The Messy Human Core of Reinventing Higher Education Institutions

Discussions of business model reengineering and innovation in higher education tend to focus on program design, technology, and on delivery, organizational, revenue, and outsourcing models—along with the myriad other moving parts of the modern organization. Even though traditionalists and romantics would rather not think about these questions, which they view as a neoliberal “corporatization” of the academy, getting the organizational questions wrong can imperil the academic mission for which all colleges and universities exist—especially in these turbulent times for higher education. Still, for those of us who are thinking hard about innovation and new business models, two critical components are too often missing from our discussions: people and culture.

That’s because people and culture are messy and sometimes irrational. It’s easier to sort out new delivery models or to restructure or adopt a new technology than it is to change the organizational culture or improve (or remove) poor-performing individuals. But here’s the thing: the very best organizational models are doomed to failure if staff talent is not good and if the culture is poor, whereas high performers and the right culture can produce amazing results even with a poor organizational model. Peter Drucker’s quote “Culture eats strategy for breakfast” is repeated often, but if we stop to think about the countless conferences, symposia, and convenings (when did we stop having “meetings”?) that take place in higher education, we’ll quickly realize that very, very few are dedicated to people and culture. In part, that is because there is no one right culture—that powerful mix of values, assumptions, ways of interacting, beliefs, power, and communication—for higher education and also because reshaping these most entrenched organizational qualities takes time, intentionality, clarity, and relentlessness. In other words, doing so is very hard work.

I’ve learned this lesson the hard way. Occasionally, after enthusiastically announcing or launching a new initiative, I have seen it struggle because I had asked the wrong people to lead or implement it, or because I had not aligned the culture with the idea (or vice versa), or because I had not made clear how the initiative reflected the shared values and mission of the institution. On the other hand, the best successes at my institution have come when we have aligned talent, values, beliefs, and communication around an initiative and have then let people run with the initiative (“ownership and accountability” are key values in our culture). Once, after the dean of a very famous school within a very famous Ivy League university had spent a day observing the student success efforts at SNHU, he commented: “It’s not in our culture to support students the way you do. We’d fail at it.” I’m sure this is not for lack of smarts, or resources, or good intention. At SNHU, our culture is built around fostering success for students for whom success might not be assured, whereas the culture at his institution is built around educating students who had already demonstrated ample success.

Here, then, are some questions for leaders to consider when rethinking an institution:

- **Is there broad agreement on core values and mission?** So often, mission statements are lengthy, watered-down, hard-to-measure lists of platitudes designed to accommodate every stakeholder’s wish. In other words, they are neither clear nor useful. Moreover, mission creep and status chasing often create institutional confusion and discord. Trying to be too many things to too many people often means doing too few things well and not serving one’s market as well as one might. In contrast, when mission and values are widely understood and agreed upon, focus and alignment can become real drivers of institutional success.

- **If the core values and mission are clearly defined, communicated, and embraced, does the institution measure the right things, recognize and reward the right behaviors (i.e., those that support the mission most fully), and hold people accountable for those behaviors?** At the SNHU traditional campus, we have reaffirmed the “coming of age” mission, and we give merit bonuses to faculty members who go out of their way to support that mission outside of their teaching responsibility. For example, two faculty used their spring break to take twelve students to a national park for hiking and camping and then facilitated a powerful campfire discussion among Iraq War veterans, Muslim students, and others—a discussion that changed attitudes and that will stay with the students for years to come. Faculty members like that deserve extra rewards, and we shine a light on that kind of performance. In another example, if a stated core value is responsive support, but students have to navigate a cumbersome bureaucracy to get things done or stay on hold for twenty minutes when calling with a
financial aid question, the institution is falling short. Having struggled with both problems in the past, now we work to streamline processes, and we measure call waiting times.

- Does the Human Resources (HR) Department help lead the effort? Today's HR departments have very full plates with policy development and implementation, compliance, payroll, benefits administration, hiring and firing functions, and more. But in the best organizations, HR takes a leadership role in developing talent and stewarding the culture—work that plays out in hiring and onboarding the right talent, creating professional development programming, and establishing appropriate reward and recognition structures. Here's a simple question: Do HR directors sit at the institutional leadership table and report to the president? If they don't, they can still be quite effective, but if they do, that's usually a good sign that the organization puts people and culture at the forefront of its efforts.

- Is innovative thinking being applied to finding new hires and talent? There are so many smart and talented people in higher education, but there are also so many smart and talented people in other industries. Those of us in higher education tend to be a bit smug about how “special” our world is. Some of my best hires have come from the military, banking, IT, and corporate worlds. Although it might take some of them a while to get fully up to speed, they bring fresh perspective, thinking, and approaches to the challenges we face. The “can do” attitude of the veteran, the compliance mind-set of the banker, the innovative problem-solving instinct of the IT professional, and the sense of urgency from the corporate person have all been very useful influences on our culture.

- Is internal talent being identified and developed? Many of our most important leaders at SNHU have risen up through our ranks, but not by accident. We bring a full array of resources to identifying and then developing talent, including our merit program (which identifies and rewards high performers at all levels), our selective Pinnacle Program (a yearlong leadership-development program), executive coaching for individuals, staff retreats, and even brand value competitions. I often invite visitors to walk around campus unescorted and ask any university employee about our mission and core values. I know that 99 percent of those asked will talk about ensuring student success, serving those for whom college is not a guarantee, and transforming lives. None of them will talk about our organizational model, but they all know the reason we exist and are passionate about it.

Again, the most important point is that in thinking about business model reorganization and innovation, institutional leaders need to think as hard (or harder) about people and culture. They need to think about culture as an ecosystem and all the ways to address its component parts. For example, if an institution wants to innovate but discourages or punishes making mistakes, it won't matter who is hired, since getting something wrong is often an important part of getting things right when it comes to innovation.

People and culture make up a complex system that can lose its way, become dysfunctional, surrender integrity, or get distracted. At my own institution, our increasingly decentralized model allows each business unit to develop a distinct culture, but I now also see that we need to remind everyone of our overall values and of the ways we are one. As a result, this fall we are launching a “One University” campaign internally. Cultural maintenance is hard work indeed, and it never ends. But when we align people and culture and values and talent with the work being done, we can transform higher education institutions.

In other words, people are not one important factor in success. They are the most critical factor.

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