



## When the Box is All You Know: Leadership, Change, and the Academy

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*Leaders in higher education are well aware the critical issues they face—relevance, value, and sustainability. They are working to navigate an educational landscape that is complex and changing, and seeking to craft responses to these issues. A major concern, however, is the extent to which leaders are both equipped for, and willing to address, some of the major critical challenges facing the academy. Recent survey data suggests no shortage of activity at colleges and universities. The question is whether “out of the box” solutions are even possible given the culture of higher education.*

A recent report from The Chronicle of Higher Education focuses on contemporary challenges in the academy and the ways in which leadership is responding to them.<sup>i</sup> The document is based on a survey of almost 1200 leaders in higher education—mostly presidents and provosts, divided almost evenly between public and private not-for profit institutions. It reveals considerable anxiety about institutional missions and financial stability and also reports on ways in which leadership is responding to these challenges (p.4).

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Interestingly enough, despite the elements of doom, gloom, and crisis embedded in the survey responses, the report is optimistically titled “Reinventing the Academic Enterprise: College Leaders Consider the Challenges of the New Era.” It cites an overall stress on institutional planning, more focused activity and the search for sustainable economic models at institutions as part of the solutions being crafted. It asserts that making innovation meaningful is “one promising way to navigate the shifting, confusing, but also promising new world of American higher education.” (p.23)

But when we scratch the surface of the report, there doesn't appear to be much innovation present. What we're left with is the sense that the academy's leadership, while well-intentioned, is largely seeking to tinker at the edges of the academic enterprise and ignores the more fundamental structural challenges present.

And a recent commentary from a consultant at AGB's Institutional Strategies consulting group confirms the idea that new models are certainly needed, but higher education appears challenged to create these models.<sup>ii</sup> The analysis from Jim Hundrieser is cogent and compelling.

He notes that for private colleges, the status quo is untenable over long term. The reasons can be grouped in four areas:

- ∞ finance
- ∞ demand
- ∞ limitations of raising tuition
- ∞ demography

In financial terms, he notes that only about 10-15% of private colleges have sustainable models based on diversified revenue streams and strong endowments. The rest of private institutions are tuition dependent and increasingly incapable of making ends meet. Part of the challenge relates to consumer demand. Hundrieser notes that students today expect a range of high quality services, including but not limited to technological ones. They also expect the types of relevance and support that can lead to demonstrated outcomes after graduation. These expectations mean escalating costs for colleges and universities, placing a further drain on finances. But given the outcry over the public perception of the cost/benefit equation for higher education, it also increasingly problematic for institutions to continue raising tuition to cover rising costs. And, as a final issue, demographic trends predict that enrollment growth will be marginal compared to 80's and 90's.

None of these factors are unfamiliar to professionals in the academy. Why, then, are responses so anemic? Hundrieser identifies some critical roadblocks.

In the first place, he asserts that there is a lack of institutional will to make critical and fundamental alterations to current models. No matter the lip service regarding change, most institutions engage in innovation at the margins and never really address core issues.

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And in some ways this should not be terribly surprising. Institutional leaders are largely the products of the types of organizations they now lead. The Chronicle's latest *Almanac* indicates that new CEO's in the academy came from outside higher education in just under 10% of the cases.<sup>iii</sup> This suggests not only that the culture of the academy as a whole is slow to change, but is also largely self-replicating and self-satisfied. Its professors and administrators are products of the system now in such dire need of change. They value it and they like it—as I once remarked about faculty, they liked school so much that they never left. And the same is largely true of administrative leaders. They understand the complexity of the academic machine, its customs and rhythms. And they value it in its current manifestation because it has rewarded them. After all, most were educated in the academy's graduate schools and have risen through the ranks of educational management. This suggests that the organizational world view, the cultural prism through which the academy's leaders view reality, is one that reflects the status quo in higher education

This dynamic creates a somewhat insular mindset in which bright and well-meaning leaders are largely inward focused, overwhelmed by operational challenges on a daily basis and without a real grasp of some fundamental issues. A good example: the *Reinventing the Academic Enterprise* report shows that the leaders surveyed thought that adapting systems and software to mobile devices was something that they believed had high costs and minimal benefit and thus should be avoided (p.16). Prudent in the short term, but inward (and backward) facing. The fact of the matter is that communications technology is digital and increasingly mobile. When we look, for example, at a recent survey of online college students<sup>iv</sup> we learn:

*Ninety-eight percent of online students own some form of smartphone or tablet yet just one-quarter of current or former online students completed all or most of their online courses exclusively on a mobile device, with an additional one-third (34%) completing some of their coursework via mobile. Two-thirds (67%) of prospective online students expressed interest in using their mobile device during their online studies. Opportunity for mobile learning is expected to continue growing given that almost all online students own a mobile device (p.49)*

Data suggests that student participation in online learning is growing, that the use of mobile devices is growing, and that consumer preferences are increasingly shaped by the types of immediate digital access typical of mobile devices. There thus appears to be a disconnect between what students will want and what higher education leaders believe they should provide them.

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Hundrieser also notes that private institutions often exhibit poor strategic planning and follow through. While the Chronicle's report on "reinvention" also indicates that strategic planning is an important part of the academy's current response to challenges—84% indicate new efforts in this area (p.14)—the survey's details on new initiatives constitute part of this "strategic" response are not encouraging.

Hundrieser is critical of what he terms a "more or grow mindset" that stresses new programs as an answer to challenges. Yet this appears to be a major portion of the strategic response outlined today—we note that the Chronicle survey in *Reinvention* indicates that 53% of respondents indicate that they are planning new schools, colleges, or programs. While new program development may be part of comprehensive strategy, particularly when they align with institutional strengths and are in demand, this alone is not enough.

Traditional students seek diversity in engagement experiences, as well as programs and allied services that make them career-ready on graduation. Non-traditional students (a misnomer, since almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of contemporary college students share some characteristic of what has been labelled "non-traditional") seek low cost, efficient and well-organized programs with career relevance.

Yet the top three ideas mentioned by leaders as they “reinvent” higher education are:

- ∞ to increase undergraduate enrollment
- ∞ launch online and hybrid programs
- ∞ increase graduate enrollment

It’s a list that is not breathtaking in its innovation. While leaders deserve credit for a grudging acceptance (finally) of new delivery modalities, note that what they are mostly focused on doing is essentially more of the same.

The final indicator of the intense and almost deep gravitational hold that the culture of the academy exerts on leadership is revealed in the *Chronicle* survey of presidents that sought to understand ways on which they are responding to challenges. Much of their focus, as we already know, is on new program development. What is really telling, however, is that when asked for what they would ideally do to meet their challenges, and providing them with a hypothetical situation where there were no potential negative consequences of their actions, presidents remained largely reluctant to make major changes on their campuses.<sup>v</sup>

*...we are like clockmakers, intent on repairing the delicate mechanism of a watch, while our old clients desert us to stand in line at the Apple store.*

Granted, higher education is a complex enterprise: a staid culture confronted with a fast changing world; a crowded and competitive market filled with small institutions, highly similar to each other yet desperately seeking distinctiveness; and a limited range of options available, most of them costly in fiscal or political terms. Above all, this institutional box has at its center a core fidelity to learning in the abstract, not contemporary relevance to the lives of students. All of us in the academy’s leadership value learning (rightly so) and what it has done for us and our colleagues (perfectly understandable). But I would urge caution about a belief that the system works just fine (or would with perhaps some minor tweaking). What we sometimes have difficulty seeing or imagining is the ways in which the system fails to address emerging demands and needs at both societal and individual levels. In this we are like clockmakers, intent on repairing the delicate mechanism of a watch, while our old clients desert us to stand in line at the Apple store (for as my children tell me, my smart phone will tell time as well as make phone calls).

When the box is all you know, it’s hard to imagine operating outside of it.

### **The Author**

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<sup>i</sup> Wildavsky, Ben. 2016. Reinventing the Academic Enterprise: College Leaders Consider the Challenges of the New Era. Washington DC: Chronicle of Higher Education

<sup>ii</sup> Hundrieser, Jim. 2016. The Impetus to Transform: Private Colleges Need to Develop New Business Models. Retrieved from [http://evollution.com/managing-institution/higher\\_ed\\_business/the-impetus-to-transform-private-colleges-need-to-develop-new-business-models/](http://evollution.com/managing-institution/higher_ed_business/the-impetus-to-transform-private-colleges-need-to-develop-new-business-models/)

<sup>iii</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2016. Almanac 2016-2017. Washington D.C. August 19, 2016. Volume LXII, Number 43, p.17

<sup>iv</sup> Clinefelter, D. L. & Aslanian, C. B. 2016. Online college students 2016: Comprehensive data on demands and preferences. Louisville, KY: The Learning House, Inc.

<sup>v</sup> Selingo, Jeffrey S. 2015. The View from the Top: What Presidents Think About Financial Sustainability, Student Outcomes, and the Future of Higher Education. Washington D.C.: Chronicle of Higher Education