

## Leadership and Change

There's an old joke in higher education that goes like this: "How many faculty does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: "Change, change?" The story illustrates a common perception that those of us in higher education are particularly resistant to change.

I would argue that the truth is more complicated. The fact is that human beings don't like change. Whether in work, relationships, or daily living, we seem to have a natural resistance to change. Maybe it's built into our system. Evolution may have given us tools to cope with the present, not the possible. Yet at this moment in human history, in a world that is rapidly changing, we need to be prepared to change, and change rapidly to adapt to this very different environment. No where is that more true than in higher education. We have witnessed incredibly rapid changes, particularly in public higher education: declining funding, loss of control, and rapidly grow competition. And we face a chorus of criticism that we are resistant to change.

And yet, we are not alone. Indeed, I would argue that we are no more resistant to change than any other sector. Think about the impact of technology on journalism...Rocky Mountain News; on the music business...Tower records; on the photography business... Kodak; on the book publishing/selling business...Borders Books.

As human beings, most of us have a hard time imagining the future and what it might portend. Most of us simply are not good at change. Clay Shirkey, a wonderful commentator on the age of technology, describes what happens when new products, businesses or processes threaten an existing enterprise.

"But do we realize the impact in time? Once you see this pattern—a new story rearranging people's sense of the possible, with the incumbents the last to know—you see it everywhere. First, the people running the old system don't notice the change. When they do, they assume it's minor. Then that it's a niche. Then a fad. And by the time they understand that the world has actually changed, they've squandered most of the time they had to adapt. 1

Clearly Clay Shirkey could be talking about traditional higher education as innovations, such as MOOCs, threaten to disrupt our core business. Yet we are not the first to be surprised by rapid changes in technology. The companies I listed above were all victims of technology, or more accurately, victims of the inability of their leaders to anticipate the impact and consequence of new technologies. And technological disruption isn't just a phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For example, consider this headline in the Washington Post, Spring 1900, just before its first auto show in December 10, 1900.

"Horse Market Active. Effect of Automobile is Not Feared by Dealers. It Is Looked Upon Only as a Fad" 2

The point of these examples is that human beings are by nature reluctant to change, not just those of us in higher education, and not just those of us living in this new age. Most of us, no matter what our business, are predisposed to resist change. So it is probably not helpful, particularly as leaders in our institutions, to lament our lack of enthusiasm for change. That attitude can stifle creative leadership.

Instead, armed with the knowledge that resistance to change is a natural condition, I think institutional leaders can be much more effective in fashioning strategies and approaches to change that invite participation and decrease resistance. In fact, I would argue that the people in our institutions are hungry for leadership that involves them in a process of change. Many of us are deeply worried about the future of traditional education, and want to see bold, imaginative leadership to address the crisis we are experiencing.

But leadership alone is not enough. On the more than 100 campuses I have visited over the past 10 years, I also see enormous numbers of bright, capable people who are trapped by the structures, policies, and practices of their institutions. To prepare us for the transformations that lie ahead, I think we need more than just bold and imaginative leadership. We also need to find spaces on our campuses for experimentation and innovation, free of the administrative and regulatory shackles that limit our ability to create new models and new approaches.

These are scary times. At every turn we read about layoffs, consolidation, and foreclosure in higher education. Moody's continues to downgrade the financial health of many institutions. For some, the future looks bleak. Yet I believe that with creative leaders at many levels, and with opportunities for innovation and experimentation, our institutions can not only survive but indeed thrive in this new era.

1. Napster, Udacity, and the Academy. Clay Shirkey (blog post). November 12, 2012.  
<http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2012/11/>

2. Washington Post, Monday, February 4, 2013 John Kelly's Washington