

Developing and Enhancing Outreach Leadership Among Department Chairs and Directors

Universities exist to serve people. When they stop doing so, they become self-serving and move toward obsolescence. According to Rick Foster, coordinator of food systems and rural development at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, higher education has lost credibility with the people it purports to serve, and those people are beginning to look elsewhere for what they need (e.g., private educational providers). People in higher education are looking for leadership and for the will to part with valued traditions and move in new directions.

The systems at work within higher education, such as the reward system, are in place because we have wanted them. The problem is that societal expectations change faster than universities can. As that change accelerates due to new technologies and emergence of competitors, people in higher education tend to fall back on older practices, and the gap between universities and societal expectations grows. As states decrease funding, higher education institutions look for soft monies, giving the appearance that they are becoming less responsive. In turn, legislators who must be responsive to their constituencies react by further cutting back support. We need a new paradigm to cope with the changing environment.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation-funded Dillman Report expresses the public's desire and need for expanded continuing education from higher education institutions throughout their lives. The report validates what many have been thinking and is being used as the basis for developing new programs. "The privatization of knowledge and the extension of knowledge are around the corner," Foster said. At stake is the credibility of the institution to provide for the continuing needs of the society. If institutions cannot meet these needs, others — unregulated and with decreasing standards of quality — will. As evidence of this need for change, the public is increasingly taking advantage of the private alternative sources of continuing education. Universities must accept a view that recognizes competition and provides for collaboration in an era of diminishing resources.

The Kellogg Foundation's Food Systems Professions Education Initiative

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation undertook the Food Systems Professions Education Initiative, which has involved conversations with more than 10,000 people in higher education, to find out how, in the years to come, we will educate people who work in providing food to the nation and the world. Population and soil erosion trends suggest enormous problems for food systems and challenges for preparing those who will work within them. The initiative has as a goal systemic changes to the land-grant system and, educational programs to develop high quality food system professionals.

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An assumption of the initiative has been that, for systemic change to occur, people must become dissatisfied with the system. Today in America, many go to bed hungry. People must have a vision of the future they want. “Whether or not we have an outreach program, I don’t believe is the question here,” Foster said. “I think the question is, what do you want your institution to look like as it interacts with the people it will purport to serve around the issues of the twenty-first century.” People must then determine how they will carry out that vision.

The initiative provided twelve grants to institutions and institutional partnerships to do visioning work. The grants were underbudgeted to encourage institutional resource commitment to the effort. Systemic dollars, not Kellogg dollars, will make the difference over time. They will make further grants after the visioning is done to help institutions and institutional partnerships move toward carrying out their visions. Operating separately, the twelve discrete projects would fail to make systemic changes because the disciplines and professions play a considerable role in the environment. The significant number of participating institutions formed a critical mass: twenty-six land-grant universities in twenty-two states, with community and industry partners, are collaboratively networked to impact the entire system. “If you want to change the system, you have to start everywhere at once.” Collaborative leadership by top administrators played a critical role in developing vision-driven projects, something that approaching faculty alone could not have achieved.

Leadership paradigms in higher education must change. This new paradigm must take the leader out of the authority role to allow others to exert power and influence. Collaborative leadership must invite widespread involvement, particularly by those outside the institution. Department chairs will need to represent faculty at one end, and the pressures to change from outside and above at the other end. The department chair position is pivotal to successful change efforts. “The most critical need is going to be...leadership at that department and faculty level, and the will to put behind us what has been important to us, and have an open vision of what it can be,” Foster concluded.

The Model Unit Leadership Training Initiative

In recent years, Michigan State University has undertaken a variety of initiatives aimed at organizational change regarding curriculum and the integration of outreach. An important conceptual model has been that of multidimensional excellence in teaching, research, and outreach. Departments and schools are viewed as the primary locus of change within the institution. Robert Banks, assistant provost and assistant vice president for academic human resources, also believes that, in this context, chairs are pivotal players in institutional change.

The Model Unit Leadership Training Initiative (MULTI) for department chairs at Michigan State tries to provide a supportive environment for the interaction of chairs with one another and with the provost. The Initiative has two components: 1) a leadership workshop program for chairs and directors focusing on communication and management skills; 2) a model unit demonstration program which provides support for unit-based projects that can serve as models for application elsewhere. MULTI complements other faculty development programs and is funded for a three-year period.

The leadership workshop program begins and ends with a dialogue between chairs and the provost, both in large and smaller group sessions. Workshop topics have included continuous quality improvement, change, conflict resolution, and the use of rewards. The workshops have been well attended and received by the chairs. An important feature of the program is that it provides an unusual opportunity for chairs from around the campus to get together, network, and share information.

The model unit demonstration program awards small grants (\$6000), on a competitive basis, for unit projects that better link faculty roles and rewards across the mission. Selected chairs and directors are named MULTI Fellows. They meet monthly, provide periodic reports on their efforts, and provide feedback on those of other Fellows. Selected demonstration projects have focused on university reward systems; removing barriers to collaborative work; integrating teaching, research, and outreach domains into a more coherent unit mission; and using technology for improving and promoting multidimensional excellence. In pursuing these foci, all projects have touched on outreach. Collaborative projects in urban planning have served Detroit and other communities. Other projects include summer institutes for high school language teachers, creating space for outreach in art, the use of new technology to facilitate reaching larger audiences for physical education and exercise science programs, and the introduction of graduate students to outreach efforts as part of their professional preparation.

The model unit demonstration program, which receives twice as many proposals as it funds each year, has helped uncover the creativity of chairs and directors. Proposals must be developed by teams, thus promoting departmental collaboration. The leadership workshop program has increased the awareness of chairs of the need for multidimensional excellence and for providing richer understanding of faculty roles. MULTI Fellows develop broad cross-institutional perspectives, which serve as a resource for other universitywide committees and groups.

There remain some important issues and problems. MULTI only runs for three years. Unclear is its impact as a diffusion model to spread innovation across the campus. Interest in MULTI has been limited in the natural sciences and the professional schools. Remaining questions relate

to the Initiative's focus on chairs as agents of change and the use of diffusion.

Don Straney, assistant provost for faculty development, is a former department chair. He believes that the position of chair is one of the most interesting in the university, and one in which "novel things can actually get done within a single person's lifetime."

MULTI has begun to develop a sense of community among department chairs by providing a forum not politicized by scrambling for resources, which typically occurs when chairs come together at the college level. It also provides visibility and institutional validation for initiatives the chairs wish to pursue, an important factor for motivating faculty involvement. Such a "university stamp of approval" is more important to faculty than the approval of a dean. MULTI also helps to move chairs into leadership rather than management roles by providing training for visioning and change efforts.

MULTI provides an independent way of knowing about the institution, unfiltered by the interpretations of people in intervening layers of the bureaucracy. Such collaborative awareness makes work more complex by creating new tensions between the visions of chairs and deans, for whom a parallel program is needed. Straney would like MULTI to continue to be funded because it is an effective intervention at the one structural level of the institution where innovation is likely to have an impact.

Discussion and Conclusion

To increase faculty awareness of the trends affecting higher education, chairs must provide leadership. At MSU, one chair organized a year-long exchange about the direction of her department in relation to specific societal events. In another, a chair engaged all of his faculty in a proactive discussion about what the department's undergraduate curriculum should look like in the twenty-first century. Chairs need a creative approach to bearing bad news and generally communicating with faculty.

Kay Moore, chair of the Educational Administration Department at MSU, believes that what faculty are reading outside of professional publications is not clear. Some may be reading nothing. Others seem saturated with informational sources, including e-mail, voice mail, and fax messages. Chairs have traditionally gotten information from administration and "dumped" it on faculty. Better attention needs to be given to segmenting who is attending to what, and more effectively using the media of choice. Foster maintained that "We really don't know how to learn from each other. And we don't know yet what it means ... to be a faculty member in the information age." Given the vast networks for information, we need to be open and communicative, and to rely on colleagues and

respect their contribution to knowledge. Straney felt that the real danger is that information overload will lead us to become too narrow in our focus.

One member of the audience felt that, overall, there are many good managers but few good leaders. Nor do we know how to teach leadership. It seems to depend upon developing shared values, which is a difficult proposition in the diverse university. One university tried to get chairs and deans to better understand themselves, their personal communication, and their leadership styles, in order to be more effective leaders. Straney responded that “at a deeper level we don’t understand the jobs we have gotten ourselves into.” Moore thought that the “culture of faculty is averse to leadership.” “They want departmental chairs to be enablers of faculty goals.”

The audience challenged members of the panel to show that collaboration would continue at MSU after the MULTI funding is exhausted. Is the money all that is holding the collaboration together? Banks replied that MULTI is seed money to get collaboration to be an ongoing part of department activity. Lifelong education at MSU historically had been centralized, with its own faculty. Over time, departments argued that these programs did not meet their needs and sought to bring lifelong education efforts into their own departmental activities. Lifelong education ultimately became decentralized, with differential outcomes. Collaborative leadership from deans and department chairs is critical for lifelong education efforts to be vital and also harmonious with the university’s mission.

How can chairs promote outreach in a fiscal environment where funds for formal programs of research and teaching are eroding? Given the socialization of faculty to value research and teaching, can you place the responsibility on chairs to cause the kind of change we have been discussing? Straney replied, “You can if you approach rebalancing resources incrementally.” Efforts must also be made to show faculty what they can gain from outreach efforts. Chairs must make it clear that they are not asking faculty to add a responsibility, but to expand the range of things they are comfortable doing. This takes time. Demands for overnight change breed faculty resentment.

Moore thought that fast results can be obtained if faculty can “make a collective leap to invest in a new vision.” MSU’s Educational Administration Department faced a clear message from the state legislature that the department’s traditional programs were not meeting the educational needs of school administrators. A whole region of the state made it clear that they would go elsewhere if change did not occur. That motivated the department to make such a collective leap of vision and begin offering new programs immediately, agreeing to wait to work

out the curricular issues until later. Foster agreed that a commitment to a vision of the future must come first. Then you can begin to build capacities to get there. The challenges and changes faced today are a natural development in the evolution of the land-grant university, which must evolve to meet changing societal needs. Moore does not believe that incremental change will produce the results needed. “At some point you have to leap.”