

Leading Academic Transformation

Scenario

Harriet is CIO at a mid-sized state university that for a long time has had relatively low—if steady—rates of degree completion. As a non-selective institution, the university accepts most applicants, and a growing proportion of the incoming students each year are unprepared for college-level work. Meanwhile, state funding has declined significantly, even as expectations are rising for student success as measured by course and degree completion. The university hired a new president six months ago, and he quickly began working on a plan to reverse the downward trends and put the institution on a sustainable path, academically and financially.

At the core of this transformation is what the new president, Randall, calls “partnered leadership.” He sets a firm course for the institution by putting one question down as a stake in the ground for all senior administrators to consider in every decision: “Will this help our students learn and earn degrees?” Insisting that the longstanding silos were incompatible with the university’s future, Randall proposed new governance structures that require real collaboration between the provost, deans, business officers, financial aid, and IT. The university joined several national programs whose missions are to develop and pilot new educational models, including pedagogies, credits and credentials, and services to support students far more holistically than had been done before.

Harriet and leaders from other units around campus find the changes unsettling and exciting, challenging them to think differently about how they approach their responsibilities as a group of leaders working as partners. Harriet quickly finds that she has greater access to the provost and faculty but also a different set of obligations for students and their learning. She develops a deeper understanding of financial aid and the business office than before. Harriet long supported the notion that technology should ultimately support learning, but not until these changes began did she really understand the benefits (and drawbacks) of adaptive learning tools, integrated advising systems, and various other services. She recognizes that academic transformation requires new levels of cooperation and collaboration, and she begins building coalitions on campus that will support the teaching and learning challenges ahead.

1 What is it?

Higher education’s teaching and learning mission is under significant pressure, both internally and externally. Technology creates new opportunities and raises expectations for what is delivered, how it is delivered, how much it costs, and the outcomes it produces. Students and other stakeholders are seeking learning experiences that increase success in course and degree completion and enable smooth entry into the workforce. **Higher education is exploring a reorientation around learner success** through new course models, learning space designs, and ways of assessing academic progress. Transformations range from incremental and tactical to disruptive and strategic, and none can succeed without excellent leadership.

2 What moves academic transformation forward?

Stakeholder-Centered Design: Higher education must meet the expectations of stakeholders, and some institutions are embracing proactive measures to learn about those needs. They are moving beyond surveys to in-depth individual and group interviews and immersion with stakeholders in their environments.

Relevance: Relevance is one of the strongest external pressures for institutions to make changes. Students, families, and employers want to see how academic endeavors support learning goals and connect to work. Workforce preparation increasingly includes skills needed to succeed as a learner, such as listening, self-management, persistence, and empathy. Degrees and credentials that allow students to demonstrate skills and provide meaningful data on which to make employment choices are hallmarks of academic transformation.

Sustainability: Leading academic transformation calls for a focus on outputs. Successful leaders advance institutional missions, set financial goals, and meet stakeholder expectations. Institutions are also reconfiguring roles to be efficient while improving the student experience in both traditional and nontraditional programs. For faculty, this can mean focusing on the interaction that students desire in ways that promote learning and personal development.

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Strategic Use and Development of Technology: Technology plays a key role in advancing academic transformation. Existing and rapidly developing technologies such as predictive analytics and business intelligence analytics promote data-driven decisions among students, faculty, advisors, and institutional analysts. Personalized learning—whether asynchronous learners working through competencies or learners using adaptive technology—affords new opportunities.

Cross-Functional Teamwork: A hallmark of transformation is cross-functional teams. CIOs need to be in conversation with CFOs, provosts, presidents, faculty, instructional designers, enrollment, and financial aid. The conversations are often surprising and empowering, creating greater awareness of abilities to support one another. Effective leaders devote time and attention to making sure that cross-functional relationships are healthy and productive, and they prioritize the work of those teams.

Culture, Climate, and Change Management: Significant innovation requires attending to the culture of an institution and applying change management principles. Starting with a clear vision of where the initiative will take the institution, effective leaders practice active listening and use what they learn to guide the effort, clearing stumbling blocks and engaging potential champions and thoughtful skeptics. Successful efforts pursue short-term wins that can be communicated to the institution and among partners. Implementing transformation involves many unknowns; change leaders acknowledge this and seek to provide answers where possible and spur continued investigation. Leadership must also maintain the priority on the strategic goals of these initiatives and continually seek new supporters.

3 Who's doing it?

Colleges and universities from across higher education are involved in academic transformation efforts. For example, several dozen institutions have participated in the [NGLC Breakthrough Models Incubator](#), a program for leadership teams to explore and launch new business and learning models. As part of the [Competency-Based Education Network \(CBEN\)](#), more than 30 institutions are “working together to address shared challenges to designing, developing and scaling competency-based degree programs.” The American Council on Education announced a [Change and Innovation Lab](#) that will “lead selected institutions through a planning process focusing on leadership practices, faculty engagement, and smart use of data.” The [Mosaic Active Learning Initiative](#) at Indiana University supports faculty and students as they move toward educational models that embrace active learning.

4 Why is it significant?

The pressures on higher education put certain institutions in a difficult position, and pundits have suggested that some institutions will shut their doors in the coming years. Expected outcomes and financial models have changed significantly, and small, tuition-dependent institutions, in particular, may face an uncertain future. With stakes this high, the incentive for higher education to transform is strong and urgent. **Academic transformation has the potential to restore higher education's sustainability and bring renewed levels of excellence and student achievement.**

5 What are the downsides?

New models often challenge existing cultures and governance. Without sufficient planning, change can result in anxiety and resistance. Many of the processes best suited to transformation, such as [design thinking](#) and [service blueprinting](#), require a mindset that may be difficult for academics to embrace. Although failed efforts can be opportunities to learn, institutions need to carefully weigh the risks against the intended benefits.

6 Where is it going?

Most academic transformation initiatives include the revision of roles, development of new roles, and new norms of interaction and decision making among stakeholders. To support these efforts, **EDUCAUSE is launching a [Leading Academic Transformation](#) community of practice**, designed for senior campus leaders who advance their institution's teaching, learning, and student success mission through the innovative use of technology. The community will have many [opportunities](#) for participants to share ideas, examine questions, explore successes and challenges, and understand the complexities of managing change with a cohort of partners. In a time of transformation, higher education has the opportunity to revisit and rethink how it approaches its core mission of teaching and learning.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Teaching and learning is the most common target for academic transformation. Many faculty are rethinking their courses as they explore new modes of delivery and experimenting with technology-enabled enhancements. Faculty development programs are being redesigned to be more accountable and to see faculty as adult learners, offering development that addresses their need to create successful learning engagements. Students, too, will have new tools and options to assist them in their coursework.