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**Abstract**

An important responsibility of metropolitan university leaders is to provide compelling evidence that their institutions have the ability to change and to articulate how much change has occurred. This paper examines how institutions can develop that capacity and determine the extent to which institutions are different. It defines transformation, describes types of evidence, presents a framework for determining evidence, suggests strategies for collecting evidence, and identifies challenges to determining progress.

**Keywords**

higher education, change, assessment, leadership

**Disciplines**

Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration

# **Assessing Change and Transformation in Higher Education: An Essential Task for Leaders**

Peter D. Eckel

## **Abstract**

*An important responsibility of metropolitan university leaders is to provide compelling evidence that their institutions have the ability to change and to articulate how much change has occurred. This paper examines how institutions can develop that capacity and determine the extent to which institutions are different. It defines transformation, describes types of evidence, presents a framework for determining evidence, suggests strategies for collecting evidence, and identifies challenges to determining progress.*

Effecting change in higher education is like “turning a battleship” (or a fleet of ships, in some instances), or like “moving a graveyard,” go the old saws. Critics charge that all types of colleges and universities are highly resistant to internal change. Any change that does occur, goes the argument, does so at a glacial pace. Colleges and universities need stronger leaders who can boldly lead. This alleged inability to respond to changing environments becomes particularly alarming in light of the accelerated rate of change in today’s society. Critics argue that higher education leaders must develop new skills to bring about necessary change or risk having their institutions left behind. Some would argue that metropolitan universities, with their distinctively urban mission, are particularly at critical junctures because of their important social roles and the types of students they serve.

A different view suggests that colleges and universities prosper because of their resiliency and ability to respond to emerging social needs, which is particularly true for urban institutions. This perspective argues that what higher education leaders currently do is adequate. People who share this viewpoint see universities as flexible and agile institutions. They argue that campus leaders can meet new challenges through continuous change and that much of the criticism concerning higher education’s rigidity are unsubstantiated. They suggest that higher education can and does change; leaders simply need better ways of demonstrating that change has occurred.

These criticisms and their counter-arguments frame a set of fundamental questions facing metropolitan university leaders: To what extent have their institutions changed? How can institutions develop capacities to measure change? How can leaders provide compelling evidence to critics that their institution has the ability to make the needed changes and

remain a viable contributor to today's urban centers? Metropolitan universities are in difficult places because they must be many things to many people, serve a diverse array of needs, keep costs low, and be effective at what they do. By understanding how much change has occurred, leaders of urban institutions can keep critics at bay, generate needed energy and momentum for continued change on campus, mark their progress and determine what strategies worked, and communicate the results of their efforts.

Metropolitan university leaders acknowledge that they are faced with tremendous challenges. Little effort must go toward convincing leaders that the following issues should be near the top of their urban institution's agenda: serving increasingly diverse student populations; coping with increased competition for students and financial resources with both traditional institutions and new providers; funding campus infrastructure improvements; becoming more engaged with local communities; and being accountable to their publics.

This paper, based upon the experiences of 23 diverse institutions engaged in institutional change and transformation, explores the challenges of assessing progress on change. It suggests different types of evidence, provides a framework for determining transformation, describes the process of determining evidence, and identifies potential pitfalls and challenges. This paper does not explore the links between the ideas of the national assessment movement, which typically focuses on assessing student learning or assessment for accountability. Space constraints limit the discussion to evidence of change. Readers knowledgeable about outcomes assessment and accountability may recognize some parallel ideas and challenges.

## **The ACE Projects on Institutional Transformation**

Twenty-three institutions participated in the ACE Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, a five-year effort funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. ACE launched the project in 1995 with 26 public and private institutions, including community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive and doctoral universities, and research universities (three institutions elected not to continue in the project's final two-year phase). Slightly more than one-third of the institutions served metropolitan areas.

We further refined our insights through the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education Transformation (KFHET), a partnership to explore and better understand institutional change and transformation involving ACE, Alverno College, WI; The Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan; The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California-Los Angeles; Minnesota State College and University System; The New England Resource Center for Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston; Olivet College, MI; Portland State University, OR; and the University of Arizona.

The purpose of these projects was to help colleges and universities achieve intentional change and develop capacities for continuous change by learning from their experiences,

and then disseminate the findings to a wider audience. Institutions were not interested in simply solving discrete problems or altering the organizational chart; they were undertaking the kind of change that challenged not only structures and policies, but also long-established patterns of thinking and behaving. In other words, they were seeking transformational change. Throughout the projects we sought to make distinctions among various types of change. We framed much of the work around our definition of transformation and used this definition to describe the objectives of project institutions:

*Transformation:* (1) alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; (2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; (3) is intentional; and (4) occurs over time.

Our definition of transformation does not imply that institutions will change completely. They will not discard the basic functions of teaching, research, and service, but instead will alter the ways in which they perform those basic functions and rethink the operating principles behind them. For example, we did not expect that urban institutions would discard their missions or change the types of students they served. Rather than throw out everything and begin anew, institutions will recast their work in ways that are tied to and shaped by their histories and values.

The progress of institutions on their change agendas varied. Some institutions had visible successes—that were deep, pervasive, and cultural—and were clearly en route to transformation. They *were* “transforming” institutions, in a continual state of change. By their own judgments, however, their efforts were still very much a work in progress; they readily acknowledged that past successes had brought about more challenges. They indicated that transformation was neither a discrete task nor that it would be finished. Some institutions entered the project with circumscribed visions of change or their efforts got mired in difficulties and they made some adjustments that did not add up to major change. The final group of institutions was in the middle. They made some important changes, but they were neither cultural nor deep and pervasive. However, with time and additional success, this middle group of institutions might become “transforming” institutions.

## **Evidence of Transformation**

Documenting change can help campus leaders determine the extent to which their efforts are meeting intended goals, differentiate between successful and unsuccessful change strategies, and understand the consequences of their efforts on the institution. Evidence of transformation highlights success for the institution and for external stakeholders. The identification and celebration of progress acknowledges hard work in a visible way and can provide additional energy and momentum for change. The process of assessing transformation keeps the change agenda on the collective institutional screen. It also adds accountability to an initiative by pushing change leaders to document what is happening and with what effects in concrete terms.

Throughout the projects, we observed different types of evidence helpful to leaders for marking progress. Measuring progress toward transformation should not be limited to examining visible changes, such as new structures, policies, or procedures. Because of the depth of transformational change, leaders should look for evidence of new values and beliefs and for changes in underlying assumptions and institutional culture.

Through continued conversations, observations, and visits over the project's five years, and further observations, discussions, and research through KFHET, we came to realize that we were looking at both explicit evidence—structures, policies, and practices—and implicit or cultural evidence that mark transformation.

**Explicit Evidence.** Explicit evidence is composed of those familiar concrete markers that can be counted, measured, and compared to baseline information. No single change in policy, structure, or practice is evidence of transformation. Instead, clustered and interrelated concrete markers are more likely to signal transformation. For example, an institution seeking to engage deeply with its local community may develop an important and successful service-learning program. By itself, that program may be a single indicator in a series of aligned, intentional changes that support the institution-wide urban focus and commitment. By itself, however, service-learning does not constitute deep and pervasive or cultural transformation. For an urban institution, explicit evidence may include tangible contributions an institution makes to its community, the number and types of activities or programs it offers, and the numbers of community members involved. Explicit evidence at urban institutions may not be found solely on campus; explicit changes in the community may also demonstrate important progress.

Transformation, we observed, is evidenced by the presence of most of the following visible markers, and by a sense of synergy and connection among them.

**Changes to the curriculum.** While typical curricular change can be relatively minor (changing the number of science courses or adding a diversity/culture course), transformational change altered the types of knowledge presented through the curriculum, the ways in which the curriculum was organized, the central principles of what it intended to accomplish, and who was responsible for delivering particular curricular goals.

**Changes in pedagogies.** Just as the curriculum changed, so did the pedagogies and methods of its delivery. The traditional array of lectures, discussion sessions, and seminars was supplemented by alternative teaching methods, such as collaborative work, web-based learning, and learning communities. Urban institutions heavily adopted service and community-based learning and cluster courses to overcome some of the pedagogical challenges of working with commuting students who were employed.

**Changes in student learning and assessment practices.** Institutions could articulate and demonstrate improvements in student learning and learning outcomes assessment practices. They adopted multiple strategies, which frequently included portfolio assessment. Metropolitan universities, in particular, along with community colleges, devel-

oped multi-faceted approaches to student learning that reflected the diversity and differences in age of their students.

**Changes in policies.** Institutions aligned their policies with their goals and articulated values. Among the key policies that were modified to support transformation were merit pay and annual evaluations; hiring, promotion, and tenure; program review; faculty development and travel; and information technology. Some metropolitan institutions developed policies that encouraged community engagement. They rewarded classroom experiences that had direct community ties, and created merit-pay programs that encouraged scholarship that explicitly addressed local problems.

**Changes in budgets.** Without corresponding shifts in the ways leaders allocate finances, good ideas may wither for lack of resources. Transformation required realigning budgets with new priorities and objectives. Sometimes, leaders found new sources of money and at other times they reallocated existing resources.

**New departments and institutional structures.** In order to do new things, institutions created new departments and institutional structures. Examples at metropolitan colleges and universities included Centers for Teaching Excellence and units responsible for community service and outreach. The new units typically had their own budgets and staff, were responsible for certain functions, and frequently acted as clearinghouses of information and centers of coordination of campus-wide efforts. Often, faculty leaders were tapped (and given release time) to lead these new units.

**New decision making structures.** Institutions no longer relied solely on well-worn traditions and patterns of decision-making and problem solving. They learned that familiar methods led to expected (and habitual) solutions. To develop new solutions, institutions developed and tapped different decision-making structures that led to creative ideas and courses of action. For some institutions, it meant creating new ad hoc structures. For others, it meant incorporating ad hoc task forces into formal governance processes.

Taken together, the explicit evidence suggested deep and pervasive change. Leaders recognized the synergistic impact of multiple changes. For example, at one metropolitan research university in the ACE project, leaders saw evidence of transformation across the campus that added up to something beyond adjustments. They noted changes in the curriculum that tied learning more closely to practice. New required capstone courses included service-learning and community-based learning pedagogies. The institution created new offices to foster community-university relationships and to assist faculty as they developed their community-based learning experiences. The institution changed its hiring policies and merit-pay structure to more heavily weigh community service and applied scholarship. They developed budget incentives to encourage units to engage more closely with the community and created an internal grants competition to fund scholarship that addressed immediate community problems.

**Cultural Evidence.** However much change was visible through the above evidence, campus leaders recognized that the explicit evidence was insufficient to indicate transformational change. An additional set of evidence was needed to identify the cultural impact of transformation. These implicit, or cultural, markers signaled attitudinal and cultural shifts that suggested an institution had accomplished more than surface change; it had developed new capacities and a new set of beliefs and assumptions regarding what it should be doing. These types of evidence proved to be challenging for leaders. These more subtle signs of transformation are not the markers commonly used by accrediting teams, legislatures, or boards of trustees. They are far more difficult to pinpoint. Additionally, alone, they can indicate only superficial change. Campus leaders readily pointed out that new rhetoric could exist without corresponding deep change. Leaders can easily create meaningless slogans or redraw organizational charts that simply shuffle boxes and do not reflect fundamental change. It is quite another thing to permeate campus norms and beliefs.

The cultural markers were:

**Changes in the ways groups or individuals interact with one another.** Institutions created new patterns of interactions. They found ways of connecting people from different units who previously did not have structured opportunities to work together, generating sources of new ideas and energy. For many urban institutions, community members came to play more central roles as collaborative partners. Project institutions also changed the patterns of the ways in which groups interacted. For example, many metropolitan institutions brought student affairs professionals to the table as educational peers rather than a group simply responsible for extra-curricular activities. Institutions created and fostered changed relationships between faculty/staff and students. Transforming institutions discovered and reinforced new ways for faculty and students to interact both in and outside of the classroom. These relationships were consistent with stated values and reinforced by key policies, structures, and mindsets. Examples include joint student-faculty research, student participation in campus decision-making, and faculty led service-learning experiences.

**Changes in the language the campus used to talk about itself.** A different self-image was a marker of cultural transformation. New language and self-concepts evolved over time until the shared terminology was widespread and became part of the institutional fabric. For example, urban universities that were one-time research university aspirants found new pride in describing themselves through urban and metropolitan frameworks and with different terminology that expressed the important role they play in their cities. Their new language reflected their pride in their service-based mission grounded in research and teaching.

**Changes in the types of conversations.** The conversations on campus changed both in terms of who was at the table (different players from inside the institution and new partners from outside of it, particularly at urban institutions) and in the substance of the conversations. These new and different conversations reflected new priorities and new

commitments. New topics found themselves on a majority of agendas, dominating campus conversations.

**Old arguments became unsuitable.** A marker of new attitudes and beliefs was the willingness to abandon old arguments: “we can’t do this because...” or “we tried this and it failed....” Old reasons for not acting often did not fit new realities, as the contexts, challenges, and situations had changed. The willingness to take a fresh look signaled important shifts in institutional norms, beliefs, and culture. (Of course, this point does not mean that new arguments did not surface, as they are part and parcel of academic life.)

**New relationships with stakeholders.** No institution can undergo profound change without the involvement of such stakeholders as trustees, alumni and donors, community groups, local businesses, and foundations. Transformation led to new types of relationships with these long-term stakeholders. It also helped forge new relationships with non-traditional stakeholders such as community agencies, local businesses, and civic groups.

For many metropolitan institutions, the cultural evidence was tied to a realization that they contribute in key ways to the cities in which they are located. The language for many shifted from that of an ivory tower to one of engagement. The ways in which they interacted with community members and local policy makers changed. They treated community members as partners (and adopted that language) rather than as clients or customers.

Only continued assessment and a view of the cumulative effect of changes in both implicit and explicit evidence over time provided markers of transformation. However, institutional leaders should be able to point to results and outcomes along the way. Although these interim indicators are markers of progress, they may not be signs of transformation. For example, creating a new interdisciplinary center (structural change) may not ensure that faculty and students are addressing problems through multi-disciplinary frameworks rather than disciplinary parallel-play. The structures may have changed but the ways of operating and the beliefs may have remained the same.

## **A Framework for Determining Evidence of Transformation**

We learned that evidence for change can help address three types of questions: (1) **Progress:** How much improvement has occurred, or what is different on campus? (2) **Success of Strategies:** What particular change strategies have produced the improvements? Who was involved? How? And (3) **Effects:** What have been the results and consequences, intended and unintended, of the changes? It is important for institutional leaders to know how much change occurred, what led to those changes, and what were the effects of those changes on the campus.

Change leaders might use the explicit and cultural sources of evidence and the three types of questions as a framework for creating an evidence collection strategy. The following tables demonstrate a comprehensive evidence framework highlighting the range of evidence of transformation that might be collected. Depending upon the change agenda and the institution, however, not all of the cells might be useful. Constructing such charts (or particular elements of them) might be a useful exercise for change leaders. A discussion of how to go about collecting evidence follows.

An institution's particular mission will also influence the types of questions asked and evidence collected. Metropolitan institutions might start by asking the following questions as they pertain to their urban missions: In what ways do changes better serve the community? How do the changes in pedagogies more closely tie theory and practice? What new structures or units connect us more closely with community needs?

# A Framework for Determining Explicit Evidence

	Progress	Success of Strategies	Effects
<b>Curriculum</b>	In what ways is the curriculum different?	What strategies helped change the curriculum?	What are the effects of a different curriculum?
<b>Pedagogies</b>	What pedagogical changes have occurred?	What strategies led to changed pedagogies?	What has been the effect of changed pedagogies?
<b>Student Learning Assessment</b>	What student learning assessment strategies are different?	What strategies were effective in creating these processes?	What are the consequences of these changes?
<b>Policies</b>	What policies have been revisited to support the change agenda?	What strategies were used successfully to bring about these realignments?	What are the effects of these changes on the institution?
<b>Budgets</b>	In what ways has the budget been reallocated? What new sources of income support the change?	What were the “politics” of reallocating resources? What approaches worked?	What are the effects of shifted/new resources?
<b>Institutional Structures</b>	What new units or structures were created to support the change?	What strategies contributed to their creation? Who was involved? How?	What have been the effects of these new structures on campus?
<b>Decision-Making Structures</b>	In what ways has decision-making changed?	What strategies worked and did not work to create new structures? What made them legitimate?	What are the implications of these changes?

# A Framework for Determining Cultural Evidence

	Progress	Success of Strategies	Effects
<b>Group Interactions</b>	In what ways do groups interact differently? Which groups, and in what ways?	What strategies helped change these interactions?	What are the effects of these new interactions?
<b>Language</b>	How does the institution talk differently about itself?	What processes generated and helped spread the new language?	What effect has the changed language created?
<b>Conversation Topics</b>	What topics dominate campus conversations? How are they different?	What strategies were effective in putting new topics on agendas and into conversations?	What are the consequences of these new conversations?
<b>Old Arguments</b>	In what ways have old arguments been replaced? What are the new excuses for not doing something?	What strategies were used successfully to bring this about?	What are the effects and implications of these changes?
<b>Stakeholder Relationships</b>	What new stakeholders participate? How have relations with key stakeholders changed?	Through what strategies were new stakeholders invited into the conversation? How did you form new relationships with long-term stakeholders?	What are the effects of these changed relationships for faculty, students, staff, and administrators?

The next section details six strategies for making assessment an integral component of a successful change effort.

# **Strategies for Collecting Evidence of Transformation**

Based upon the experience of institutions in the ACE and KFHET projects, the following strategies will help change leaders collect evidence as part of their change efforts.

**Start when framing the change agenda.** For many institutions, collecting evidence of transformation and assessing progress are afterthoughts of the change process, done most energetically when the boards of trustees, state legislators, or accreditation agencies press for it. The process of collecting and using evidence should not be thought of as an add-on, but as one of the many elements central to a successful change strategy, starting at the very beginning of the change efforts. Collecting evidence to determine what things are like now may include hard data or softer information that help define a problem (or opportunity) and its magnitude. For example, what are the indicators of how well students are learning? To what extent does the campus embrace diversity? This evidence is useful in making the case for change, and it also provides a baseline against which to measure progress.

**Use all types of information.** As mentioned above, evidence should address three different questions: How much positive change has occurred? What strategies are working? What are the results? Numerical data are concrete, carry legitimacy within the academy and to external groups, and lend themselves to comparison, both over time and across units. Stories, on the other hand, provide important illustrations, help explain complex and ambiguous situations, and connect information in a logical (and chronological) sequence. Strategies that use multiple types of evidence from a variety of sources will present a more complete picture of what has happened. Leaders should determine what type of information would be accepted most willingly by the different groups that they are trying to convince. Will humanities faculty be more motivated by facts and figures, by stories, or by both? For metropolitan university leaders, how will the value of various types of information vary when speaking internally with faculty and externally with community officials?

**Link assessment and change processes.** To collect evidence of transformation effectively and incorporate it into change processes, leaders should view its collection as connected with the change initiative and as an ongoing part of the overall effort. Leaders should gather information and use it in feedback loops to make adjustments during the change process and to create momentum and energy for change. For example, collecting evidence on the pervasiveness and depth of technology use in the classroom may advance a change agenda. Surveys might be helpful when institutional attention needs to focus on teaching and technology, such as before a campus-wide workshop on the topic or when a major committee is about to undertake a related initiative. A formal survey might be sent to faculty at the end of the academic term, but an approach more supportive of the change process might include informal discussions with chairs throughout the year. Linking evidence collection strategies with particular

change processes reinforces the institutional focus and enhances the potential impact of all of the tactics.

**Use existing data.** Most institutions routinely collect information through their academic and student affairs offices, alumni offices, or institutional research that can be useful evidence for determining the parameters of change and its results. Information used in institutional reports to the board of trustees, a state coordinating body, or the federal government should also be available and may be extremely useful. Rather than reinventing the wheel, use evidence easily obtained and already collected to guide change efforts. The same offices that regularly collect and/or disseminate information also may be willing to add one or two questions to an annual campus survey or to report their findings in a slightly different format. On some campuses, data may be closely held or not easily accessed. Change leaders need to ascertain who has the information, assess their willingness to share it, and determine how best to allay any fears that the information might be used in a harmful way.

**Do not get hamstrung by incomplete information.** Even before all the evidence is in, trends can usually be discerned. Because the purpose of collecting evidence is to make progress on change and to account for results (as compared to student outcomes assessment or accountability assessment), there may be times to celebrate success before all the data are in. But such celebration should be done carefully, because false statements can seriously hurt leaders' legitimacy and credibility. Change efforts can become derailed because of demands for too much information. Excessive calls for more and more sophisticated data can prevent institutions from moving forward. When opponents call for unrealistic data, change leaders have to determine how to use existing data and to move forward.

## Challenges to Determining Progress

Collecting evidence regarding transformation and change should be understood throughout the campus as a formative process and as an integral part of an institution's overall approach to change. This is not always understood, however, and challenges exist to determining progress on a change agenda. We observed the following challenges to determining progress:

- **Assessing** progress may be a diversion from **making** progress because time is finite, and spending time on assessing progress may mean spending less time engaging the campus or making the case for why this effort is important.
- Change leaders may have more to lose than gain from determining the impact of their efforts, especially early in the process, because the effects of strategies are often far easier to determine only after some time has passed, rather than when changes are underway. If the results are less than expected, leaders may become discouraged and begin to question the investment of their limited time and energy in the effort.
- Opponents might see a poor assessment as justification for opposition to change. Findings of limited progress would provide them with ammunition for their negativism.

- Individuals dislike being the bearers of bad news, especially if it must be delivered to campus leaders or board members. If the evidence paints a less than positive picture, people may consciously or unconsciously distort or omit some of it, giving a false sense of accomplishment.

Other challenges most likely exist. The literature on outcomes assessment might be useful to identify other challenges to collecting data that advance institutional agendas.

In spite of these challenges, which occur when assessment is understood to be primarily or exclusively summative instead of evaluative, it is possible to find evidence of change helpful in the continuous process of leading transformation. With proper forethought and planning, institutions can make finding evidence an integral part of their change strategies.

## **Conclusion**

Metropolitan university leaders face the difficult challenge of leading change in highly complex, and potentially chaotic, environments. Knowing where the institution began its change and transformation efforts and where it is at a later point in time are crucial to advancing a change agenda and to acquiring the learning necessary to change and change again. Learning cannot occur without the feedback provided through solid evidence. Change agendas can gain needed momentum from well-presented data. Evidence can help institutional leaders overcome opposition and gain needed commitments both inside and outside the institution. Evidence can demonstrate that changes were needed and that new activities and priorities are paying off. Because collecting evidence of transformation is difficult and deciphering the relationships between actions and outcomes challenging, the act of intentionally collecting evidence to support a change agenda is even more essential.

Understanding how much change has occurred, what strategies brought about the improvements, and the results of those changes on the institution's urban role are essential knowledge for metropolitan leaders. Leaders play important roles in representing their institutions publicly and embodying institutional values and priorities to internal stakeholders. They are the spokespersons for the institution, presenting its accomplishments and ideals to the community. A key function of leaders is to make the case for change, create a sense of momentum needed to break free of the status quo, and respond to unsubstantiated criticisms. Having solid evidence to support statements is an essential part of effecting transformational change.

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