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Against All Odds

Transforming Institutional Culture

Engaging in institution-wide change requires examining institutional culture and, when necessary, engaging in cultural change

IN RECENT YEARS, the University of Michigan–Flint has undertaken more new initiatives than most institutions tackle over an entire generation. Since 2004, we have produced an ambitious five-year strategic plan, adopted a decentralized budget process, committed to increasing enrollment by 25 percent, reformed our general education program, and begun the transition from a commuter to a residential campus. Some of these initiatives were dictated by outside forces; others represent responses to growing internal calls for change.

Engaging in institution-wide change requires examining institutional culture—defined by the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize the institution (Trice and Beyer 1984)—and, when necessary, engaging in cultural change. Colleges and universities are historically slow to make changes to institutional culture, however. They tend to seek extensive deliberation and study, which too often result in resistance to change.

The types of change needed to meet demands for a twenty-first-century education require us to rethink not only who is involved, but also how decision making and implementation occur. As R. Eugene Rice (2006) has observed, institutional change requires serious consideration, buy-in, and support from all stakeholders. While faculty are central to the success of almost any institutional change effort, it is also essential that staff, students, administrators,

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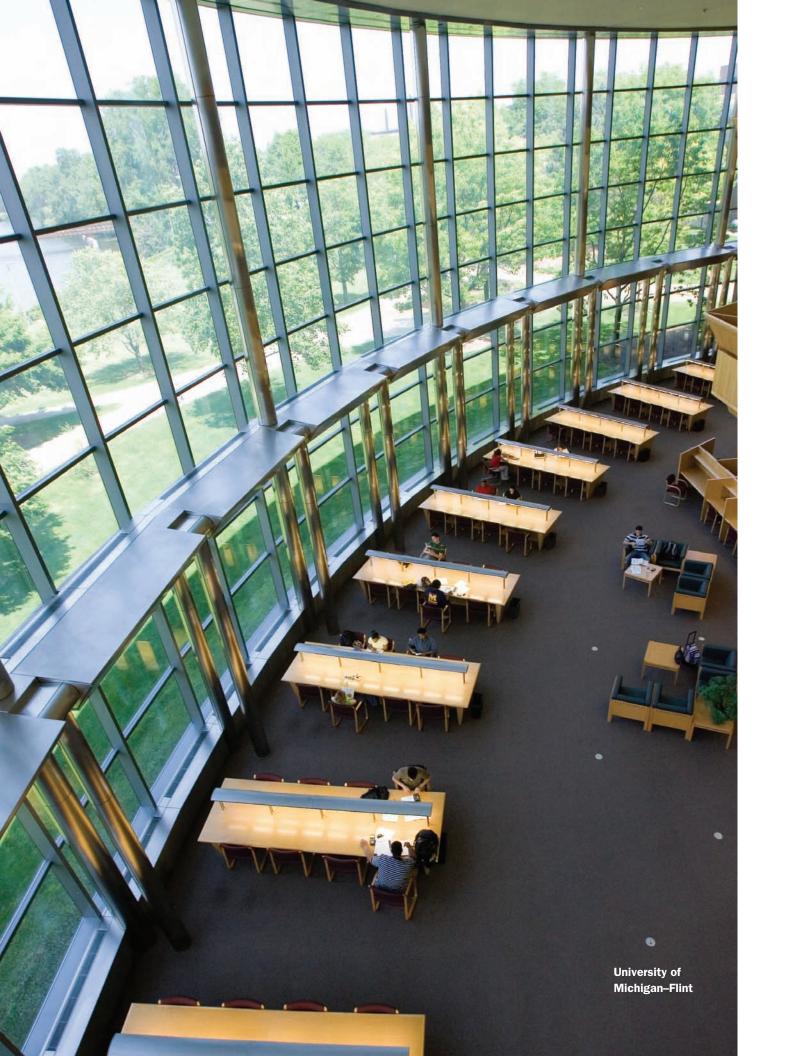
governing boards, and the community at large be given real opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes.

Like other higher education institutions, our university has certainly struggled with its share of failed attempts at change. At times, it has seemed as though we have abandoned nearly as many initiatives as we have begun. But for a relatively brief moment during the 2005–6 academic year, our whole campus was moving together, at the same time, and in the same direction. Something was different this time.

Fostering campus engagement

In reforming our general education program, one of our major initiatives, we consciously chose to alter the way we address campuswide issues. Instead of our traditional approach—appointing a committee and charging it to bring back to the campus a fully realized plan or solution—we separated the *content* of the project from the *processes* for addressing it.

At an Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Institute on General Education, former AAC&U Vice President Andrea Leskes informed a team of our faculty that an astounding 95 percent of general education reform failures are directly linked to failures in process. Heeding Leskes's advice that we carefully consider matters of process as a part of our larger reform effort, we gave control of the process to the committee; decisions about the content of the project were left to the rest of the university. In other words, we empowered the campus community as a whole to make decisions about the curriculum, rather than relying on an appointed committee to make those decisions on their

behalf. In the end, this process-oriented approach enabled us to achieve much more than the reform of a single program; we changed the culture of the campus.

Early in the general education reform process, the steering committee sifted through the responses to a campuswide survey of opinions on what was wrong with the old general education model and what a new program should look like. After grouping and categorizing the responses, a picture began to emerge that astonished us. Of course, the surveys yielded predictable complaints associated with the program itself, including its inadequacy to meet the needs of students and faculty. But what also emerged was a broader set of complaints that transcended the programmatic issues and gave the committee its first look at the underlying problems that had contributed to years of collective failure: a culture of secrecy and suspicion, a lack of communication at almost every level, a fierce sense of territoriality, and a strong sense of disenfranchisement. The committee had inadvertently uncovered a historical roadmap to our own failure, and we realized that we had been charged with much more than managing a process for producing a new general education plan. If we were to

have any chance of success in reforming general education, we would have to find a way to transform the culture of self-defeat and failure into a culture characterized at every level by transparency, collaboration, and inclusiveness.

Using an analysis of the cultural problems on our campus as a starting point, the steering committee made a strategic decision to address directly the very problems that had for so long impeded institution-wide success. The first challenge was to engage our constituents in the conversation of reform. Disengagement and apathy had grown over the years to the point where they eventually had embedded themselves in our cultural identity. To address this problem, the steering committee created tasks and timelines. But the real work of the committee was to guide the *how* of reform and leave the *what* to the rest of the campus. Our mantra became, "the role of the steering committee is to manage the process, not determine the content." Although it seemed foreign to many of our colleagues, this process-first concept gave them an upfront invitation, maybe even a challenge, to become involved in solving the problem.

Previously, faculty had complained bitterly that top-down leadership decisions had rendered

their involvement meaningless. And so the steering committee took a calculated risk. We bet that by ceding decision-making authority to the faculty, administration, and staff—that is, by creating an equal playing field—we could empower our colleagues to take collective ownership of the plan that would eventually emerge. The risk paid off. Nearly a third of our colleagues attended the campuswide kickoff workshop at the beginning of the 2005–6 academic year. Attendance at the myriad events that shaped the yearlong initiative remained uncharacteristically high, and by the last meeting of the year, when we debated and voted on the final plan, 73 percent of our voting faculty were in attendance. True to our strategy, we had made institutional change by addressing a cultural problem.

Changing communication patterns

The profound lack of communication revealed by our survey was a second problem that had embedded itself in our campus identity. While it certainly rose to the top of our list as a cultural problem that had become an impediment to progress on institution-wide initiatives, the communication void also revealed something else. Over the years, by driving a wedge between faculty and administrators, breakdowns in communication had created a subculture of suspicion and secrecy. Rice (2006, 12) frames this dangerous dichotomy as a tension between two established internal cultures—the "collegial culture" (faculty) and the "managerial culture" (administration)—each "driven by an economy that exerts an enormous amount of power." If left unchecked, these economies of power can create serious impediments to vital internal communication.

For our campus, a pathway to identifying and embracing our own tensions and power struggles emerged through the careful development of a communication structure the likes of which the University of Michigan–Flint had never before seen. For the steering committee, which had already committed itself to engaging all of our constituents in the reform process, building an effective communication system became a catalyst for achieving the level of engagement we sought. In addition to posting everything related to the reform effort on a Blackboard community and issuing biweekly updates on our progress, we hosted fifteen brown-bag discussions, published a monthly

newsletter, and scheduled major workshops with nationally known experts. Our weekly steering committee meetings were open to all to attend, and we encouraged feedback at every step of the way. At no time during the reform process was the campus ever left in the dark about the committee's work.

Power struggles between competing subcultures were not eliminated, but they were minimized to an extent that allowed collective movement forward. By adopting a neutral posture within a conversation fraught with highly charged opinions and deeply held beliefs—that is, by managing the process and not the content—the committee was able to stave off failure while influencing noticeable shifts in the campus culture.

Broadening our perspective

It was relatively unsurprising that our insularity would present itself as another cultural problem impeding institutional progress. In some ways, we had lost touch with the rest of the academic world, with national trends and best practices. And to make matters worse, we had fallen into a pattern of certain failure in attempting to solve campuswide problems. Faculty committees were selected by senior administrators

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to solve long-standing institution-wide problems. These committees were routinely sequestered for as long as a full academic year, given nearly impossible charges, and asked to produce comprehensive plans of action. Later, they would be paraded in front of the governing faculty to present their plans. The faculty, in turn, would soundly defeat the initiatives, one by one, on the grounds that vision, faculty input, and loyalty to the existing programs were lacking.

Out of frustration, and as a last resort, we contacted AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider for advice. She suggested that we apply to send a team from our university to the AAC&U Institute on General Education. Our chancellor, a reform-minded leader, approved and supported the idea. Upon returning to campus after five intense days of workshops, plenary sessions, and consultations with as many as a dozen experts on general education reform, team members were energized and committed to educating the campus about some of the national trends driving successful reform movements. We knew that in order to get our colleagues to support a new approach to change, we would have to address the underlying cultural problem that stood in the way.

The insularity that so often stymies creativity and progress can easily be overcome by inserting broader perspectives into local conversations. We began our reform process by inviting nationally recognized experts to conduct workshops on our campus. These outside experts shared theories, practices, and specific success stories associated with reform. The attendance at these workshops—drawn from across the campus—was unprecedentedly large, and the broad participation created a new energy that expedited the engagement the committee was so desperately seeking. For the remainder of the academic year, we continued to bring outside perspectives into the conversation, and we did it while addressing some of the other cultural problems simultaneously. After all, cultural problems, and the solutions to them, are interconnected and interdependent. It seemed intuitive to tap into our emerging communication structure as a way to address the insularity problem, and in doing so, we steadily increased the level of campus engagement.

The challenge of faculty governance

Faculty governance presents both challenges and opportunities for institutional reform. Our university has four academic units, and each maintains autonomy over its own curriculum—a power granted by the Board of Regents. While all of the units had shared a single general education program from the beginning, the future seemed less certain. Moreover, among the faculty, there was deep distrust of any interference with governance processes. For the committee, this meant taking a crash course in institutional policies regarding governance issues.

At times, faculty governance created unexpected problems for the steering committee.

But we discovered that establishing a clear and transparent timeline of events, including those that relied on faculty votes, helped ease the suspicion and mistrust that sometimes threatened to bring the whole reform movement to a screeching halt. A well-structured timeline does not carry the same institutional importance as realizing and addressing cultural problems, but it certainly helped us address the cultural problems with less fear and trepidation. The committee communicated its intentions from the very beginning with a mantra that we repeated over and over again, and the timeline helped reinforce the message: "we don't know what a new plan will look like, but we know how we'll get there." By the end of the 2005–6 academic year, however, we did know what a new plan looked like—three-quarters of our governing faculty cast their votes for one. Anyone involved in a major institution-wide reform effort would do well to brush up on faculty governance structures and processes, as well as the cultural histories attached to them.

Conclusion

So how did such sweeping cultural change occur on our campus in such a short period of time? Like many historical phenomena, it happened in revolutionary ways. The steering committee went public—making all of its work and documentation available to the campus community, and sharing the view that our best hopes for success depended upon collective action. The committee used existing faculty governance structures to define the process—but not the curricular content—that would result from a foray into uncharted territory. We inundated the campus with national news about general education reform, we invited participation from campus members who had felt silenced or "silo-ed," and we refused to accept the status quo as an option. We placed the needs of our students squarely at the center of the discussion and unrelentingly communicated with all constituents to help them see roles for themselves in the initiative. Silos were dismantled, barriers were crossed, and the culture of secrecy and suspicion that pervaded the campus was transformed into one of openness, inclusiveness, collaboration, and engagement. We learned,

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in short, that cultural change enables institutional change.

How successfully we resolve the remaining and yet-to-emerge cultural challenges that threaten our movement toward a more collaborative culture at the University of Michigan– Flint may depend upon how well we heed Rice's (2006) call for a transformative view of faculty work—from an individualistic approach ("my work") to a more collaborative approach ("our work"). We have yet to see how our process-oriented approach to change and its subsequent cultural changes will play out over time, but we will have plenty of opportunities to address new issues on campus from such a perspective. Assessment and reaccreditation, the establishment of an early/middle college, and efforts to internationalize the campus loom large on the horizon. We hope that the lessons we have learned from our willingness to examine and, where necessary, change existing cultural practices and to place student learning squarely at the forefront of our thinking will help us find broader success in these campuswide initiatives. As faculty move toward collaborative change with a clear focus on the commitment to student learning, and as they move under the direction of persuasive and exemplary leaders and committees, we are extremely hopeful that the cultural changes will indeed prove lasting. ☐

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