

Three Keys to Fostering an Innovative Culture On Your Campus

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Focusing on the institution mission, clearly articulating and communicating the vision, and allowing for experimental and transformational spaces are critical ways that institutional leaders can foster an innovative culture on their campuses.

There is a large body of work on change management (search “change management books” to see for yourself), any number of consultants to help out in the process, and ideas like “*Total Quality Improvement*” and “*Disruptive Innovation*” are now part of many managers’ playbooks these days. Why so much attention, so many competing theories and ready consultants? Because culture change is hard. Harder still if you are trying to drive an innovation agenda in higher education, one of the most change-averse industries in our society.

Southern New Hampshire University is often cited as one of the most innovative universities in the country. College presidents often bring their teams here to visit and the question often asked is, “How do we create a culture of innovation?”

Tolstoy wrote: “*All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.*” In a sense, the struggle to create a culture of innovation is similar: It is different for every institution and the solutions will thus look different for every institution. There is no standard playbook, but there are three constants that, when ignored or mishandled, almost always condemn the effort to failure. While the list of things that worked for SNHU may or may not work for another institution, these three factors are critical to reshaping institutional culture.

A culture of innovation has to be grounded in mission. Change for change sake is shallow, but change in the service of better serving the institutional mission is hard to argue against. At Southern New Hampshire University, we have a laser focus on student success for those for whom college is not a guarantee. Change in our institution is much more rapidly embraced if it can be framed in that context and the first question often asked of a new proposal is, “How will that help students?” This is an existential question—the “Why?” of our institutional existence—and is a powerful way to move people.

Sometimes we frame this question as “What job are people asking us to do?” That comes from Clay Christensen’s work (described in *Competing Against Luck*, his latest book, where we happen to be featured) and while we recognize that institutions are often asked to do many jobs—educate students, generate scholarship and research, be a local economic force, and more—there is typically one primary job. Lose sight of it, and you risk mission drift and can easily start to make strategic missteps.

Institutions are notoriously bad about this challenge. Some try to be all things to all people. Status reach is endemic to higher education. Institutions have many stakeholders and often try to please everyone, usually never wholly pleasing anyone. They believe their own press clippings or myths. Leadership mostly wants to say “yes,” but mission focus also requires the discipline of saying “no.” However, get the “Why” question right and keep it in front of everyone and a lot of good things start to happen.

There is no better way to inspire people than narrative. Humans are story-consuming machines. As Nicholas Kristof has observed, we cannot really process the idea of millions of people starving in a drought, but the well told story of one child can move the hearts (and wallets) of millions of people. University presidents are the *Storytellers in Chief* of their institutions and the narratives they build around the “Why” behind change are the tools they must effectively wield if they wish to garner buy-in and participation. The best “Why” stories in this context are not the ones of today’s success (why change then?), but of a vision for tomorrow.

The third and final key component undergirding culture change and innovation has to do with inviting everyone into the work. If one can get people to a place of understanding and then inspiration, the next necessary piece is to create space in which everyone can contribute and everyone can share in the success. And where there is little to no punishment for trying and failing. Universities can be unforgiving of failure—tenure gets denied, jobs are lost, the press loves to report on them. Yes, there are good failures and bad ones, smart attempts and stupid mistakes, if you will, but I have argued elsewhere that accreditors and regulators should allow “safe zones” in which institutions can try new things. Similarly, institutions should create resources and space for internal stakeholders to try new things

Safe zones in this case means a combination of resources, affording time, freeing up from slow moving governance and internal approvals, and protecting the innovators from all the internal forces that will attempt to incorporate or remake the innovation in conventional ways. That last dynamic is often not intentional, but more a reflection of how organizations, like the body, either try to incorporate or eschew foreign cells. Trying new things, conducting pilots, incubating ideas (skunkworks are often useful), failing fast and learning each time, should all become part of the institutional landscape.

At SNHU, our vision statement includes “We relentlessly challenge the status quo.” The greatest impediments to innovation are esteemed reputations and large endowments, which often create a sense of smug institutional self-satisfaction. That’s why unknown and fiscally challenged institutions are among our most innovative—creativity craves constraint and everyone knows they have to be better. Everyone *can* be better, no matter their status or wealth.

It’s the job of leaders to keep people focused on better serving the mission, sharing compelling stories of what that can look like in the future, and then creating spaces in which people can safely contribute to the effort. Where they can try new things. Then, when successful, it is the leader’s job to shine a light on that work and invite everyone into the conversation. A lot of resistance to change and innovation is that stakeholders often don’t see their place in it. Indeed, it is often perceived as a threat to their futures. What we know is that in our VUCA world—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—a failure to innovate and embrace change is a threat to everyone’s future within an institution.

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