Embracing Failure to Spur Success: A New Collaborative Innovation Model

On college and university campuses across the United States, we’re surrounded by a resource that leads to discovery, innovation, and growth—yet we don’t embrace it at the leadership level. That resource? Failure.

Failure is happening every day in our labs and classrooms and is essential to the learning and discovery process in both settings. As our research scientists attempt to make breakthrough discoveries, they run through repeated trials that fail to deliver the hoped-for results, but each failure provides another clue pointing in the direction of a solution. In classrooms, we encourage students in every discipline to question and analyze the information we put before them. Have we ever criticized them for being “wrong”? Not at all. We congratulate them on having the courage to ask new questions, and we encourage them to keep going.

Despite all this healthy respect for failure on our campuses, we tend to shun it in academic administration. We’re keen to tout our successes: our latest enrollment figures, entering class qualifications, job placement numbers, or alumni engagement. But when we don’t succeed, we are inclined to keep that information to ourselves.

The implied message is clear: We’d prefer not to talk about what isn’t working at the postsecondary level.

We’re in a competitive sector, and there is misplaced pressure on all higher education institutions to achieve top placement in U.S. News & World Report and other annual rankings, regardless of whether or not those rankings make any sense. We all feel significant pressure to make sure that our constituents—from board members to faculty to parents to legislators—are happy with the direction of the institution. And we also know that those constituents can be impatient in waiting for substantive change to produce positive results. Honest discourse on new initiatives that seem unproductive or in need of modification is likely to lead to unpleasant conversations that few of us would relish.

This is not the way to foster innovation and improvement in higher education. The best innovators in the world typically follow the mantra that failure is acceptable, helpful, and sometimes even necessary to ultimately achieving an objective. Many of the products we rely on today, from Post-it Notes to pacemakers, resulted from mistakes or failures in the search for other innovations. And just about any founder of a successful Silicon Valley startup has a track record of ventures that failed.

Successful innovation requires experimentation and learning from failure. A corollary to the mantra that failure is acceptable is that an innovator should fail fast—in other words, if your new project isn’t working out, you should acknowledge when the results you expected aren’t being produced, figure out why not, and then incorporate that information into your next attempt.

Acknowledging and embracing failure is tough to do. It can discourage the people who worked hard on a project and delay them from moving in a new direction; it can require letting go of favored projects or even acknowledging that previous criticism turned out to be well-founded after all.

All college and university leaders want their institutions to have the capacity to make breakthrough advances in all aspects of their mission. We want our colleges and universities to welcome more students from diverse backgrounds. We want to raise our graduation rates, especially for students who have traditionally graduated at lower rates than their peers. We want to find innovative ways to use technology to expand accessibility and enrich the learning experience. We want to make degrees and credentials more affordable for students and their families. We want our students to have transformative learning experiences. Collectively, our greatest wish is to fulfill the ambition of every parent to see his or her child have a foundation for a meaningful and rewarding life. At the same time, the ambition of every policymaker is to see the United States maintain the most innovative and well-trained workforce in the world.

Many institutions are making progress in these areas. Yet the progress could be even faster and more dramatic if we did two complementary things: collaborate with each other across campuses, and embrace, share, and learn from failure.

At the University of California, Riverside and Oregon State University, we are engaged in one effort to achieve these goals: the University Innovation Alliance. The UIA is a consortium of eleven major public research universities that are working together to identify new solutions to challenges found throughout the higher education community, and then to share information about failures and successful solutions among institutions. (More information about how we came together and what we hope to achieve can be found in the article “Innovating..."
Together: Collaboration as a Driving Force to Improve Student Success, published in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review.

Chief among the objectives of the UIA is to raise the graduation rates for all students, but particularly those from underserved communities, at UIA institutions. We will develop and employ a variety of methods to reach this goal, starting with the innovative use of data analytics to identify students in need of academic, financial, or other interventions and then providing targeted help to keep these students on track toward graduation. Innovations that prove successful at one university will be transferred to other institutions, with partnering universities working hand-in-hand to achieve success. In ten years, we envision awarding degrees to more than 68,000 additional graduates, with more than half of these additional degrees earned by low-income students. Along the way, we hope to develop a collaborative innovation model for the higher education community.

The commitment to share the lessons learned from our failures as well as from our successes is a critical element of the UIA collaboration. Being open about what hasn't worked at one institution can be enormously helpful to another one facing similar challenges, since avoiding pitfalls and dead-ends can save time and money—two resources that are always scarce.

Candor of this type requires trust; thus, much of our early work within the UIA has been about building a community of trust. The eleven universities participating in the UIA have agreed on a set of shared goals and are committed to helping each other meet those goals. That common commitment includes a continuing set of frank conversations within the membership about our successes and our failures.

Importantly, the UIA has buy-in from the leaders of all participating universities. This produces two benefits. First, it sends a signal to the entire campus administration and community that collaboration and innovation are to be prioritized and that sharing lessons learned from failure is not only acceptable but essential. Second, it enables every president and chancellor participating in the UIA to build a network of peers to discuss our separate and common challenges and concerns and to get valuable, honest feedback. Our intention is to grow that network to include colleagues in comparable roles (Provost, Undergraduate Dean, Registrar, etc.) across our schools.

Many universities are generating positive results from innovations on their campuses. UIA members want to take the great ideas that are working at their individual institutions and expand them to serve many more students. Just as importantly, we want to create a culture of innovation that encourages new thinking, acknowledges failure, quickly analyzes the results of failed efforts, and stimulates great ideas.

Although we have high hopes for the UIA and anticipate many successes, we know we won't succeed at everything we try. And we'll be stronger for it.

Note

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