

Why Change is Hard

Overview

Higher education is undergoing significant changes due to disruptors such as technology, social and economic inequalities, and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while change is essential, individuals and organizations often resist it. Heart attack survivors demonstrate that even when lives are at stake, only one in nine patients will change their lifestyle. For higher education, the individual level resistance is compounded by factors such as institutional policies, procedures, and practices. There is also an organizational level resistance to change in higher education that is amplified by its "loosely coupled" structure. The challenge is that change, especially transformative change, is difficult to sustain. Universities produce vast amounts of data, but this data is often not used to inform decision-making. Universities face challenges in capturing and integrating data streams, determining data governance and privacy policies, and investing in data infrastructure and trained staff. While these issues are significant, they need to be addressed if higher education is to move forward. Overall, transformational change is essential for higher education, but individuals and organizations must be willing to embrace it.

Introduction

Turbulent times for
Higher Education

These are turbulent times for higher education. There are many accelerators and disruptors that are driving change, especially transformative change. These disruptors include the use of technology; overcoming educational, economic, and social inequities; new ecosystems for work; large-scale change efforts that impact the entire organization; financial distress and declining public support; climate change; and pandemics. While each of these serves as a catalyst for change, taken together, they provide major challenges. *Transforming for Turbulent Times: An Action Agenda for Higher Education Leaders: Norris, Donald, Gilmour, Joseph (Tim), Baer, Linda: 9781794856974: Amazon.com: Books*

While higher education is often viewed as slow to change, the major impact of the Covid pandemic required dramatic accelerated responses. Institutions that were already strong in online programs, delivery, and support services did better during the massive institutional shutdowns of physical spaces.

Within weeks, colleges and universities determined plans to contact students, training in skill sets for designing and delivering programs online and developing technology services and support for students and faculty. This rapid pivot created a massive impetus for change that some had been resisting. It reflected the major component of change, a sense of urgency.

What is Change?

Change is when the factors and circumstances of a person or organization become different from the previous conditions and procedures. This occurs due to dynamic situations and experiences that prompt new actions or requirements on the individual organizational level." *How To Adapt To Change in the Workplace (6 Methods) | Indeed.com* As this definition suggests, there are issues relating to change at both the individual and organizational level.

Challenges in Individual Change

In *Change or Die!* Alan Deutschman illustrates most humans' powerful aversion to change by citing research on heart attack survivors. According to this research, only one-in-nine patients will change their lifestyle to reduce their health risk. If resistance to change of this magnitude occurs in life-threatening situations like this, think about how much more difficult change will be in situations that are not perceived to be as dire. *Amazon.com: Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and in Life: 9780061373671: Deutschman, Alan: Books*

In higher education there is an extra layer of resistance on the individual level. Faculty willingness to change is muted by the protection tenure provides and their greater commitment to their academic discipline as contrasted to their college or university. Other dynamics that serve to protect the status quo are evident in existing institutional policies, procedures, and practices that will need to be carefully reviewed if substantive change is to be accomplished. These situations can provide us with insights about how to approach change on an individual basis. A clear internal motivation, a cost benefit ratio that includes the benefits of change, a detailed plan to stay on track, monitoring progress and celebrating accomplishments are important factors for individual change. Maintaining the change is the next step. This is a critical step where individuals work towards long-term change, while resisting the tendency to return to old behaviors and practices. Realizing that change is not a linear process but rather a cycle of activities helps individuals stay on track.

Organizations and Change

The individual aversion to change compounds the sense of the resistance to organizational change. It is extremely difficult to sustain change and even more difficult to sustain transformative change. Organizations, through the people in the organization, take the resistance to change from the individual level to the total system level. In the article "*Smart Change' for Turbulent Times*" (Baer and Duin, 2020), the authors describe the compounding nature of change when we move to the organizational level. Organizations are faced with change all the time; routine changes, targeted strategic changes and transformative changes. With this increased complexity, often with elements of conflict, the difficulty of change can grow exponentially. Further change at the organizational level is even more difficult in higher education because of its "loosely coupled" structure (Weick, 1976). In an *Administrative Science Quarterly*

article Weick describes loose coupling, which is widespread in education, as a situation where the connections between the various parts of an organization are weak and where collective, centrally guided action is much harder. Clearly this reality significantly increases the difficulty of bringing about change, much less transformation.

Challenges in capturing and using data for decision-making

A study reported in 2022, *"Data Blind: Universities Lag in Capturing and Exploiting Data,"* conducted by UCLA School of Education and Information Studies professor Christine L. Borgman and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Press publisher and director Amy Brand, found that universities face serious challenges in capturing and using various data streams on campus, and these negatively impact decision-making ability. While "universities produce a wealth of data in various departments across campus, such as 'faculty research, prospective students, research funding, higher-education policy trends, and competitive intelligence about other universities,' said the study's authors, coordinating all of it and making it available for use in decision-making has met significant barriers. Findings relate that tensions exist among stakeholders regarding who has access to particular data, appropriate uses of data, and mechanisms for data governance, privacy, and integration," said the study's authors." "Reasons vary, but the main challenges are owing to a lack of investment in data infrastructure, centralized databases, and trained staff; concerns about corporate control of academic platforms and analytics; privacy, security, and risk management, especially at universities that have medical departments needing to comply with government regulations; and friction among university departments." Study Finds Universities Slow to Integrate and Use Data in Strategic Decision-Making -- Campus Technology These issues related to data collection, access, governance, mining, and use must be addressed for campuses to launch and sustain change initiatives.

What do we know about why change initiatives fail?

Researchers have studied change initiatives. John Kotter, well-respected professor from Harvard University, tells us that about 70% of all change efforts fail. Given that there are many dedicated, smart, diligent people framing the long-term strategies of our colleges and universities, why so few victories? His conclusion is that leadership is seldom prepared for the tasks that allow Kotter's 30% to succeed. "Change leaders must craft a process that is attentive to campus culture, inclusive in nature, is transparent and honest, and measures the right things." Essay on the challenge of leading change as an administrator (insidehighered.com) In a study of 280 large and middle size organizations from North America, Europe, and Asia, researchers reported that employers felt 55% of change management initiatives met initial objectives but only 25% felt gains were sustained over time.

- 87% of respondents trained their managers to manage change but only 22% felt the training was effective.
- 68% of senior managers said they got the message for change, but this fell to 53% for middle managers and 40% for front-line supervisors.

These are disappointing figures and seem to show, unsurprisingly, that the lower down you go in the organization, the less informed and therefore less engaged employees are. (27) *Why change initiatives fail and what we can do about it!* | LinkedIn

What Can We Do About It?

Factors affecting long-term success

There are several important factors affecting the lack of long-term success in change initiatives. Philanthropic organizations have reviewed the dismal record of funding innovations that aren't sustained. These organizations want to know how to better invest in sustainable change. People go into change projects with good intentions. Great programs, services, and equity initiatives have been developed over time. The main problem is in sustainability and having a robust plan for sustainable change. Lessons learned include the importance of time to incubate new ideas; shifting the narratives to change perceptions, attitudes and policies; realizing that more long-term investments are needed since change agendas take time, and measuring and monitoring impact. *Change Takes Time - And The Philanthropy World Needs To Keep Up!* (forbes.com)

In addition, research suggests that some of the reasons for failure of change initiative include the fact that goals are not realistically attainable, that leadership is not at the forefront of driving the change; that senior managers talk the talk but don't walk the talk; and middle managers and supervisors are not sufficiently informed or understand the changes needed; management wants quick fixes and don't understand that implementing change is a long-term effort. (27) *Why change initiatives fail and what we can do about it!* / *LinkedIn*

Kieffer (2021) addresses why change is so hard for higher education. He lists several factors including the breadth of function, roles, and skills in higher education. He points out that education is looked at by administration and staff as not being a business—but it is. Faculty are focused on their specific academic pursuits, not the larger picture of change in higher education. Higher education is a consensus driven culture based on mission. *Why Is Change So Hard for Higher Education?* (thetambellinigroup.com)

Kieffer points out that several things have changed over the last decade that have influenced change management practices in higher education. These include communication methods, digitization, digital personas and pressure to change.

In conclusion, Kieffer calls on leaders to become expert change agents who pay close attention to the goals of their transformation and the methods used to bring the faculty, staff, and students to an understanding of the goal, the rationale, and their part in it.

Leaders need to become expert change agents who pay close attention to the goals of their transformation and the methods used to bring the faculty, staff, and students to an understanding of the goal, the rationale, and their part in it.

1. Determine metrics, strategies, and activities to support new goals. Invest in systems that support data collection, governance, retrieval, and use.
2. Describe the factors that require the change and the expected benefits.

3. Understand the ecosystem of change that requires assessment of the change impact on policies, practices, and performance.
4. Develop a change plan strategy map with key stakeholders' involvement, activities, responsibilities, and timelines.
5. Communicate regularly across the organization.
6. Provide adequate training, talent, tools, and resources to support the plan.
7. Determine that the change plan is for the long term so that the organization moves from sustaining to thriving.

Change is hard and not for the faint of heart! It takes a deep understanding of why individuals and organizations resist change. It takes a systematic approach with the view on the long-term implications. Insights into how to better sustain change is necessary in this transitional moment for higher education.

Norris, Gilmour and Baer. (2022) Transforming in Turbulent Times