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Core Values and the Road to Change

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Core Values and the Road to Change

Abstract

Higher education draws much of the vocabulary and many of the concepts about change from the corporate sector. Corporations "downsized" and "restructured" in the early 1990s in response to competitive and financial pressures; higher education currently is experiencing similar pressures. Yet change and renewal in higher education are not just about money and becoming more cost-effective. Although these are important objectives, higher education must incorporate changes that improve student learning, foster closer connections with their communities, and adapt to the demands of an increasingly technological society. Reorganizing and cutting costs alone do not suggest how colleges and universities might become more agile as institutions, nor do efficiency measures usually address the core issues of the higher education enterprise.

Disciplines

Community College Education Administration | Community College Leadership | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Education Economics | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education

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Colleges and universities cannot simply follow the lead of corporations. They must find their own approaches to change—ones that are consonant with their missions and values, yet recognize the need for timely action, measurable results, and cost containment. Governing boards must balance two

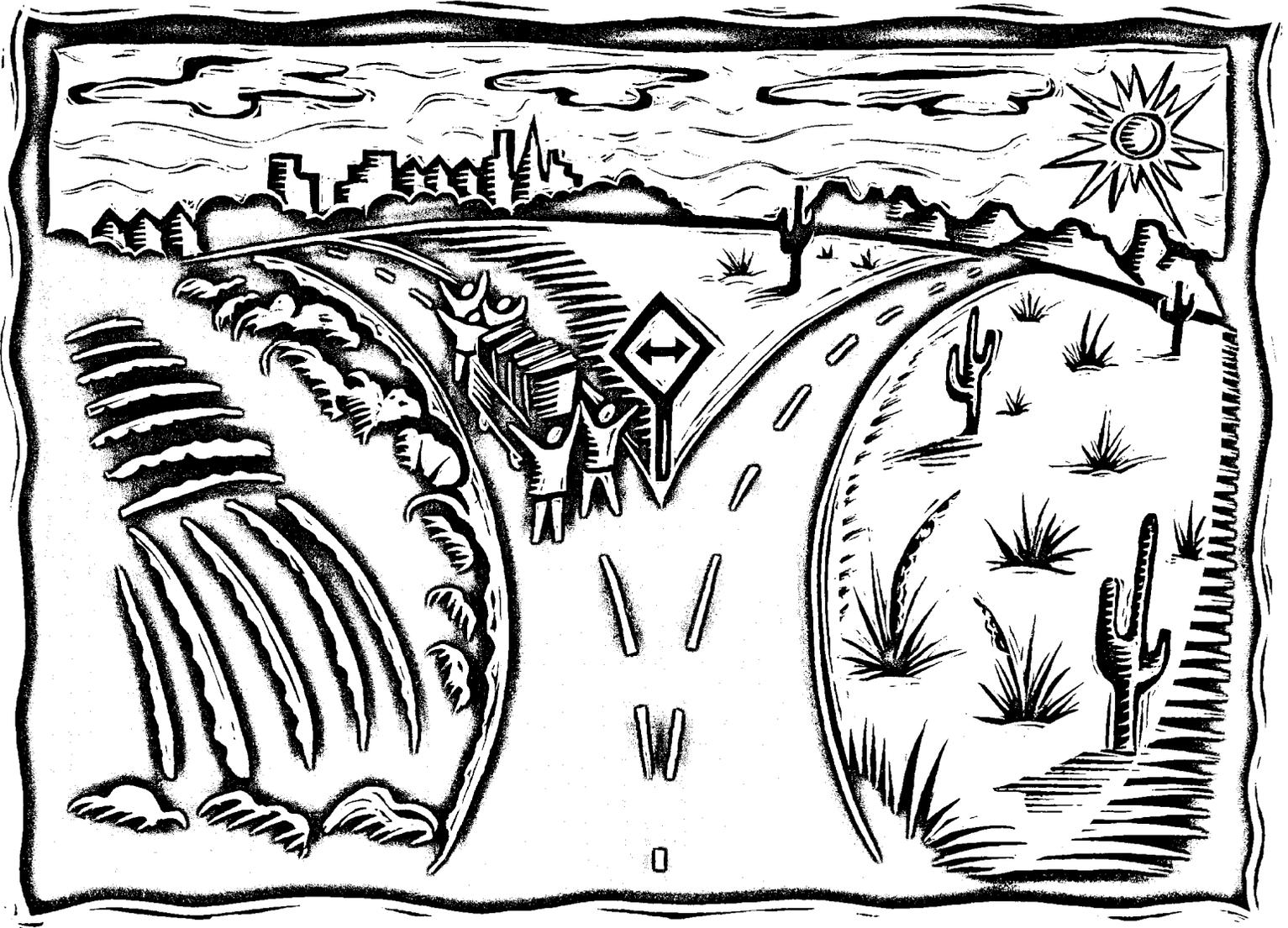
Core Values AND THE Road to Change

Although colleges must recognize the need for timely action, measurable results, and cost containment, the corporate approach to change won't cut it in higher education.

valid and sometimes competing demands: Their institutions must find their own change methodology and language, which must be rooted in their value system and culture, and they must honor the demands for rationality and efficiency.

For the last four years, the American Council on Education has engaged in a partnership with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and a diverse group of 26 colleges and universities that were serious about taking charge of change. The ACE Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, which we directed, assumed each institution would determine its own agenda for change in response to a variety of external and internal factors, examine the reasons for change, craft the substance of the agenda, design the process, and thoughtfully consider who should be involved in developing and implementing the change.

BY MADELEINE F. GREEN
• PETER ECKEL •
AND BARBARA HILL



The experiences of these institutions helped us develop an approach to change unique to higher education. We drew on the literature and experiences of corporations, nonprofit organizations, and colleges and universities to extract useful concepts, find new language, and above all, uncover approaches that made sense for higher education because they worked. Much of this literature was more helpful in framing questions than in providing answers.

As we guided and followed the experiences of the 26 colleges and universities, we were struck by the intensity with which institutional officials spoke of the academy's values—serving students and society and creating and disseminating knowledge, for example. Although corporations certainly

have their own values, corporate values do not seem to play as central a role as in higher education, nor does higher education share the straightforward corporate values of producing tangible products and making a profit.

Of course, colleges and universities must be efficient and businesslike in purchasing equipment, registering students, and running residence halls and food services. Indeed, academic institutions have made great strides in containing costs and maximizing efficiency in these areas. But effectiveness and efficiency in teaching, learning, service, and research are much more complicated endeavors. The “products” of higher education are not tangible, nor can they be tracked and measured on a spreadsheet.

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Authority and Cooperation. To begin the process, board members first must distinguish the key ways in which colleges and universities are unlike corporations. In addition to developing concepts and language that are appropriate *within* each institution, institutional leaders also must take care to make concepts and language understandable and persuasive to those on the *outside*—especially those who exhort colleges and universities to change.

The corporate sector largely shapes the thinking of many trustees and legislators, but most of the change models from the corporate world do not fit colleges and universities because they do not accommodate collaboration, shared decision making, and other unique values of the academy. Further, faculty members are not employees in the same sense as is a worker in a manufacturing setting, nor are higher education administrators like corporate executives who simply can make decisions that others must implement.

In the modern corporate model of change, “buy in” is an important concept. But “buying in” to someone else’s decision or vision in a corporation involves a profoundly different dynamic from “buying in” in the context of shared decision making in a decentralized and values-driven organization. In colleges and universities, the stakeholders—especially the faculty—have some authority over the central decision makers.

Articulating these and other central differences between the academy and corporations is important for two reasons: First, overlooking such factors may result in mistakes in both analysis and strategy. Second, using language and concepts that are alien to the values and mores of the academy may fail to engage the very people who must develop and implement the changes.

Not surprisingly, straightforward models of change—labeled “reengineering” and “restructuring” and generally considered favorable in the corporate context—are complicated and difficult to execute in higher education. The terms appear to have little relation to teaching, learning, service, and

research. Rather, they suggest to academics a narrow preoccupation with numbers, efficiency measures, and ultimately cutbacks. Because financial resources are a central issue in higher education and these terms are easily understandable and respond to public and market pressures for efficiency, the restructuring themes and vocabulary dominate discussions of change.

Emphasizing resources and structures at the expense of values and purposes may satisfy politicians and other higher education watchdogs, but it diminishes higher education’s value and distinctiveness from other segments of society. Skeptics argue that the academy’s concern with its culture and values and its exaggerated notion of its unique nature are merely clever diversions from the hard work of change. They charge faculty would rather talk anything to death than act, and they suggest academics are expert at devising elegant defenses of the status quo. Nonetheless, most of higher education’s critics find value in the core purposes of the enterprise and just want things to be done better.

A Different Road. Is there a “higher education” approach to effective change of this sort? The answer clearly is Yes, and we have seen it work in this project. Twenty-six institutions have proved colleges and universities have the capacity to be active, evolving, and revitalizing organizations. Certainly, the important elements for “higher education-style” change may be found in other kinds of organizations, but together they form a distinctive approach. Some of them follow.

- *Change begins with an exploration of why a particular change is necessary or important and what the institution wants to accomplish.* Although colleges and universities have changed over time, they are reluctant to embrace fads or to change for the sake of

change. Thus, a thorough exploration of *why* a change is important is a vital first step in the process.

For boards and other stakeholders, that exploration begins with a set of questions, rather than with answers. What is the problem? How might we improve the institution? Will students benefit? Is it necessary to our survival? Our well-being? Our competitiveness? Where will the change take us? What are our aspirations and goals? Unless the stakeholders really believe the status quo is unsatisfactory and change is necessary and beneficial, the process may be doomed from the outset. If it points the way to a stronger institution and to a more exciting place for faculty, staff, and students, completing that exploration will create a collective will to act.

- *Change is anchored in the institution's mission and values.* Changes that are not good "fits" with an institution's mission and values are not likely to succeed. For example, why would a residential liberal arts college want to develop graduate programs on the Internet? Does intensifying research activities make sense in an institution whose primary mission is serving adult part-time students?

Similarly, the change process must account for the academic values articulated by members of the community. People who choose to spend their professional careers in academic institutions generally do so because they care deeply about the life of the mind and about educating students. Their behavior derives from these values. External groups may misunderstand or minimize this commitment and see it more as a device for self-protection than as a positive force. But an academic community is less likely to feel marginalized, misunderstood, or diminished by a process that respects the beneficial traditions and values of the institution and its stakeholders.

- *An academic community is less likely to resist change if stakeholders help determine the agenda for change.* The benefits of establishing a process that allows people with different perspectives to contribute to a dialogue about change outweigh the risks of doing so. For example, if learning really

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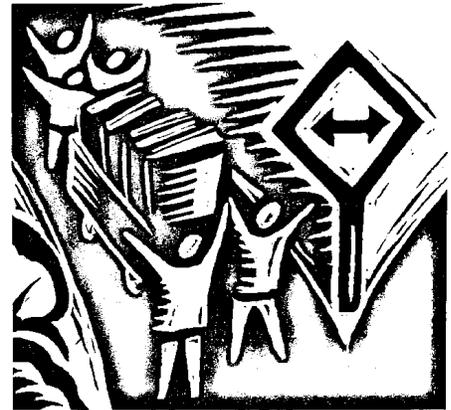
is to be improved, it will happen because of the experience and insights professors, administrators, students, student-affairs staff, learning specialists, and others bring to this complex issue. No individual or group alone has the breadth or the wisdom to formulate a change agenda.

Admittedly, participation brings some risks. The agenda risks being a weak compromise of the interested parties. Negotiations and political tradeoffs may give everyone a little but not add up to much. But the hazards on the other side—too little input and too little ownership—may mean charting directions that are meaningful only to a few and embraced only by a minority.

- *To the extent possible, the agenda for change is supported by a critical mass of stakeholders.* Even an inclusive process will not guarantee that all

stakeholders embrace change enthusiastically. Nor is this necessary. But if a specific change is to pervade the institution, it ultimately must be embraced by the many, not the few. A change process may start with a small group, which then expands through dialogue and involvement, but real change requires influencing a critical mass of stakeholders. This cannot be commanded or legislated. Significant numbers of people must be persuaded that the change is necessary and beneficial, because they will be the ones to make it happen.

- *Stakeholders view changes as improvements to the core functions of the institution,*



not as efficiency moves. Budget cuts are a fact of life in most institutions. If they aren't part of an institution's present, they probably were part of its past and undoubtedly will be part of its future. But the trimming that leaves basic programs and structures intact is not the issue here. Rather, significant change means reducing base budgets, eliminating programs, or reallocating resources.

When institutional officials pursue serious budget reallocations or academic restructuring, their difficult challenge is to consider how to improve programs *and* cut resources simultaneously, because reducing spending alone automatically is associated with reducing quality. If they only reduce cost, few people will be enthusiastic about the change. However, if they can improve the core functions of teaching, learning, service, and research while reducing costs, then such an initiative may generate positive energy.

Not every budget cut has the potential to improve quality, of course. Through widespread involvement and with collaborative leadership, however, the two may be linked to avoid or minimize anger, resistance, and low morale.

- *Leaders lead by persuasion, through other leaders, and by building trust.* One of the most distinctive features of the academy is the decision-making process and its effect on leadership. While one easily can envision "leaders," "constituents," and "stakeholders," it is difficult to imagine campus "followers." Academic institutions are composed of schools and departments that function relatively autonomously, and many important decisions are made far from the president's office. Consequently, many campus "leaders" lead by persuasion. Additionally, they can set standards, provide sanctions and rewards, and create a climate that is conducive to certain behaviors, but they cannot legislate good teaching or civil discourse.

Because colleges and universities operate more like networks than hierarchies, powerful leadership is not restricted to "the top." Influential faculty members with no official power are more important than the

president when it comes to changing the curriculum. A major change, such as incorporating technology into teaching, requires champions from many quarters—faculty, information technology staff, department chairs, deans—none of whom can create widespread change alone.

Finally, because power is dispersed and leadership shared, trust is an essential underpinning of change in higher education. Without it, no genuine exploration of the reasons for change will occur, only disconnected rhetorical arguments. Lack of trust creates stakeholders who focus on preserving rights and privileges rather than taking risks to create a future with the common good in mind. Distrust feeds unhealthy personal and professional relationships and creates dysfunctional organizations. Left unaddressed and unresolved, its destructive powers are boundless.

A large number of campuses are engaged in the difficult processes of change, despite critics' accusations of complacency and inaction. Many outside the academy think technology and the marketplace will make the deliberate style of change that historically has characterized higher education a thing of the past. State legislators and governing board members who are dissatisfied with the pace of higher education decision making undoubtedly will try to quicken its pace. Endless debate is not productive, but neither are hastily conceived plans.

Although the academic community must explain higher education's distinct features, values, and importance to society, it also must create and employ approaches to change that have perceptible and beneficial consequences for teaching, learning, service, and research. Excellence is an act of creation, not just preservation. ♦

Madeleine F. Green is vice president of the American Council on Education and director of the ACE/Kellogg Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation. Peter Eckel is assistant director of the project. Barbara Hill is senior fellow of the Center for Institutional and International Initiatives at ACE.