Synergism and Speed

I am fortunate to lead an extraordinary institution: Empire State College, one of the sixty-four institutions of the State University of New York (SUNY), the largest comprehensive system in the United States. I am surrounded by talented and dedicated employees, and we have much to be proud of as an institution of open learning, one that thrives in an era of “open everything.” Most important, in the undergraduate and some graduate programs at SUNY Empire State College, learners work with faculty mentors to design individualized degree plans that integrate previous and emergent formal and experiential learning. Integration of the learners’ studies with their external worlds and with the vast array of open educational resources is understood and encouraged.

Our learners are the original “EduPunks.”1 And in an era when, as my friend Elliott Masie likes to say, learning is more about getting smarter than about getting a degree, all of these approaches, plus the emergence of stackable credentials, would seem to position our institution ahead of those still trying to understand what disruptive innovation actually looks like.

So, what keeps me up at night? During a forum with faculty to discuss the strategic direction of the college, one bright-spark faculty member in Labor Studies noted that the most common reason for a revolution is unfulfilled expectations. He thought I was promising a lot with my long-term vision, and he advised me to be careful. This advice came back to me as I prepared for a January 2012 workshop, jointly sponsored by EDUCAUSE and the Center for American Progress, focusing on the largely unfulfilled expectations of information technology to truly transform higher education and to fundamentally distort the iron triangle of access, cost, and quality.

Sure, there are plenty of examples of individuals or departments and even institutions that, through innovation and some fundamental rethinking of the instructional model, effect real change. However, the oft-cited examples often seem to be institutions that do not have tenured faculty, recognizable academic freedom, any system of serious shared governance, or even, sometimes, a comprehensive array of academic offerings. As a devotee of public education at all levels, I believe these characteristics are foundational to sustaining academic quality and integrity, and I do not think that they, in and of themselves, inhibit effective change. In fact, academic autonomy and the freedom to challenge the status quo stimulate innovation and new approaches to everything. Academic freedom does slow things down occasionally, but often for good reason. (I’ll say more about speed later.)

From a leadership perspective, what is hard is leveraging innovation beyond the small pilot or boutique system into something that can be shared and scaled up and widely adopted in order to extend the richness and reach of institutional offerings. Time and again, I learn about individuals or small groups doing some wonderful work, such as new instructional practices or innovative uses of information technology, only to find that similar work is being done elsewhere in the college in an effort to solve the same problem. Across the SUNY system, the same is true for the sixty-four campuses and their individual uses of information technology in instruction, with little evident synergism.

The question then is, how can we encourage synergism? It is in the nature of most academics (and campuses) to want to figure things out for themselves, even though the benefits and efficiencies of collaboration and sharing would seem to be obvious. Certainly in most disciplines, conducting research without collaboration and extensive sharing is nearly impossible. In fact, the first and essential step in any potential research is to exhaustively search for what everyone else has already said or done and to connect with those in that research community. Surprisingly, this does not often happen routinely and rigorously when it comes to instruction, although some good work is emerging on how to scale up change through networks and incentives and the use of intermediary organizations.2 We are looking at this approach at SUNY through the establishment of Open SUNY, a space for collaboration and innovation in open and online learning across the system.

The problem of synergy in instruction is likely exacerbated by distance. For example, SUNY Empire State College has thirty-five locations around the state and eight abroad, with a rich array of face-to-face instructional modes plus extensive online offerings that use many adjunct faculty who are themselves widely disbursed. We thus need to use information technology not only to deal with the iron triangle for the learners but also to support and foster collaboration across distances and disciplines. We need to provide sharing and innovating spaces that are open, robust, and intuitive.
Ensuring collaboration and effective change is not just about the technology, however. We have the wherewithal, and intention, to design the best kind of open-learning system, one that provides places for faculty and learners to collaborate across the college and beyond. We do this by accessing open educational resources, building digital portfolios that integrate prior and emergent learning, supporting communities of practice, and stimulating relevant research and scholarship. But “build it and they will come” is not enough. Leaders must get back to the basics of leadership: motivating and building trust; creating a working environment where sharing, collaboration, and innovation are supported and rewarded; obtaining the funding needed to support people properly as they take risks; and being prepared to openly measure and discuss the impact of it all. When leaders can demonstrate success, they also must become enthusiastic braggarts about what has been accomplished as they set off to seek funding for the next round of innovation.

I think we are taking all the right steps at my college and across the system for synergism. But I also worry about speed. That clever TV advertisement that shows a 4G-connected smart aleck having the scoop on office gossip over his 3G colleague (“that is so 27 seconds ago”) is disconcerting. Technology is moving rapidly, and the industry is adept at raising expectations and making money without regard to the ability of the human soul to adjust. Some observers have commented on the mismatch between the pace of change and the rate of human adaptability.1 I do not see the pace decelerating, nor do I see a decrease in expectations for the impact of information technology on higher education.

Part of my collaborative leadership thus involves having conversations about whether our focus on enabling higher education to create access and quality at low cost, thereby supporting workforce and economic development, misses the much larger issue of “why”? But I digress. This discussion should continue elsewhere, maybe in a future issue of EDUCAUSE Review: “The Doomsday Edition”?

Notes

Alan Davis (alan.davis@esc.edu) is President of SUNY Empire State College.

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