

Collaborative, Faculty-Led Efforts for Sustainable Change

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As higher education institutions respond to numerous challenges and opportunities—from new technologies to changing student demographics—their efforts to adapt depend on faculty and staff collaborating across departments and divisions. In this shifting environment, some faculty focus solely on what is under their immediate control: their own courses and research. In contrast, other faculty recognize that, in an inevitably evolving environment, their front-line perspective can influence campus change efforts as a shared responsibility. As the projects described in this issue of *Peer Review* unfolded, we identified several theories of organizational change that help explain why the campus initiatives took root: collaborative leadership, team-based learning, social network theory, and resilient capacity. These themes are also evident in a number of other projects carried out as part of AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative over the past decade. Understanding and applying these interconnected theories can guide faculty as they help shape and lead the transformation of higher education.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP ACROSS DEPARTMENTS AND DIVISIONS

Much of the research on effective leadership focuses on positions of authority—the university president or company CEO, for example. Because colleges and universities are relatively flat organizations, somewhat fragmented by departmental boundaries, leadership is distributed. As such, top-down change has limited appeal for faculty and is often unsustainable. Faculty who want to make a difference often find it challenging to accomplish institutional change without formal leadership authority, sometimes facing colleagues' resistance or indifference. Formal governance structures framed by committees and

by-laws are generally inflexible and offer meager ground for innovative change. Instead, institutions need informal, inclusive processes, such as working groups and faculty learning communities, to enable those without formal authority to shape new initiatives. Establishing “collaborative and participatory” relationships may take more time than top-down mandates, but it allows for the iterative process through which ideas are tested and refined, group trust is established and membership is expanded, and initiatives become embedded and sustainable (Watson and Watson 2013, 45).

Faculty leaders often emerge because they have a good sense of common interests and work well with colleagues. For instance, change efforts typically start with “high-participating faculty”—those who actively engage in initiatives to strengthen student learning and connect with other equally invested faculty (Rutz et al. 2012, 42). Knowing how and with whom to start a change process “in order to make the greatest impact and build the most momentum” pays off during implementation (Watson and Watson 44). Although it is easier and safer to start with more experimental faculty who are familiar with the work and who are willing to try something new without a guarantee of success, including skeptical faculty too can bring a productive tension to the effort and potentially better results. Once “high-participating faculty” begin to establish the work, engaging skeptical faculty can help change leaders “identify patterns of concerns” ahead of implementation (Duffy 2010, 11). It takes both types of faculty to effect institutional change.

An inclusive process that is not only open to but actively seeks out diverse practitioners is also essential to building a collaborative process. Research on creativity, innovation, and problem solving describes the importance of exploring, experimenting, and including



a diverse group of outsiders who can ask questions, provide different perspectives, and offer additional expertise (Lehrer 2012, 112-135). Not only are assumptions tested, but also “the benefit of such horizontal interactions—people sharing knowledge across fields—is that it encourages conceptual blending, which is extremely important to the insight process” (Lehrer 2012, 37). Business leaders often cite office products—such as masking tape and post-it notes—that resulted from failure while pursuing another goal: due to collaboration and sharing, individuals with no stake in the original goal saw the potential of the “failed” initiative. In this way, inviting a diverse group of participants into change work not only creates a more inclusive campus culture, but also creates opportunities for repurposing “failed” or unlikely ideas from a fresh perspective.

INITIATING AND DIFFUSING CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS

In any change endeavor, faculty leaders rely on a foundation of social capital and a broad network of expertise built over time through other successful projects. Social capital here can be defined as the goodwill and trust that faculty accumulate across campus relationships. This broad network creates “expertise transparency,” or an environment in which faculty know about and can leverage expertise and connections across campus networks (Daly 2010). For example, particular departments or campus leaders may be highly skilled in community engagement, while multicultural centers, student affairs offices, and race or gender studies departments may have valuable expertise in creating an equitable and inclusive environment for student and faculty success—but are campus leaders collaborating across a full range of expertise?

In higher education, leaders often believe that if faculty are faced with evidence from an external reform expert, they will support change, when in reality “new strategies are more likely to be adopted from a trusted

colleague than from an unfamiliar expert” (Daly 2010, 2). But how strong are the links within and across departments, campus divisions, and even institutions that share students, problems, and funding streams? If Daly’s (2010) reading of organizational change is correct and “informal webs of relationships are often the chief determinants of how well and quickly change efforts take hold, diffuse, and sustain,” then campuses may have some work to do.

Change built on durable social networks “can persist over time, even when specific funding is exhausted,” with the establishment of an institutional culture that centers faculty work, student learning, and “the development of skills that support reflective teaching based on observations of student learning” (Rutz et al. 42, 47). Sustainable change in higher education must be built on meaningful, collaborative projects that fosters a common language and a shared vision for student learning through repeated, intentional, formal and informal interactions. This collaboration among faculty and professional staff creates lasting communication channels and interpersonal trust, and builds expertise transparency (Lengnick-Hall and Beck 2005). Without trust and collaborative work that crosses departments, divisions, and institutions, new initiatives will not take hold.

TEAM-BASED LEARNING FOR INNOVATION AND ACTION

Ultimately, lasting institutional change requires faculty to adjust their practices. Leaders can tap both current expertise and build additional institutional capacity through team-based learning aimed at generating new ideas, perspectives, and skills. Many curricular design projects, relying on working groups or task forces, flounder because participants do not realize that they are having dissimilar conversations due to their different disciplinary training and previous experiences (Stark et al. 1990). Communication requires more than just using the same vocabulary; change leaders

must create rich team learning experiences that support the formation of shared meaning and the clarification of unintentional distortions or misunderstandings within and across divisions and departments (Hill 2006).

To develop as a team, faculty can invest time together to set collective goals, determine processes for collaboration and conflict management, and meet regularly to move from ideas to action. Creating this “shared sense of purpose makes a group a team as opposed to a collection of individuals.” Highly developed teams become self-directed, capable of adapting to new challenges, recruiting new members, and sharing their knowledge with the potential for real innovation (Adams, Kayes, and Kolb 2005). But competing demands, ineffective leadership, and traditional views about inclusion keep many projects from achieving significant change.

Efforts to identify faculty facilitators for team-based learning primarily lead only to tenured and tenure-track faculty. Campus change leaders understandably are concerned that contingent faculty are unavailable to participate in such efforts, since many hold multiple and/or disparate employment positions. Additionally, contingent faculty are often disconnected from institutional and departmental learning goals and relevant professional development opportunities (Kezar, Maxey, and Eaton 2014). Yet, it’s becoming increasingly unrealistic to keep contingent faculty on the margins of sustainable campus change efforts. They are the new faculty majority, and their commitment to student success is evident in their determination to teach under primarily insecure employment circumstances.

Research on faculty development programs provides some insight on the value of including contingent faculty in sustainable change efforts. Rutz et al. (2012) found in their assessment of faculty development programs that faculty off the tenure track were deeply engaged, especially at a campus with a significant number of contingent fac-

ulty. Yet, faculty with secure positions more willingly implemented lessons from the professional development programs than faculty with insecure positions, “and that freedom to experiment” equated to “more learning for students” (Rutz et al. 2012, 44). These findings may help debunk a widely held assumption that contingent faculty are unavailable to engage in change efforts. Incentivizing the work, however, may be critical to their participation and sustained engagement.

RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF DISRUPTION

Carefully planned and systematic change has long been characteristic of higher education, but it is insufficient given today’s highly dynamic environment where disruptions abound, such as new learning technologies, diverse student needs, changing faculty roles, and unremitting public attention. Indeed, the public has criticized higher education for not changing fast enough. A new theory of change might frame these “disruptions” as critical moments for faculty to reassess the purposes and processes of their work. For example, rather than resist the call to increase completion rates and close achievement gaps, many campuses implemented useful, evidence-based practices for enhancing both completion and student learning. Institutions and faculty reframed this disruption as an opportunity to deepen understanding and reassert a shared vision of equitable learning for successful individuals, citizens, and employees. This response demonstrates resilience in adapting to change.

Resilience is *not* the capacity to withstand disruption in order to stay the same. Rather, it is the capacity of a community or organization to adapt or transform its structure and processes to sustain its most fundamental purpose (Brand and Jax 2007; Adelman and Taylor 2003). The first step an organization must take to act and think resiliently is to separate its fundamental purpose from the

entrenched processes that have traditionally supported it. For example, in response to climate change, a community might decide to adapt food production practices in order to ensure food security (McCambly and Brown 2014). In response to the many disruptions facing higher education institutions, campuses must reimagine higher education in order to deliver learning experiences that lead not only to degrees, but also to proficiencies all students need to succeed and thrive. Defining and committing collectively to a shared vision is a key asset to resilient behavior, including rapid and long-term responses for change (Kimberlin, Schwartz, and Austin 2011).

As institutions and faculty adapt in the face of disruptions, they experience a variety of challenges. Effective educational innovations tend to remain in small and even temporary “islands” of change. Despite initial enthusiasm, faculty work groups are not always harmonious, reflecting some of the messiness of working out the implications of any new initiative. The implementation phase for a new curricular design can be further destabilizing when the work is publicly scrutinized. Most faculty have been part of a project that lost steam as a result of staff turnover, the end of grant funding, or “initiative fatigue.” Even a strong, evidence-based campus initiative can quickly dissolve, “becoming yet another layer of sediment in the sea of change” (Daly 2010, 2). Skilled faculty leaders understand the phases of change and attend to building and maintaining relationships as well as accomplishing the task and adjusting their behavior as the situation demands.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative leadership, social networks, and team-based learning are important assets for organizational resilience. Higher education’s capacity to adapt relies on each institution’s capacity to mobilize its faculty as critical sources of both expertise and resources. Ultimately, transformation will

require strong bonds and commitment beyond individual institutions and extend to external stakeholders, including accreditors, legislators, and policy makers, as essential partners for sustainable change. ■

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