AHEE Interview with Daniel Seymour | December 2017

Daniel Seymour is the author of nearly 20 books in higher education and business. His recent books that relate directly to the mission of AHEE include the best-selling *Momentum: The Responsibility Paradigm and Virtuous Cycles of Change in Colleges and Universities* (2016) and *Future College Fieldbook: Mission, Vision, and Values in Higher Education* (2017).

His forthcoming book, *The Institutional Effectiveness Fieldbook: Creating Coherence in Colleges and Universities* (with Michael Bourgeois), will be released early in 2018.

Daniel was interviewed in December 2017 by AHEE Board of Directors member William E. Knight.

WK: Throughout your recent publications you have used the term coherence in discussing the current challenges and promise for a brighter future for American higher education. In the *Institutional Effectiveness Fieldbook* you say creating coherence is the organizing principle of the book. Can you please explain what you mean by coherence, why it is an important concept for today's higher education environment, and how it relates to institutional effectiveness?

DS: The basic structure of colleges and universities is a series of cubbyholes. The large ones involve business operations, student services, and then academic affairs. Then within those we fragment further. In the academic area we have centers, institutes, schools and departments. We love to specialize. We also love our autonomy. While this has certain advantages, it also comes with significant costs. Most importantly, it is tough to develop a vision for the institution—*What do we want to create?*—when the individual units are empowered to push and pull in all different directions. And then, of course, you have the further challenge of aligning strategies to help the institution achieve that illusive compelling, shared vison.

Coherency is a useful concept when thinking of a response to this cubbyhole problem. It comes from the Latin root meaning "to stick together." Successful groups and organization are cohesive. A sports team, for example, with a collection of individual stars doesn't often win. It is the team that has great chemistry and coordination that wins. They stick together. An orchestra is another useful illustration of the importance of cohesion. As institutions of higher education, we too can become more coherent through increased interdependency, integration, and information flow.

So who is in charge of advancing coherency at college or university? Well, the only person who traditionally has the requisite field of vision and cross-functional responsibilities is the president or chancellor. And we know that in today's environment our CEOs are often focused on fund-raising and political challenges.

That is where an integrated Institutional Effectiveness office and its leader have huge roles to play. It isn't a vertical command and control function but, instead, a horizontal integration function—or a cubbyhole coordination function.

In fact, we go so far as in the book to refer to a senior-level IE position as the Chief Coherency Officer.

WK: In the book *Momentum: The Responsibility Paradigm and Virtuous Cycles of Change in Colleges and Universities* you discuss the importance of higher education moving from a paradigm of being held accountable to one of taking responsibility for virtuous cycles of change. Would you please discuss the importance of that transformation and how it relates to institutional effectiveness?

DS: This is closely associated with coherency. Why is it important that we, as higher education institutions, become more coherent? It is largely because of how our stakeholders have interpreted the gap between a dynamic environment and our non-dynamic responses. Most people would agree that the pace of political, economic, social, and technological changes in the environment is increasing. It is a high-velocity environment.

Our traditional organizational structures, in contrast, involve the care and feeding of those cubbyholes—or, more technically, loosely-coupled systems. They thrive on independence and autonomy. But here is the current challenge: Cubbyhole structures do not work well in complex, unstable environments and they do not have much capacity to develop and pursue a focused, integrated strategy.

This breach between what we perceive we do and how others perceive us is being interpreted as elitist, intransigent, and anachronistic. And the result? We need to be held accountable. We need to be fixed.

I believe we need to shift to a paradigm of demonstrating responsibility. It is a shift from being defensive and reactive while operating in an adaptive mode to one that recaptures the essence of thriving by operating in a more generative mode that helps create our own future.

Sounds great! Right? But exactly how do we do that? An integrated Institutional effectiveness function is the key to moving towards more moderately-coupled systems, ones that can, in effect, create coherency and structural advancement.

WK: Within the *Institutional Effectiveness Fieldbook* you present the IE Triad Model. Can you please elaborate upon the elements of the model, the need for it, and the role of various stakeholders within it?

DS: Perhaps the largest, most immediate, challenge associated with IE is a definitional one. How can you advance it as an antidote to being held accountable by others if you can't define it? A number of different individuals and groups such as AHEE have taken a shot at a traditional definition—a formal statement of explanation.

The IE Triad Model comes at the definitional question from a different angle. It asks, "What are the key components of institutional effectiveness from an operational perspective?" or "How would we recognize it?"

We think there are three components. First, IE would be able to identify, "A set of elements that reflect the most important questions about an institution." This immediately gets us out of the one-size-fits-all conundrum. Next, IE would have, "The ability to treat the elements (or questions) as whole rather than as separate parts." This strongly implies that IE is the glue associated with how things "stick together." And finally there is, "The commitment to encourage reflection and respond to the elements (or questions) as part of an on-going process that drives organizational learning and continuous improvement." Organizations that learn are replete with feedback loops and IE is the function that should be charged with the responsibility for enhancing that information flow.

So, IE (1) asks important questions, (2) uses systems thinking, and (3) pursues continuous improvement.

A final note here is that every regional accrediting agency now has standard and language associated with institutional effectiveness. The IE Triad Model was developed to align with the various definitional or interpretational differences among them. Campus-based IE and regional accreditors need to have synergistic alignment. And our model helps achieve that.

WK: Please discuss the distinction between institutional research and institutional effectiveness from your perspective and why many institutions have developed an institutional effectiveness structure that includes institutional research as one of its components.

DS: My co-author, Michael Bourgeois, and I have had a lot of discussions about this. He is a social scientist with strong data management skills and has served in institutional research roles at University of California Santa Barbara and now at California State University Channel Islands. I am an organizational development type and my last administrative position was as Vice Chancellor for Planning and Institutional Effectiveness at Houston Community College.

I know he concurs with the approach that is taken by Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in its *New Vision for Institution Research*—a shift of IR from service provider to a network model. The emphasis is on developing an expansive decision support system for the institution.

I come at their roles from an organizational learning perspective in which feedback through IR processes is a requisite, core concept. The visual schema is a bullseye with IR at the very center surrounded by assessing student outcomes, program review, and accreditation in the outer rings. Strategic planning is the outermost ring. IE, to me, is the whole gestalt of these concentric rings.

Indeed, if you review the IE Triad Model it acts as the natural integrator for functions which historically have existed in their own separate cubbyholes. IE gives them visibility and

expanded purpose in institutions and I think that is why there is a movement to bring them together.

WK: What are the challenges associated with pursuing an institutional effectiveness agenda and how can they be mitigated?

DS: We spend a lot of time on this subject and have identified seven specific challenges. We go into detail on each in the final chapter. The first one is "Loss Aversion." This is about inertia and change but addressed as a psychological dimension—we care much more about losses than gains and we are willing to fight hard to avoid them. So, it is easy to understand how some people see an integrated IE office as a threat to their turf. My co-author uses the term "border guards" to refer to how some individuals view their role in colleges and universities.

Another challenge is "Skilled Incompetence." This comes out of the decision sciences literature. As people gain success in their specialized fields they tend to over value their own experience. A cognitive bias develops such that they feel less and less need to question assumptions. They quite literally begin to cut themselves off from their own learning. In such situations the IE function is not seen so much as a threat but as a lower-level priority since feedback is irrelevant if you already have all the answers.

Other challenges include "Administrative Bloat" and "In Name Only." The former is the tendency to interpret any expansion of the administrative structure as a zero-sum subtraction from the ranks of the professoriate, while the latter describes the propensity to slap the name and title "Institutional Effectiveness" on an existing "Institutional Research" office without fundamentally rethinking the function.

We then offer a set of responses to each of the seven challenges.

WK: What are the most important areas of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for staff members doing (and particularly leading) institutional effectiveness efforts and how can AHEE facilitate practitioners' acquisition of these capabilities?

DS: Actually, this is one of the seven challenges—"Skills Gap"—enumerated in our book. We speak to a lot of soft skills—interpersonal communications, facilitation, and consensus building—that go far beyond the technical skills associated with the narrower IR job responsibilities. Christine Leimer has a wonderful list of personal characteristics in a *Change* article from several years ago that include sensitivity, open-mindedness, flexibility, a capacity to listen, a sense of humor, the ability to build others' self-confidence and motivate them, creativity, team-building and problem-solving capacities, a thick skin, a tolerance for ambiguity, and patience.

We really emphasize the professional development component to all of this. The reason we call our book a *Fieldbook* is because it is a combination of a strong research and disciplinary base of a book and a pragmatic workbook format. To that end, we included almost 20 pages of

Resources (articles, books, websites, conferences) associated with this expansive view of institutional effectiveness.

In addition, it is important to encourage cross-pollination. If you have always attended AIR conferences, you might consider sitting in on Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) sessions on strategy planning. If student outcomes assessment is your focus, consider reading about learning organizations and continuous improvement.

How can AHEE facilitate this skill development? The organization has sponsored some research reports—white papers—that have been posted on its site. I certainly would encourage more of that. The listserv has been increasingly active. One of the recent questions generated a really great discussion: *How can institutional effectiveness professionals work effectively with supervisors and/or Cabinet-level personnel when the IE leadership is not at this level?*

It might be appropriate to take a more formal approach to this activity; that is, identify a board-directed question every few months, curate the responses, and then post them on the website for current and future use by members.

Of course, this type of targeted one-on-one exchange is always helpful.

Thank you.