

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Lessons for the LUMS SSE

The Theory and Practice of Institutional Transformation in Higher Education, Alexander W. Astin and Associates, published by **HERI** (Higher Education Research Institute) at **UCLA** (University of California, Los Angeles), 2001

Excerpted/adapted by Salal Humair

Note: When reading, we recommend assuming that any positive credits go directly to the authors of the above-mentioned report, in spite of our adaptations, since we do not put sentences or paragraphs in quotations repeatedly.

This excerpt seeks answers to relatively simple questions. Why is change in the academy sometimes frustratingly slow? Why do things almost never go exactly where we want them to - meetings upon meetings, and discussions upon discussions later? Why does it sometimes seem that the left hand does not know what the right is doing? Some fairly tenable answers are that any deep change is expected to be slow; one must look for positive results under the surface, beneath the chaos and turmoil of the process; and that the lack of coordination is natural to the process in which a substantial number of stakeholders are not only trying to make sense of the change, but also find their voice. The lessons Astin et al synthesize may sometimes seem obvious; many experienced practitioners will recognize them as echoes of their experiences; but they do have value. Their value is not in just reading them, but in reflecting upon them, and as diagnostics, i.e. recognizing the symptoms of problems in the change process once one sees them.

Institutional transformation is a tricky problem, with sometimes unpredictable outcomes. It is tricky because it deals with the intangibles. Any substantial transformation must (1) alter the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions, institutional behaviours, processes, and outcomes; (2) be deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) be intentional, and (4) occur over time. (Obviously it is good only if it enhances the capacity of the institution to perform its fundamental missions of teaching, research, and service).

The "basic principles" of such transformations are a limited set of features that seem to appear in most, if not all, transformation efforts. It is important to reinforce that these abstract-sounding lessons are not theoretical artefacts, but distilled from experience across several successful (as well as failed) change efforts in higher education. The value of these lessons is not to convert anyone, because they cannot be obeyed. Rather, it is to invite rethinking on what we think we know about change. Our previous experiences, our live ones, and the ones we will see in the future.

1. TRANSFORMATION IS SYSTEMIC

Colleges and universities are like mini-ecosystems, where every part and every function of the institution is connected to every other part or function, either directly or indirectly. If we attempt to change any significant part, such as say curriculum, stresses and tensions are created in connections to most other parts of the institution. Unless these tensions are relieved, by making appropriate adjustments in the other parts, resistance is natural to arise making the change effort very difficult to sustain.

Let's take a simple case. If LUMS moves to becoming a research institution, it will need to give its faculty more time for research and will have to rationalize its teaching load. This will cause changes to the fiscal policies (more required faculty based on the workloads, generating resources, allocating resources to departments), which will affect faculty and personnel policies (procedures for appointing new faculty, and reviews and promotions), which will affect the focus of the faculty, the curriculum they teach and their interactions with students. The cascade effect is quite clear, even in this limited example.

2. TRANSFORMATION IS BOTH EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR/CULTURAL

Many educators and stakeholders might be tempted to view their institutions in terms of observable exteriors (physical plant, resources, programs, policies, etc.) or quotable metrics, like

student faculty ratio, or research revenue per faculty etc. While these are all necessary, it is vastly important to remember that faculty and staff also have “interiors” – beliefs, values and intents that vitally affect everything they do. Even if transformers succeed in copying the best policies and the best practices from other institutions, the changes will have a very dubious future if not accompanied by an appropriate acceptance of the changes by the institutional personnel.

3. TRANSFORMATION TAKES TIME

While this principle may seem self-evident, perhaps even simplistic, it is easy to lose sight of in a comprehensive transformation effort. Perhaps the most time-consuming aspect of successful transformation comes from the second principle – the need for cultural change. Cultural change tends to occur slowly. Substantive change is different from procedural change, and therefore the socialization of the change initiative, within and outside the institution, is at least as important, if not more so, than the change itself.

4. TRANSFORMATION EFFORTS GENERATE RESISTANCE

Transformational efforts that do not generate resistance are unlikely to have been substantive. However, certain attitudes are very important to keep in mind for transformers. It is vastly important to make an effort to distinguish between opponents who are inclined to resist simply any kind of change, and opponents who may have detected real flaws in the plans. One of the most difficult kind of resistance is passive resistance, which can assume many forms, but most generally involves not offering overt resistance, but disengaging, i.e. simultaneously not doing, or doing only half-heartedly, whatever is needed to support, implement, or sustain the change.

5. PAIN IS INEVITABLE

Since most educational reformers and change agents have a strong emotional investment in the correctness of their transformation efforts, the resistance described above can be painful. This pain can be especially acute when the resistance comes from the faculty, most of whom are expert “critical thinkers”, well-schooled in the art of critical writing and speaking, and not adverse to expressing their opinions whenever an opportunity presents itself. Indeed, some of the intemperate faculty critiques that almost any proposal for substantial change are likely to generate can be especially painful for the change agents.

6. CHANGES IN THE INITIAL PLAN ARE INEVITABLE

No matter how carefully and thoroughly the initial transformation plan has been worked out, it will almost surely require changes during implementation. The reason for including this self-evident point in the basic principles is that change agents can become emotionally attached to their plans or strategies. It is important to distinguish between what is truly necessary in the plan against what is modifiable.

A quite different situation arises, however, when there is fundamental disagreement about the goals and the values that drive the change effort. In such cases, disputes about means (why do things this way) might really be masking conflicts over institutional values and purposes (why do it at all). It is important for change agents to recognize the symptoms of these deeper masked doubts and address them in some manner.

7. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE AN UNCONVINCED MINORITY

No matter how “right” the transformation might be, no matter how thought out the plans are, and no matter how long the change agents work to get everyone on board, there will always be individuals who will persist in maintaining that the entire effort is a bad idea. If nothing else, such individuals offer change agents some protection against succumbing to the temptations of complacency. They do have some value.

8. THERE MUST BE SOME INSTITUTIONAL READINESS FOR CHANGE

Astin cite a study of 26 institutions that had undertaken planned change efforts, which uses an aquatic metaphor to describe four levels of readiness for change: calm waters (little pressure felt for change); currents (minor pressures suggesting the need for modest change); rapids (unstable environment, hazards apparent); and edge of the waterfall (catastrophic environment or the need for immediate and far-reaching action). Clearly, no institutional transformational effort is going to get off the ground if there are no members of the faculty who believe there is need for change, or the ones who do, do not have the wherewithal to do so.

In the LUMS case, the institution has done quite well so far, and while there are mild pressures for change, there is nothing catastrophic within the school. What is catastrophic, requiring far-reaching action is the outside environment, which is changing so rapidly that if our institutions do not adapt to creating knowledge, sustaining the best faculty, and

educating the best students with the best possible education, the consequences will be unimaginable in the next fifty years. This is where the vision of a research university comes in.

There are some paradoxes and dilemmas inherent in the institutional transformation process, which are useful to keep in mind, and stem partly from the nature of the academy. We list only a few from the original report since they seem most relevant.

1. THE TWO SIDES OF DEBATE

The autonomy and independence of the academics (and faculty traditions of critical thinking) means change leaders cannot simply mandate changes and expect faculty to fall in line. Every proposal is likely to be greeted with a good deal of critical commentary. It is important to interpret such resistance wisely and distinguish the point at which the debate becomes paralyzing from when it is actually useful, i.e. when faculty are trying to understand and come to terms with the change.

2. THE NECESSITY AND LIMITATIONS OF PROPOSALS

Words are the currency of academe. When proposals for change are made, they are usually written. Those receiving the proposal may well discuss it among themselves and prepare a written critique. The proposal may be further rewritten or dropped. All too frequently, this verbal and written "talk" becomes a substitute for action—a "paralysis of analysis"—and otherwise excellent proposals end up languishing in the library or shelves of change agents.

Perhaps the most common problem that occurs is when a committee or task force diligently develops a change proposal, which never sees the light of day for three reasons. First, the task force members may see their task narrowly in terms of "preparing a proposal" rather than also being part of the implementation process, i.e. the proposal is an end in itself. Second, the leadership that appointed the task force neglected to think through the "next steps" to be followed once the proposal is complete. Third, both groups fail to recognize that since the task force went through its own "learning process" in formulating the proposal, other faculty and staff must go through a similar process before they can be expected to understand and support the proposal fully. They have to be able to make sense out of it; otherwise they will not support it.

3. FOLLOWING ESTABLISHED GOVERNANCE PROCEDURES

Change proposals may not be considered legitimate if they do not follow established governance procedures and are seen as such (e.g. appointments to task forces, review by established committees, approval of the academic senate, etc.). Many times, the problem is that the established governance process is exactly what needs changing. The challenge is to contain the obscurantist aspect of the system while still maintaining legitimacy.

How is all of this relevant? Because the above lessons expose where the investment in time and energy goes when trying to implement something like the SSE, which requires changing institutional mechanisms. To take just one example, for the past many months we have investigated, proposed, deliberated over, and come to terms with the changes needed for the most critical area for the SSE: faculty appointment, promotion and tenure processes. This has in large part gated a full-time drive to appoint faculty. We are close to the end of the process now, which we hope will allow us to make rapid progress in hiring faculty over the next year. On other lessons for the SSE from the above work, most readers will draw their own conclusions, but we hope it will help them interpret our progress in the coming years.