

Creating Context for Consensus

By David G. Brown and Sally Jackson

Every sort of practice within the college and university has been changed by the growth of the World Wide Web and related technologies. More profound change is highly likely, some of it unintentional. A central question for higher education administration is how to lead change in profitable directions and avoid getting committed to anything that could prove unhealthy for the institution.

Advice on directions is plentiful but inconsistent. Campus visionaries insist that investment in new technology will stimulate unprecedented organizational advancement, while other experts, both academic and technical, protest that organizational change should not be technology driven. Both public and private institutions face pressure from outside interests, again divided between proponents of

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technology spending and skeptics who doubt the return on investment.

Put as broadly as possible, the leadership challenge is not how to draw recalcitrant faculty into compliance with already chosen directions but how to cope with competing impulses within the campus community. How do we move from a position in which everyone has a different fixed idea about the changing higher education landscape to a position in which the community as a whole can move forward with confidence?

Two Cultures

Understanding the role of two powerful expert communities found on every campus is key to our purpose. We refer to the information technology (IT) community, whose members are mostly technologists, and the academic community, whose members are mostly faculty. Each community has its own distinct culture, with distinct values, and each of the cultures enjoys great prestige and intellectual authority when not in conflict with one another.

The two communities have clashed on the issue of how aggressively to push the incorporation of technology into teaching and learning. Despite the undeniable historical fact that many faculty embraced Internet technologies a decade or more ahead of the business sector and general public, IT professionals have regularly painted the faculty as resistant to technology and as obstacles to change—that is, resistant to the directions

championed by the IT community. Faculty, for their part, have resisted pressure to invest time and money in unproven enterprises, and they rightly point out that those pressing for experimentation with unproven technologies are not the ones whose time will have been wasted if it fails. The two cultures are also hobbled with views of one another that prevent much influence of one by the other.

IT professionals believe in the transformative power of technology. Many are convinced that learning is less effective than it might be because we have not yet adopted enough of the right technology in the right places. They are advocates for greater investment in technology, greater use of technology, and more assessment of the impact of technology on learning.

Some faculty believe in the transformative power of technology, but most probably do not. Where teaching and learning are concerned, some fear that technology has the power to destroy teaching, not only as an activity but also as a profession, by reducing or eliminating personal (that is, face-to-face) contact between faculty and student. Individualized teaching and scholarship seem to IT professionals to be a luxury. They believe in work teams made up of diversified specialists, outsourcing, and joint authorship. Faculty culture is highly specialized but less reliant on explicitly negotiated team roles. Intellectual work in the academy is gen-

erally a lonely, solo enterprise, where the quality of work can be adequately judged only by equally specialized peers at other colleges and universities.

Because the IT culture is attuned to the integrated functioning of the whole organization, it is much more inclined to recognize the need for some organizationally legitimized decision making. In a world where choices are virtually infinite, technological innovators understand the importance of focus and of decisions that concentrate resources and effort.

Faculty culture, by contrast, is highly balkanized, a cacophony of specialized languages, with each faculty member speaking and thinking in idioms that relate more to the work of his or her discipline than to the general culture. Academics trust others who understand and speak their language. They live in a culture of local autonomy with each disciplinary subculture free to make its own choices about the value of any new idea.

Presumptions Concerning Change

One important point of similarity between IT professionals and faculty is a fascination with new ideas. Both cultures value creativity and openness to intellectual and material progress. However, even this key similarity provides only limited common ground for the concrete decisions to be made about technology, because the two cultures differ deeply in their presumptions concerning change.

Where change is concerned, two broad presumptions can be recognized as taken-for-granted operating principles of the two cultures. The first, known in argumentation theory as the *liberal presumption*, sees change as opportunity for invention and advancement and accepts large numbers of failed innovations as the cost of pushing forward. The second, the *conservative presumption*, sees change as something to be controlled through deliberation. Change must be justified in terms of something demonstrably wrong or in terms of some demonstrable benefit.

One important point of similarity between IT professionals and faculty is a fascination with new ideas.

(For a general discussion of presumptions, see Goodnight, 1980; for a discussion of the role of presumption in public argument, see Gaskins, 1992.)

For technology innovation and related issues of teaching practice, the conservative presumption demands evidence of benefit from incorporation of technology into teaching. Faculty operating from this viewpoint want to avoid wasting time on changes that will not bear fruit, and they tend to accept assurances of the value of change only from sources who clearly understand the demands of faculty work.

Technologists operating from the liberal viewpoint see experimentation not as a waste of time but as a necessary condition for innovation. Because they do not generally understand how faculty reason about the value of various professional activities, they often adopt strong secondary beliefs about the importance of changing the faculty reward structure to favor experimentation with new teaching practices.

Because of these presumptions about change, the two cultures differ in some striking ways that create actual or felt tension between them. Surveys of IT professionals commonly identify faculty resistance as a problem to be solved in moving their campuses forward, and faculty commonly complain that the IT organizations on their campuses are uncritical in their enthusiasm for every new trend. These differences in perspective are important to understand in the creation of a climate favorable to innovation.

Providing Leadership to Manage the Cultural Tension

Without some transcendent process or perspective, these differences generate irreconcilable expert opinion and impasse. Campus decision makers need to be able to look at technology issues from a broader view than that provided by either of these two cultural perspectives; they need to be able to under-

stand why something that appears self-evidently desirable from one perspective can appear undesirable or even threatening from another. Even more, campus leadership needs to be able to define for itself a mediating role that uses this tension between two professional worldviews to encourage deeper reflection on campus goals and strategies. Skillful management of discourse can create an opportunity to elevate everyone's thinking through expansion of argument around the points of deep disagreement. Our problem is to set aside both presumptions about change and construct a discourse in which the burden of proof is evenly distributed between proponents and opponents of any particular change.

For the conservative presumption, change is justifiable only once evidence is available for its benefits. This means that we have effectively ruled out change, because to get the evidence of benefits, we must first make a change. Ignoring the justifiability of technological innovation, the conservative presumption can be pushed to its limits by pointing out how it protects itself from dealing with any relevant experience.

For the liberal presumption, we have no way to predict the sweeping changes within an academic community that might result from changes that appear at first to be only technological. It is the unknown risks that remind us not to push an academic community beyond steps that can earn authentic campus consensus.

Two basic rhetorical objectives for academic leadership, then, are getting all parties to understand that some level of risk is necessary simply to conserve our values under changing conditions and getting all parties to understand that some changes do not appear as improvements *and in fact might not be improvements*. Neither change nor stability is presumptive: change is not assumed to represent progress, but neither is it held accountable to an impossible burden of proof.

Leadership Strategies to Consider Last, Not First

A dangerous but common framing of the leadership question is, "How can we get the faculty to do such-and-such?" How can we get the faculty to incorporate technology into the classroom? How can we get them to develop distance courses? This liberal presumption framing gives preference to one set of values, treating the activities as self-evidently desirable and the communication task as one of gaining compliance. When the communication task is seen as compliance gaining, the most common strategies are those that sidestep the difficult problem of changing beliefs: edict and incentive.

The dangers of edict are well known. Mandating that all faculty will have a Web presence for each course and requiring all faculty to develop distance courses are inflammatory actions to faculty. Faculty accept few mandates concerning teaching. Consensus on required Web publication of course materials is out of reach for now, given the many associated issues of academic freedom and intellectual property. Edicts that get too far ahead of faculty support for an idea are rarely successful, except in stimulating the invention of all kinds of clever strategies for non-compliance.

The dangers of incentive are subtler. Offering incentives to faculty to do what they do not value intrinsically has two disadvantages. First, it isolates individual faculty from their intellectual communities, inviting them to search elsewhere (for example, in faculty development committees and groups) for social support. This is exciting at first but does not usually offer the intellectual resources needed to sustain a disciplinary teaching and research program or the professional network needed to advance an academic career.

Second, it communicates unintentionally that the activities for which the incentives are offered are off the budget—outside the faculty member's full-time obligations. In research universities, the offering of incentives for

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extra teaching activity is practically certain to draw down research effort. And because these are more likely to attract faculty with flagging interest in research, they do little to elevate the prestige of the activity.

Incentives can be structured to avoid some of these dangers, but this requires a good deal of thought. Heavy reliance on incentives does not look as authoritarian as issuing edicts, but it has the same strong whiff of arrogance about it: the untested presumption that some new direction is desirable and the willingness to “get our way” without actually persuading anyone that our way is best.

Leadership Strategies to Consider First, Not Last

Neither the liberal nor the conservative approach appears attractive as a first-line strategy. What does appear attractive is persuasion occurring through critical discussion (that is, debate) with very broad participation offering diversity of views. This is not preliminary to change but a continuous process that creates conditions as favorable as possible to new thinking. The national Carnegie Campus Conversations project, for example, is designed simply to increase opportunities for faculty to talk about teaching (and about the scholarship of teaching), on the assumption that these conversations will produce a new consensus on the relationships among the professorate’s various obligations.

Stimulating debate is not easy. It is unnatural to say, “I’d like to get us involved in a virtual university consortium, but let’s see what the faculty think,” and all too natural to say, “I’d like to get us involved in a virtual university consortium if I can just get some faculty buy-in.” The questions animating discussion should be about goals, not means. Before figuring out how to participate in a virtual university, for example, we need to provide the opportunity to decide not to participate at all. This is especially true when administrative goals are far ahead of

faculty consensus. Those visionary goals may mean that the leaders are exercising leadership, but it may also mean that they have overlooked issues of real concern.

How do we stimulate debate and other discussion? What we want is active private and public conversation about goals and values, and that takes place only when the issues themselves take hold. Issues are more likely to take hold if we frame questions to enlarge debate, avoid premature closure on any controversial issue, and participate as proponents rather than as judges.

Frame questions to enlarge debate. Debate can be made narrow or broad, inclusive or alienating, depending on how its topic is framed. Questions about change should be framed to reflect the achieved consensus of the campus accurately. Unless a university already has reached consensus on the desirability of virtual universities, “Shall we participate in the statewide virtual university?” is a better framing of discussion than, “How can we increase our ability to participate in the statewide virtual university?”

Avoid premature closure on any controversial issue. Open, unrestricted debate is fundamental to science and scholarship, and in our scholarship we almost never close debate in any permanent sense. In practical affairs, we close debate when time runs out on a decision or when it appears that no further progress can

be made. Usual means for closing debate are voting and adjudication. Although we should not expect to reach complete consensus on issues involving technology directions, we should be slow to close debate, slow to resort to votes, and especially loathe to make decisions that render further debate pointless.

Participate as proponents rather than as judges. Leadership sometimes requires a risky personal commitment to a direction for change. Nothing we have said so far is meant to suggest that leaders should appear undecided when they have in fact formed an opinion about a direction for change. Addressing the campus as an audience to be enlisted into a standpoint is different, however, from addressing the campus as an audience to be informed of a decision.

Talk and Action

In identifying debate as a strategy to try first, not last, we may seem to be suggesting indefinite delays in experimentation with new technology on campus. That is not what we mean. We envision a strong communication component in every large or small step, making each practical task perform double duty as an occasion for education and persuasion, not just for faculty or for technologists or for administrative leadership but for all sectors of campus. To illustrate this, we return to the question of when and how to use incentives to change the faculty’s calculations about what is worth doing.

Our problem is to construct a discourse in which the burden of proof is evenly distributed between proponents and opponents of any particular change.

A common strategy is to offer money or other goods in return for specific acts of compliance, and many instances of this strategy appear to confirm that it works. We have raised several objections to anything like this. We now point out how incentives can be structured instead to open up discourse around change while simultaneously moving forward in ways appropriate to the level of campus consensus on change.

Consider grants for instructional innovation. These look like a straightforward implementation of an incentive strategy and, moreover, like an incentive strategy geared mainly to innovators and early adopters. But this depends entirely on how the grant program is organized and what sort of discourse space it opens. Every grant program can do double duty for a campus as a communication campaign designed to draw attention to some particular set of issues. Understood this way, the design of a grant program becomes more important even than the amount of money spent.

Grant programs have several design features that can be tweaked to create much greater potential for stimulation of discussion—and to accommodate the differences in interest and value of the IT and faculty cultures. First, every grant program should have a recognizable issue agenda that proposers must address. Structured as proposal preparation guidelines, these present an opportunity for the designers of the

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program to raise campus consciousness about specific issues on which movement toward consensus would be desirable. For example, if a grant competition requires explicitly formulated theories of how the proposed innovation will affect learning, faculty accustomed to writing research grants to adapt to programmatic requirements will delve into topics in learning theory that they would otherwise never trouble to explore.

Second, every grant program should be understood as an opportunity to educate or influence a group of reviewers. The review panel should be considered an audience. What is most important in choosing this audience is not their competence to review, but the value to be gotten from their exposure to new ideas embedded in grant proposals. Showcasing funded projects is a good strategy for spreading innovations; involving a very large number of proposers and reviewers in talking about specific new ideas is a great strategy for spreading innovations.

Third, most grant programs should be made competitive, even when resources are not limited. This has two points: to communicate that experimenting with instruction is creative activity that may be judged qualitatively and to equip some segment of campus with knowledge and values needed to make quality judgments. Peer review is preferable in most cases, since it ensures that

the work a faculty member invests in the activity is noticed and acknowledged by faculty colleagues. But even more important is the opportunity that peer review presents for movement toward consensus on the value of the activity and the dimensions along which it can be evaluated. In other words, a grant program should not simply select award recipients but should also educate faculty on how to evaluate innovation, so that creative teaching activity can also be recognized in other contexts, such as promotion and tenure.

Fourth, whenever possible, review processes should be designed to promote discussion. If grant programs are construed only as ways to distribute funds, a discussion-intensive review process will appear costly and inefficient. If grant programs are construed as communication campaigns, the reviewing itself is one of the most important events. Reviewing processes may be structured to promote or inhibit discussion. Having reviewers rate proposals and aggregating the ratings to determine awards does not stimulate discussion. Having reviewers meet to discuss proposals and make consensus-based recommendations is more effective in stimulating the sort of talk that leads to shared evaluations. Beyond the quality of decisions made, this review process gives every reviewer substantial new opportunities to talk about technology in teaching and to deepen his or her understanding of the state of the art.

Fifth, grant competition may be accompanied by broadly participative discussion of internal funding priorities. The process of deciding where next to spend money is an opportunity to draw together diverse members of the campus community to build consensus around a bigger picture. Including both technologists and academics increases the opportunity for both sides to articulate their abstract positions on change. For example, both change supporters

and change skeptics share an interest in assessment.

What we have illustrated here for the design of instructional computing grant programs might also be illustrated for many other similar programs. The point of this discussion has not been that change can be stimulated through grants, but rather that any activity related to change can be structured to stimulate talk and support practical action simultaneously.

Conclusion

How we communicate is itself an important element of culture and an important determinant of the health of a community. We have argued here for treating the leadership of campus transformation as a kind of communication campaign, carried out with whatever resources (like grants) come to hand. But we have also tried to make a more subtle point: that leadership is responsible for creating conditions in

which a campus may decide *against* change.

Belief in the transformative power of technology has certainly passed the tipping point in higher education. Not everyone agrees, however, that transformations through technology are desirable. Nor does everyone agree on what is to be transformed. We have no consensus, nationally or on most campuses, about even fundamental issues like whether to invest in classroom technology or distance technology—that is, whether to use technology to transform teaching and learning on campus or to use technology to support true anytime-anyplace learning. Proponents of the transformative power of technology frequently conflate these two possibilities as though they amount to the same thing.

These differences are not an obstacle to change in practice but an opportunity for two resourceful expert communities to improve and deepen one another's thinking. Until true consen-

sus over directions is achieved, the most important task of leadership is to create conditions for serious, sustained critical discussion, occurring not before or after particular decisions but all of the time. *e*

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