

# LARGE-SCALE INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE TO IMPLEMENT AN URBAN UNIVERSITY MISSION: Portland State University

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**ABSTRACT:** *In response to calls for accountability and effectiveness, public universities are reviewing their missions and are adopting measurable mission-specific goals. An emerging distinctive institutional type is the urban university, an institution characterized by the nature and extent of its responsiveness to the research and educational needs of complex metropolitan regions. This paper concerns the national environment for organizational change, a model for change, and a case study of one urban university that has pursued comprehensive and systemic change in its academic and administrative environment to direct resources to the support of its distinctive urban mission.*

**C**olleges and universities are under a number of pressures, both internal and external, that call for major changes in educational traditions. These pressures include long-term financial constraints, demands for accountability and enhanced productivity, concerns about student learning outcomes and values, and demands from policymakers for higher education to provide solutions to social and economic problems in an increasingly urbanized world.

To build capacity, demonstrate accountability, and enhance programs without additional resources, public universities and colleges must have specific and institution-specific missions and goals.

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**JOURNAL OF URBAN AFFAIRS, Volume 18, Number 2, pages 139-151**

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ISSN: 0735-2166.

Seymour (1989, pp.22-23) summarizes the implications of these pressures:

The result has been a basic change in the fundamental role and function of the American college and university. Our institutions of higher education no longer have the luxury of solitary and extended debates over philosophical issues of the past. They now balance on the fulcrum of today's information-based society and are expected to take a leadership role in defining relationships and creating linkages with industry and government. This linchpin role requires that institutions become more closely related to their surroundings, that they establish ties with multiple organizational sets, and that they coordinate and facilitate the flow of information between and among the organizations... A college or university that cannot change, adopting new ways of meeting changing environmental conditions, is risking its very survival.

Efforts to shape more distinctive missions that better link the resources of higher education to the needs of society necessarily center on the essence of the academic environment, the roles of faculty, the nature of faculty scholarship, and the structure and content of the curriculum. Boyer (1990), for example, proposes that the scope of faculty work can be broadened to reflect the demands of particular institutional missions. Disciplinary and institutional support for a broader repertoire of faculty roles would promote a better match between specific institutional missions and faculty priorities and help higher education regain and hold public confidence.

In the face of growing demands for distinctiveness and responsiveness and sharply declining resources with which to respond to these demands, the strategy of the urban university is to become an engaged campus (Edgerton, 1994), to place the entire institution on a community base, and to develop academic program and research designs that meaningfully connect research, undergraduate education, professional education, and continuing professional education or "professional outreach" together. This integration, achieved through the collaboration of faculty, students, and appropriate community participants, has the potential to expand the resource base available to an institution and to provide a vehicle for the university to respond more effectively to societal demands.

The most significant potential effect of creating a community base for research and teaching is that positive community impact will become a natural byproduct of the research and educational efforts of the entire institution. This model stands in contrast to the usual institutional pattern where community involvement or outreach is assigned either to one or more specific academic programs, such as urban studies, or is managed by a separate outreach arm such as a center or institute, or the cooperative extension, or continuing education units of the campus.

The introduction of a community base across all academic programs is a sweeping challenge. It encompasses the entire institution, its curriculum, administration, faculty, infrastructure, and research activities. Every faculty member, every student, and every staff member is affected.

## **ENVIRONMENT FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

Any thorough review of institutional purposes and accomplishments must, by necessity take place on a background of significant societal change and educational reform from pre-

kindergarten to postgraduate. In brief, recent trends in higher education suggest the following context:

(1) Educational reform will take place in a complex environment composed of local, regional, and national resources, and institutional relationships and influences. No institution, public or private, will be self-contained in the future. In fact, as organizations participate in more shared educational and research activities, it will be harder to assign responsibility or measure the productivity of individual institutions without considering the contributions of partners and the context in which the work is being done.

(2) Significant educational reform must occur throughout an entire system of education in order to be effective. More is now known about how students actually move through the educational system and how far a common educational environment really extends, especially in urban areas. Students often switch back and forth or study at more than one institution in the same term or in the same year. No matter how carefully the educational environment is structured, students are shaping their own educational experience, intentionally or otherwise, by studying at several institutions, sometimes simultaneously. Curricular goals of higher education cannot be fully realized without the cooperation of the schools and community colleges that serve the same students.

(3) Each campus must consider its mission relationship to the environment it means to serve and change as necessary to support collaborative and community-based work. Most especially, faculty must develop credible and comprehensive measurements of the productivity, quality, and impact of collaborative activities, both across disciplines and programs and in partnership with other institutions and organizations (El-Khawas, 1994, 1995; American Association of State College and Universities, 1995).

In works calling for a redirection of faculty attention to a balanced agenda of teaching, research, and service as a tool for articulating distinctive missions, the urban universities are cited most often as possible sources of experience (Boyer, 1990; Elman & Smock, 1985; Elliott, 1994). Urban universities have long been perceived as having a special and consistent commitment to responding to community concerns and as operating with a mission and a scholarly environment that encourages university-community interaction. However, many urban institutions are just beginning to implement the academic changes that will permit full realization of the urban mission (Elliott, 1994; Holland, 1995a). The urban university must integrate the traditional values and goals of the academy with the interests and needs of the local, regional, state, national, or international communities that are primary external constituents and partners of higher education.

This paper presents a framework for institutional change and a case study of the organizational transformation of the academic environment of Portland State University as it has clarified its purposes as an urban university, brought faculty and student activities and institutional purposes into a more harmonious alignment, and utilized the resources and concerns of the external community as core assets of the institution as a whole.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR LARGE-SCALE CHANGE**

Michael Heifetz (1993) has proposed that significant change of any type can be described temporally in seven stages. A change process is initiated when an individual or a

group feels so much discomfort or pressure, either internally generated or externally produced, that change becomes the best option. Once the decision to change is made, by whatever means appropriate for the people involved, the change process unfolds in a similar matter regardless of the nature of the actual changes themselves. The stages defined by Heifetz are as follows.

Phase 1. Choosing the target: identifying the appropriate possibilities for responding to the factors that motivated the decision to change.

Phase 2. Setting goals: defining the purpose, scope, desired outcomes and action plan for the change effort.

Phase 3. Initiating action: launching the first major project or activity.

Phase 4. Making connections: the process of achieving lasting shifts in attitudes and behavior that creates a new environment in which the changes that have been initiated can be sustained.

Phase 5. Rebalancing to accommodate change: the process of adapting other aspects of the organization so that the change can be reinforced and sustained.

Phase 6. Consolidating the learning: the time in a change cycle when a person or group pauses to reflect upon what has happened, what it means, and what the change implies for the future.

Phase 7. Moving to the next cycle: establishing enough momentum to permit the initiation of another major transformation change process.

Heifetz not only characterizes the stages of a change process, but also describes the challenges that an organization will face in moving from one stage to the next. To sustain the change process, an organization must first maintain the interest and commitment of the people who were the first to embrace the need for change, then recruit new groups of people who must first accept the need for change, then understand what has already taken place, and finally undertake responsibility for the next phases of the change process. Generally, change remains awkward and unnatural until very late in the process, perhaps as late as Phase 6, when the process of interpretation and consolidation begins to allow a majority of the members of an organization to map themselves onto the new environment in ways that are both personally and organizationally meaningful.

The case of Portland State University will be presented using five stages derived from the Heifetz model but adapted to reflect that fact that the goal was to transform the institution as a whole, rather than to initiate a change cycle to improve some aspect of the institution and its operations.

The Heifetz model suggests the following stages for organizing the PSU case.

Phase 1. Preparing for change.

Phase 2. Choosing the first targets.

Phase 3. Expanding the scope of change.

Phase 4. Making connections and sustaining change.

Phase 5. Rebalancing the campus.

The institution does not appear to have reached the stage of consolidation (Heifetz Phase 6) and it is not clear whether the process will be cyclic or continuous and, therefore, whether there will be a clear point of distinctive initiation of a new change process (Heifetz Phase 7).

## **CASE STUDY**

### **Phase I. Preparing for Change**

A discussion of the most fundamental purposes of an institution must be based on a clear and specific institutional mission. In describing the major institutional concerns expressed by higher education trustees, presidents, and faculty leaders in 1994, Johnson and Meyer-son (1994, p.23) of the Association of Governing Boards identified mission and strategy among the top five. In commenting on this new arrival on the trends and problems hit parade, they said, "A top concern of higher education leaders for the first time this year, mission and strategy have become increasingly important as colleges and universities attune institutional priorities with political, economic, societal, and technological changes."

To be an effective foundation for change, a mission statement must provide a basis for identifying what the institution really hopes to accomplish and for assessing how successful it is in achieving its objectives.

In 1990, Portland State University (PSU) entered into a period of rapid and necessary change, generated in part by an impending budget crisis set in motion partly by a citizens' tax initiative and partly by the work of the Governor's Task Force on Higher Education that examined the needs of the Greater Portland Metropolitan Area for access to higher education. In November 1990, the Governor's Task Force issued its report which contained, among other recommendations, the suggestion that Portland State University should become an urban grant university.

PSU's new mission statement, which was adopted in September 1991 by the Oregon State Board of Higher Education, reads as follows:

The mission of Portland State University is to enhance the intellectual, social, cultural and economic qualities of urban life by providing access throughout the life span to a quality liberal education for undergraduates and an appropriate array of professional and graduate programs especially relevant to the metropolitan area. The University will actively promote development of a network of educational institutions that will serve the community and support a high quality educational environment and reflect issues important to the metropolitan area.

From the mission statement development process, the core characteristics of an urban research university were derived (Table 1) which guided the process of organizational change.

In fall 1990, a highly participatory process involving many campus and community focus groups was designed to clarify the institutional mission and to create an action plan that would guide the direction of resources toward achievement of the mission. The plan became a constant reference guide for budgetary and program planning during the change process that began shortly after the planning process was completed.

### **Phase 2. Choosing the First Targets**

Like most institutions, early change projects at Portland State focused on administrative areas. Although these had nothing to do directly with the academic core, it was useful to

**TABLE 1**

**Characteristics of the Urban Research University**

- 
- committed to excellence in undergraduate Liberal education through a curriculum that links learning to student and community needs
  - provides access to graduate and professional programs central to the needs and opportunities of the metropolitan area
  - responds to the needs of metropolitan students, most of whom will require lifelong access to a high quality educational environment
  - seeks partnerships at the graduate and professional level with other universities
  - creates an educational network that supports student access and success at all levels of education
  - uses the region as an extended campus and "text" for teaching and research
  - designs its scholarly agenda and conducts research in collaboration with members of the metropolitan community in order to enhance the quality of life in its metropolitan region
  - creates an organizational structure that supports and rewards faculty roles compatible with these mission characteristics
- 

demonstrate that a number of crucial aspects of the campus culture were being addressed (e.g., it doesn't do any good to complain around here because nobody listens; this problem is all their fault; they won't let us do things differently).

Among the administrative change projects were the following:

- restructured and brought related units together in order to cluster similar activities;
- redesigned/reengineered many campus operations facilitated by the introduction of new technology; PSU is moving from a paper environment to an electronic environment;
- conducted quality initiatives and improved campus services without additional expenditures;
- invested in additional staff development programs, guided by staff input;
- used partnerships with other organizations to support resource sharing and to contain costs; and
- redesigned staff evaluation guidelines to recognize individual performance and the contributions to shared responsibilities and tasks.

These strategies have allowed PSU to absorb budget cuts with a minimal loss of support service and, in some cases, enhanced productivity despite a net loss of approximately 13% of support staff. The goal was to create a learning organization (Senge, 1990). Responsibility and power began to move into the hands of the people who make everyday decisions, supported by shared resources and infrastructure to facilitate consultation among units that wish to improve their cost effectiveness or quality.

### **Phase 3. Expanding the Scope of Change**

After a few administrative projects were successfully completed, attention began to turn to the enhancement of the academic environment for learning and research. Until 1993, PSU was able to protect the quality and capacity of most of the academic programs and to achieve enrollment goals through a combination of cost reduction and productivity enhancements. However, a fundamental rethinking of instructional goals and curriculum was necessary in order to continue doing even better with even less as budget cuts continued.

The transition from administrative change to academic change was associated with a shift in strategy but not in philosophy. In the earlier stage of administrative change, the recommendations of staff quality teams were accepted without question by management. These changes were not controlled by the President, the Provost, or the Vice President for Finance and Administration. In the next phase, as the nature and impact of the curriculum became the focus of attention, the pattern of supporting staff-initiated change continued by moving to a model closely aligned with faculty values and habits of thinking. Academic change was defined as scholarly work and the issues were framed as scholarly questions, the answers to which would be held to the highest standards of true scholarly achievements.

To identify and encourage faculty interested in new educational approaches, faculty development funds were combined into one fund for internal grants to support new instructional approaches. By the end of one round of this process, a small core group of faculty had successfully conducted experiments in curricular redesign with the support of internal minigrants. Guided by a clear vision for the future set forth in the strategic plan, a general education working group began work in the fall of 1992. The working group explored the nature of the undergraduate curriculum and the quality of student success at Portland State University as a research problem: The group studied the experience of students at many institutions, examined the literature on student success, and concluded that a fundamental rethinking of the total general education curriculum was necessary.

Participation in national forums built faculty confidence in the importance of these questions and the merits of serious scholarly inquiry into the experience of students and the nature and coherence of the curriculum. These national experiences also ensured that PSU would not be limited by its own institutional experience as the faculty set out to design a genuinely innovative and mission-appropriate curriculum. These discussions served as a starting point for examining academic programs in the light of the urban mission.

Honest self-appraisal, backed up by relevant data and observations, revealed some important things about the academic environment at Portland State:

- The gap between faculty expectations and institutional needs had grown wider and more unclear over the years as different administrations defined different missions for the institution.

- In the absence of any clear focus, the campus was experiencing “mission creep” toward traditional research university status without adequate resources to finance such a mission. The desire to achieve comprehensive research university status was a laudable goal because a genuine urban mission cannot be fully realized without substantial research capacity, but it became clear that it would be impossible to develop enough research capacity unless the campus considered more creative ways to compete for grants and contracts and designed innovative graduate degree programs based on interdisciplinary and interinstitutional cooperation.

- Quality was too often measured, both by outsiders and insiders, by research university or selective liberal arts college standards. The roles of an urban university called for different ways to measure quality. Here, as elsewhere, quality was frequently confused with prestige or reputation, which in turn, is influenced by narrow definitions of excellence.

- Students were becoming more heterogeneous in experience, ethnicity, motivations, learning and cognitive styles, and expectations than were faculty.

- Campus preoccupations and concerns did not match up very well with the questions being asked by legislators, business people, students, and parents.

Although somewhat painful, this self-assessment became the basis for institutional efforts to rethink curriculum, the research agenda, the effectiveness of involvement with the metropolitan region and the state, and the interpretation of faculty roles and rewards.

#### **Phase 4. Making Connections and Sustaining Change**

At this stage, many faculty whose scholarly interests are consistent with the principles and philosophy developed by the general education committee were already involved in the new curriculum. To encourage other faculty to embrace the responsibilities of designing and offering components of general education and to define a range of scholarly activities to support the urban mission, the Provost appointed a promotion and tenure guidelines revision committee in 1994-1995 to recommend ways to incorporate a broader, institutionally-appropriate definition of scholarship into promotion and tenure guidelines, as well as into hiring policies and merit salary criteria. The final report was released in early 1996 and adopted by the Faculty Senate.

Once scholarship has been defined within the context of the urban university mission, it will be necessary to provide credible and workable ways to record and assess the quality and impact of scholarly work of all kinds. Boyer (1990), Diamond (1995), and Lynton (1995) have laid the groundwork for assessing forms of scholarship, such as professional service and community-based teaching and research that are essential for the full achievement of an urban mission.

To sustain faculty interest in a range of scholarly activities that will support a community-based approach to research and learning also required significant campus investments. For two years, the faculty development program has sought faculty proposals in new areas of inquiry, such as community-based or interdisciplinary research or curricular innovation or other forms of scholarly activity required to achieve the mission of the university.

Faculty at PSU recommended a new center for academic excellence be established with components that could support the demands of new strategies for learning and teaching, facilitate university/community projects, and create new methodologies to assess the new curriculum and the impact of the university on the community.

To reassure and inform people who have doubts or questions about what it means to have an urban community-based mission or who question the wisdom of heading down this path, a continuing strategy of interactions with effective and critical thinkers from other institutions as consultants and evaluators is helpful. As PSU moves closer to full realization of the urban and community-related aspects of the research and educational mission, it should become clear to more faculty that these activities build upon, and do not replace, the core university values of original research, scholarly inquiry, and the study of the liberal arts and sciences. The collective responsibilities of the academy are made up of many individual contributions that will vary depending upon a faculty member's interests.

For those who fear that they will be unable to achieve prominence in their disciplinary field of study if they embrace this mission and the strong emphasis on collaborative and community-based work that it entails, it is important to note that last year, 71% of the institutions that responded to the annual ACE survey (El-Khawas, 1994) on trends in higher education have reviewed the mission and contributions of each of their academic depart-



ments. Ten percent of respondents are seriously revisiting and sharpening their institutional missions in response to public pressures to respond to compelling societal needs. The experience at Portland State reflects a national movement that soon will be experienced by faculty throughout the country.

One of the most difficult problems facing a campus undertaking such ambitious changes is to find the resources to underwrite the costs. In order to put real resources behind change initiatives, PSU released frozen assets, usually within the administrative structure but sometimes within the academic support structure as well. This has been accomplished in part through redesigning campus operations and in part through sequestering some of the resources released by faculty retirements. These resources serve as venture capital to fund the initiation of curricular changes and the introduction of new technology. Once the new curriculum is fully in place, it will be possible to recover the costs associated with the old distribution requirements and reinvest these dollars in the undergraduate majors and in graduate programs.

### **Phase 5. Rebalancing the Campus**

As significant change continues to move deeper into every unit of the campus, campus culture will change. There will be significant shifts in attitudes and behavior as faculty and staff begin to interpret their own roles and responsibilities in terms of the new culture, the new conditions, and the new ways of doing things. To facilitate this process of adaptation and absorption of the new ways, there must be frequent and open discussion of what is happening. During this process, some people have begun to talk about “our” changes rather than “their” changes or “your” changes (Heifetz, 1993), but only a few of the especially skeptical faculty have abandoned their wait and see attitude to join the new ways of doing things.

At this point, the academic and administrative areas that have undergone significant change are beginning to create ripples all over campus and other sometimes seemingly unrelated activities and functions now need to be rebalanced to support the new curriculum and a growing emphasis on collaborative research. The total redesign of the general education curriculum has set up a chain reaction that will affect the design and delivery of undergraduate degrees, graduate education, research mission, student services, and community relationships.

The clear philosophy that underlies the general education component of the curriculum has called into question the intent and result of the rest of the course work that students take and the other educational experiences that they have at the institution. Reviews that are now underway regarding undergraduate majors in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences are designed to take into account the new capabilities and knowledge base that students will have as they enter the more concentrated study of a major after completing a portion of their general education requirements.

These reviews and rigorous questions will, in turn, trigger an examination of graduate programs. The faculty involved seek to carry forward the same clear and compelling philosophy that underlies the general education curriculum into more advanced stages of learning and to integrate research, graduate study, and professional outreach in order to produce an effective community base for graduate and professional programs.

The next step will be to examine the role of the academic department. To rebalance the campus and reinforce the changes that have occurred, the functions of the academic depart-

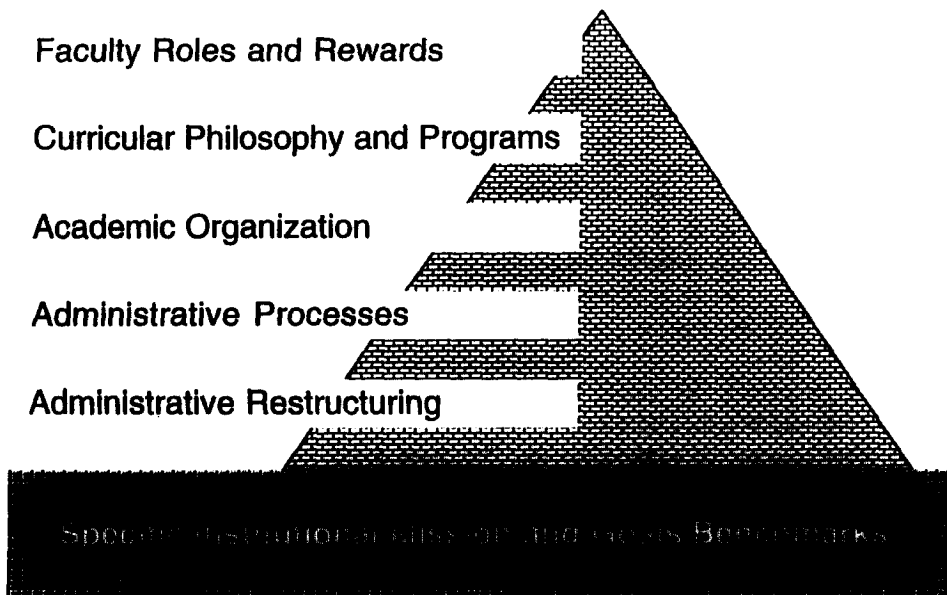
ment and the school or college must change to support the individual and collective responsibilities and development of faculty and to become the primary locus of responsibility for student learning.

The principles and goals of general education must be reinforced by how the resources in student affairs are utilized so that student services resources are centered on promoting student success. The major review of campus support for undergraduate and graduate students must be translated into organization shifts and professional development strategies.

In addition, other campus operations must change to bring day-to-day decisionmaking as close as possible to the locus of the primary impact of those decisions. This will mean continued reassessment and revision of the role and responsibilities of all administrative support units. To support these changes, investment in staff development and program assessment will be necessary.

### LESSONS LEARNED

A number of years ago, Hefferlin (1969) observed that sweeping reform is rare in higher education. More commonly, change is sporadic and occasional, progresses in fits and starts, and is characterized by bouts of housecleaning followed by years of inertia. Universities tend to confine significant change to circumscribed components of the organization,



Source: Holland (1995b).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Typical Arenas of Change in Higher Education**

**Note:** The most common forms of organizational change undertaken by universities listed from the most common at the base of the pyramid to the least common at the apex.

usually within administrative units. Most institutions reserve real attention to the philosophy, goals, and design of the curriculum for later stages of change. This progression of change can be shown in the form of a pyramid (Fig. 1) resting on the foundation of a specific institutional mission characterized by a clear and workable set of goals and benchmarks. The pyramid represents the relationships of frequency among the levels and that the levels of change are, in general, sequential. The distinctive characteristic of the case of the change process at PSU is that all levels of this pyramid are addressed almost simultaneously.

The following lessons can be drawn from this unusually transformational change process.

First, the change process was centered in the hands of faculty and staff. Community participants have been consistently involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation phases in the administrative units and in the academic units.

Second, the work is framed by a clear and specific institutional mission and goals.

Third, the change was undertaken in ways that are consistent with the habits of thinking and action that characterize the core of faculty culture and practice. Change became scholarly work and the results were evaluated by the same standards as any scholarship: (1) clarity of goals, (2) mastery of existing knowledge relevant to the subject of the work, (3) appropriate methodology and ability to be replicated or transferred to other comparable circumstances, (4) appropriate use of resources, (5) effective communication to appropriate audiences, (6) a culture of evidence and peer review, (7) creative and innovative work, and (8) ethical conduct and respect for all participants. These qualities of excellent scholarly work, derived from the work of Diamond (1995) and Boyer (1994) apply equally well to the change process at PSU.

Fourth, partnerships with faculty and administrators at other institutions that are attempting change on a similar scale contributed greatly to the clarity of thinking and provided instructive experiences that allowed expansion of the repertoire of approaches to change.

Fifth, the regular habit of presenting results at national meetings in order to invite critical review and constructive criticism of work provided another form of reality check and critical review.

Organizational elements that were identified as necessary to support the urban mission and the accompanying extensive community involvement across the campus, were:

- clear faculty roles and responsibilities
- faculty and staff development and reward programs consistent with the defined roles and responsibilities
- campus infrastructure and technical support services that support faculty work
- new assessments/measures of quality and impact of the changes made
- a long-term strategy to support change
- dedicated resources for the functions/programs that are being redesigned or changed
- recognition, support, and rewards for individual and collective performance and accomplishments.

In those cases where attempts at change did not succeed at PSU, it seems to be best explained by the occasional failure to apply scholarly standards to the work or because direct change was suggested from a purely administrative perspective. A gap can develop between administrative concerns and faculty concerns when administrators worry about

government work, that is, roles and responsibilities, tasks, processes, and timelines and forget the importance of ideas and the value of inquiry and experimentation.

The PSU case suggests that transformational and institutionwide change is best facilitated by a scholarly approach that draws upon the core strength of the faculty. Change is not administrative work. The best role for the senior administration is to consult with faculty and staff and to act on recommendations about what investments must be made to create a campus environment supportive of change.

From the lessons of this case study, the following strategies for sustaining large-scale change, once change has been thoughtfully initiated in a manner suitable for a particular institution, may be derived (adapted from Holland, 1995b) :

1. Begin with a clear mission and an action-oriented strategic plan.
2. Establish core organizational values and undertake change in a manner consistent with these values.
3. Create incentives, recognition, and rewards that recognize and support faculty and staff roles and responsibilities consistent with the institutional mission.
4. Ensure early successes that can be documented and utilized to make the case for the value of large-scale and continued change.
5. Provide frequent and direct communication to everyone affected by change in order to promote a clear understanding of what is happening, why it is happening, and what it means.
6. Consistently link budget decisions to strategic goals in order to show that these goals are serious and valued.
7. Respect resistance and offer skeptics an opportunity to test the validity of the change process and the results being obtained. At the same time, hold critics to the same standards of evidence that they wish to apply to those who have embraced change.
8. Demonstrate flexibility and make midcourse improvements as the results of change become clear.
9. Involve everyone in the design, implementation, and evaluation of change.

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