or initiatives.

The Study

This article is based on a study of institutions participating in the ACE Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, a five-and-a-half year initiative. The focus of the study was transformational, or large-scale, change, since this is the type of change that is most difficult for leaders to guide. Liberal arts colleges, comprehensive institutions, community colleges, urban institutions, and other institutional types were all included in the study; having a variety of institutional types was important in order to determine how institutional context might impact the transformation change process (Berquist 1992; Levy and Merry 1986). Qualitative research techniques were used including interviews, participant observation, site-visits, and document analysis. See Eckel (this volume) for a detailed description of the study.

The following main questions guided the study: Do you think transformational change is occurring? What evidence can you provide? What are the most successful approaches to creating change on campus? Why were these approaches so successful? Have the successful strategies changed over time? What strategies failed and why? Who were the most involved individuals? In the later interviews, more targeted questions about communication, the external environment, planning, assessment, role of leaders, relationship among strategies, and institutional culture were explored. Over the five-year period, investigators also learned how the campus cultures affected the change process in profound ways.

The Mobile Model of Change

The result of five years of data collection and analysis was a new model of change that can be used to guide transformational change efforts on campus. The model and its components will be described next; this will be followed by a review of the three key concepts that make the model dynamic—sensemaking, balance, and culture (for a more detailed description of the model, see Kezar and Eckel, forthcoming). Five core strategies common across institutions were identified: senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, robust design, staff development, and visible action. If any of these components were missing, major change was not identified. Supportive senior administration is related to how individuals in positional leadership provide support in terms of value statements, resources, or new administrative structures. *Collaborative leadership* refers to the positional and non-positional individuals throughout the campus who are involved in the change project from conception to implementation. *Robust design* is a process whereby leaders develop a desirable and flexible picture of the future that is clear and understandable and includes set goals and objectives related to the implementation of that picture. The picture of the future and the means to get there are flexible and do not foreclose possible opportunities. This concept originally included vision, but was redefined based on the data from the study. *Staff development* is a programmatic effort to offer individuals opportunities to learn certain skills or knowledge related to issues associated with the change effort. Finally, *visible action* refers to the steps in the change process that are noticeable. Activities must be visible and promoted so that individuals can see that the change is still important and is continuing. This is an important strategy for building momentum within the institution.

Their ability to help individuals conceptualize a new identity, to feel worthwhile, and to be included in the institutional agenda made these five strategies so powerful. All the institutions that made substantial progress toward change had these five conditions/strategies in place. Which strategy played a more central role depended upon the campus context, institutional type, and culture.

Sensemaking emerged as a super-ordinate strategy or characteristic found among these five strategies. The core strategies provided opportunities for institutional participants to make new meaning—to help members of the institution change the way they perceive their roles, skills, and approaches/philosophies. In periods of change, new cognitive frameworks (or mental models) are introduced, explored, modified, and adopted, and a central component of transformation is providing vehicles for people to alter their mental models, leading to new meanings and activities.

Balance is an important principle in transformational change and is also related to the inter-relationship of strategies. The six institutions in this study engaged in careful negotiation between various conditions, strategies, and issues, striking a balance as they progressed. For example, in developing the robust design, it was necessary to balance inside and outside perspectives. Balance suggests that the plan or design pace should be moderate; moving too fast will create disequilibrium. What is balanced and the ways in

which balance occurs is defined specifically within each organization as conditioned by institutional type, culture and context. The importance of balance led to the phrase "mobile framework for change." Urban institutions that tend to balance multiple stakeholders' voices will find this principle critical to their change agenda and process.

Finally, the campus culture appears to influence the change process. Institutions were successful because the leaders recognized that their strategies had to fit with the culture of the campus. Culture impacts the way change occurs and the change process impacts culture; this is a reciprocal relationship. Broad generalizations about the change, such as seeing the big picture, having shared leadership, or developing a climate of trust, were enriched through analysis at a micro-level. For example, different institutional histories illustrated what creating a culture of trust means. It is the exploration of culture that is particularly important for urban institutions to focus on as leaders attempt to create change on campus; this will be the focus of the rest of this article.

Organizational or Institutional Culture

Most higher education leaders are aware that colleges and universities have distinctive cultures with features such as faculty autonomy, academic freedom, student subcultures, and campus football. Not only is the enterprise unique, but each institution also has a particular culture. When contemplating institutional culture, we often focus on the most distinctive institutions in higher education, such as Reed or Bennington, as having a particular culture, yet each college or university has its own specific culture.

But what do we mean when we speak about institutional culture? Culture is commonly defined as "the deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work" (Peterson and Spencer 1991). It provides meaning and context for a specific set of people (Berquist 1992; Schein 1992). Culture includes some of the following aspects: (1) norms or specific guides to conduct; (2) values espoused by a campus; (3) the philosophy that guides the campus' attitudes and actions toward students and employees. Culture is reflected throughout campus process and structures such as the mission, leadership, information sharing, strategic planning, and socialization of new members. Thus, it is ubiquitous. It is its ubiquity, however, that makes it invisible to the people within an institution who encounter it every day.

It is easy to imagine that the culture of an institution, being a fundamental aspect of the organization, would impact the process of change. Yet, most institutions that engage in the process of change ignore this factor as they engage planning and implementation. When efforts fail, there is the plethora of excuses or blame: faculty do not want to change, the institution lacks the money for incentives, we are simply too complex and large to move forward, etc. Does anyone ever say, "We forgot to assess our institutional culture"? Institutions should begin to think about this issue (in addition to assessing the potential impact of the type of change) as they begin contemplating the change process. Assessing institutional culture requires that you examine fit with organizational processes and values. This will help leaders to determine how difficult the change process

will be and where to focus efforts. In order to illustrate the relationship of institutional culture to the process of change, two case studies will be presented.

Both institutions were undergoing comprehensive, intentional change of a teaching and learning issue that involved faculty fundamentally rethinking their work. The purpose of highlighting these particular cases is to show the impact of institutional culture on the change effort. What follows is an introduction to the two campuses and their change processes across the five key change strategies that comprise the mobile model: (1) senior administrative support, (2) collaborative leadership, (3) vision, (4) staff development, and (5) taking visible action, which refers to noticeable in the change process.

Developmental, Informal, Trusting University

Developmental, Informal, Trusting University (DITU) is a public doctoral institution located in a small midwestern town. It is endeavoring to integrate technology into the core of the teaching and learning process. This initiative had the ambitious goal of having the entire faculty involved in rethinking their courses and curricula around fusing technology to enrich the undergraduate student experience. DITU prides itself on being a developmental campus, one were personal growth is the most important goal for not only students, but also faculty and staff. The mission and faculty strongly supported the importance of learning; at one time the institution defined itself as a "premier teaching university." Within this developmental culture, the leadership is facilitative and strongly collaborative, trying to create growth among all. DITU also tends to share information widely, since it is critical to growth.

DITU was also distinctive in having a trusting and informal culture. Although a sense of trust is likely to emerge within any developmental culture, it is stronger at DITU than at other developmental campuses in the study. Trust at DITU appears to result from the long and stable leadership created by having the same president and provost for over 15 years, the large number of long-term employees (over 60 percent have only worked under the current president and provost), and the strong connection between the campus and its community. The institution is also exceedingly informal. For example, the institution does not have a strategic planning process and institutional direction is set informally and communicated through a series of conversations between the president, the provost, and various key stakeholders. DITU's policies and practices were developed locally in departments and colleges, are modified frequently, and lack uniformity. Although some campus decision-making structures are in place, such as a faculty senate, there appears to be little reliance on them. Much of the business of the campus happens around a lunch table, in the hallways, or through a variety of different meetings. People who work at DITU are likely to know each other well, as many interact both within the workplace and outside of it in the local community.

The two key strategies at DITU were staff development and personnel changes (taking visible actions), clearly a reflection of the developmental culture. The way the strategies themselves were enacted reflected the informal and trusting environment. DITU

utilized a local model for technology staff development; individuals within different schools or colleges led the initiative to develop the needed support for their colleagues. They drew exclusively on internal staff for development because of the deep trust they held, knowing they would be the best guides for assisting each other's growth. The developmental culture at DITU necessitated new employees be hired and current staff trained to maintain momentum. This was achieved through the award of developmental grants for staff development and through a change in hiring policies aimed at bringing in new faculty.

Senior administrative support, vision, and collaborative leadership were less important within DITU's change process. The culture of the institution results in senior leadership being in the background to change. Furthermore, collaborative leadership was already the norm for the campus. Although a part of the change process, organizing activities and events for leaders across the campus to come together was not important within this informal, trusting environment. Vision was important, but less so than staff development or new employees.

Yet, even though these strategies were relatively less significant, based on the institution's culture, the way these strategies were impacted by the institutional culture is apparent. For example, at DITU, senior administration's support role appeared in the background of the change efforts and consisted primarily of providing needed resources and facilities for technology. In addition, collaborative leadership was a natural element at the developmental culture of DITU, where decisions and much of the action was up to individual academics and departments. Mechanisms for collaborative leadership were already established through informal information networks and cross-departmental groups that met on a regular basis to discuss improvements. Developing people's leadership capacities and tapping their creativity had been a long-term philosophy for the current administration.

DITU's vision was quite unique compared to other campuses. Institutional leaders had no overall grand scheme for change; instead, they established a process of launching a series of uncoordinated yet broadly linked change efforts. Decisions and ideas emerged at the local, departmental level, often informally. The few planning documents evolved at the local level (within programs and departments), for local use. The vision and "real" plan for the future regarding technology and the educational experience was in each individual's head or within the strategy of each department. Even new promotion and tenure criteria that reflected the institution's technology goals was left to the design of each unit to best fit their specific intellectual contexts.

DITU was also unique in that it was one of the few institutions that did not violate its institutional culture throughout the change process. Its culture was facilitative of change since there was abundant communication and trust, uncommon on most campuses. Their process was also much quicker than others' were, and they made the most progress of almost any campus in the study. The next institution struggled and their

process was prolonged, as most are, since they were unaware of their institutional culture and the way it impacts the change process.

Collegial, Autonomous, Insecure University

Collegial, Autonomous, Insecure University (CAIU) is a private research university located in an urban area. It is redesigning its general education program. Over the years, the general education curriculum has become extremely fragmented, a recent accreditation cited this as a significant problem for the campus. The campus is rethinking the purposes and structures of general education.

Being a collegial campus, values are primarily drawn from the disciplines of the faculty. It values scholarly engagement, shared governance and decision making, and rationality. This could be seen throughout the activities and structures of CAIU. For example, the colleges and schools are the focus of planning and administration, with decision-making taking place with little connection to the central administration. Furthermore, the institution articulates that one of its main goals is striving to move up in the traditional academic rankings. If it were not yet apparent, the institution is focused on research and the disciplines. Academic affairs exerts strong influence over the institution and governance and decision making occur at the department and school levels.

Yet, the institution also has two other powerful cultural elements: it is highly autonomous and insecure. The change initiative itself—to reexamine the general education curriculum, its structure, and its purposes—results from a history of high fragmentation across the extremely autonomous schools and colleges. The institution is private and that fact may contribute to the high level of autonomy, as it is neither part of a system nor dependent on state funds, but is responsible for its own resources in a continually shrinking environment. Campus leaders, in the past, have a high turnover rate, leaving colleges and schools responsible for their own continuity of purposes and for providing their own direction. The older students that enroll have a less dependent orientation to learning, and further, foster a culture of autonomy.

Many people in the highly academic city where it is located view it as a low-status university. New faculty are quickly socialized to learn that they work at a less prestigious institution. The institution has recently gone through a down-turn in enrollment, creating significant financial distress at the university, which included laying off academic staff. Its insecurity was reinforced and heightened by a poor accreditation review (one major point was CAIU's poorly performing and fragmented general education curriculum).

The most important elements of change at CAIU were acquiring grants and incentives (taking visible actions), collaborative leadership, and vision. The collegial culture at CAIU focused on resources (both acquiring external grants and internal monetary rewards) as a determination of their success, like many campuses with strong faculty and disciplinary values. The acquisition of several grants provided the needed incentive to build the change initiative. Furthermore, the insecure culture of CAIU resulted in

grants being a major strategy for change. The prestige of outside grants became the primary way that senior administrators could develop a sense of efficacy among insecure faculty.

CAIU reflected the autonomous culture in its approach to collaborative leadership by tapping its decentralized bureaucracy, also a typical mechanism within this type of culture. Deans and chairs were expected to take leadership within their various units. The senior administrators delegated leadership to them and encouraged them to get faculty involvement and ownership in key unit decisions. CAIU also learned (after repeated problems) that the word "draft" needed to be placed on documents until there was official approval from each college. On a few occasions a document was sent out without one or two schools' official approval, which led to great disruption. But, at CAIU, this was the only way to successfully achieve faculty ownership and buy in. Many other initiatives had failed because they had not been attuned to this aspect of the culture on CAIU's campus. In fact, they almost failed when the president and provost initially established a non-inclusive and more centralized implementation process; they quickly backed off after feedback from the faculty (and encouragement from the research team). Many faculty noted that this respect for the nature of collaborative leadership is what made this particular initiative succeed.

Vision was an area where the campus violated the institutional culture; thus, the change initiative almost failed. Members of the campus immediately rejected the initial plan developed by the president as too restrictive and unwarranted. The responsibility for designing and implementing the change then shifted to the college/school level (this also happened as a result of help from the research team). The design was created to allow for flexibility at the departmental level. For example, the central administrators created a master document that tracked all aspects of the plan that had been delegated to the colleges and departments, yet allowed each unit to identify the specifics to meet institutional goals. At CAIU the central administration developed the vision around areas of insecurity and used faculty and staff insecurity as a lever to coalesce the campus. In the past, designs for change were thwarted at CAIU; leaders knew it would be difficult to coalesce people without some strategy or crisis. They had learned from the research team that they needed to better assess their culture, and this time, things worked out better.

As would be predicted from their institutional culture, senior administrative support and staff development were relatively less important within the change process. At autonomous CAIU, the provost and his administrative staff created a process that moved much of the key decision making to the faculty of each college (after initially failing in this area). Senior administrative support took the role of launching the efforts and then providing resources and creating accountability mechanisms. They were fairly absent from shaping decisions directly and worked to intentionally stay out of the way. All decisions were pushed down to the college. Working within their culture, they were successfully able to move change forward.

In CAIU's autonomous culture, several different staff development models emerged. Many faculty were sent off campus to observe how their peers were working to transform general education; within the collegial model, comparison to one's prestigious colleagues is important. In addition, speakers were often brought to specific colleges/ schools to describe general education change in particular areas such as engineering. Their insecure culture resulted in them seeking outside expertise, not trusting their own knowledge for various aspects of the staff development. The autonomy of CAIU resulted in multiple levels of staff development by various colleges/schools and throughout levels within the college—department, program, and other levels. The focus of the development was at the departmental level.

Conclusion

Institutional culture impacted the change process in three important ways that institutional leaders need to be aware of. First, the key strategies for developing change (such as staff development and personnel changes at DITU) were related to the institutional culture and could be predicted ahead of time. Second, the way the change strategies emerged is related to the institutional culture. It is important that institutional leaders be aware of these nuances as they develop a vision or design a plan for collaborative leadership, as these processes need to be crafted to match the institutional culture. If CAIU had assessed their institutional culture, senior administrative support would have initially been enacted in a very different way. Lastly, missteps in the change process were often missteps in understanding the institutional culture. By better understanding the culture, these missteps, which slow down the change process, can be avoided.

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