

# From Status Quo to Status Go: Scaling Innovation in Higher Ed

*Vincent J. Del Casino Jr. | Vice President of Academic Initiatives and Student Success,  
University of Arizona*



Creating a culture of continuous innovation requires college and university leaders to become more supportive and invest in staff creativity both financially and emotionally.

The prevailing narrative about higher ed has been that many universities are averse to risk, unresponsive to the realities of the changing political economy,

and generally suspect of change. This narrative, however, oversimplifies the narrow definition of “innovation” in higher education and disparages the hard work of those faculty and staff who have been asked for decades to do more with less.

With the rapid changes to the higher ed environment, it’s unfair to say that there is no innovation or creative change within our institutions. In fact, those in higher ed have little choice but to adapt to the rapidly shifting context of their work for and with students. But the pressures to engage in certain kinds of innovation—toward a model of the revenue-first public university with a streamlined curriculum that eschews difference—continues. And, as it does, the image of the conservative academy takes center stage, an august body of scholars unwilling to adapt their long-held traditions.

But if innovation, as I suggest, is taking place in universities, and faculty and staff are willing to take up new challenges and change existing practices when it makes sense, why is the public’s perspective on higher ed not changed as well? It is because innovation has largely mirrored the models of the universities themselves; with change unfolding in a decentralized fashion, inside local units and departments and not at the institutional level.

Indeed, universities have changed a lot over the last several decades. The question now is how to scale the innovations that work best and enable more members of university communities to be part of these changes to the benefit of the broader institution.

### **Killing Innovation with the Wrong Kind of Budget Cuts**

Let’s just say it: The massive statewide defunding that strangled public higher ed during the Great Recession actually did force universities to change as a means of survival. One can argue with the results and benefits of this defunding, but to deny defunding’s effects is to miss the point. Today, especially in Arizona, universities are doing more with less, spurring innovation as a byproduct of leaner budgets and highly focused teams.

This more-with-less mentality, though, has run its course and it is now time to do more with more. Indeed, one can argue that many institutions refused to have the really hard conversations about what the changing budget climate has meant to them, using across-the-board cuts as opposed to more targeted approaches. This has often not benefited faculty, staff or students.

It is time for a reset. With the great recession in the rearview mirror, many administrators are now in the unusual position to reinvest and strategically fund those projects and teams that show promise and that can scale change on an institution level.

In order to take these decentralized innovations and drive largescale institutional change, central university leadership must appreciate risk and embrace failure. At the University of Arizona, we have learned two crucial lessons to support a culture of innovation and change-management:

- **Locate and support risk in the right places:** If the institution wants to change, then the institution has to absorb the risk, not the individuals asked to make change.
- **Enable your colleagues to succeed *and* fail with purpose:** Put people in a position to do the job they were hired for. Don't ask and expect your teams to do every little thing.

### **Locating and Supporting Risk**

One of the main challenges that central administration must face, especially from a funding perspective, is changing a culture of "no" to a culture of "yes." As state dollars tightened, it became the norm for administrators to deny many of the new ideas and programs that were pitched their way. Where would the money come from, after all?

This is the wrong approach. As the University of Arizona came out of the great recession, it knew that its central administration had to facilitate collaborative conversations and find ways to invest in the big ideas that were often found around the edges of our university.

At the University of Arizona, we have seen just how much can be accomplished when central administration becomes an enabler and facilitator of change, not an impediment. Through central financial support, our Office of Digital Learning, for example, was able to incentivize wary colleges and faculty to develop their degree programs and courses for a fully online environment.

To say that this support model allowed those same parties to embrace online learning would be an understatement. By centrally funding online course buildouts for colleges and by absorbing the costs of putting entire programs online, the university removed their fears, gave them a safety net, supported

their ideas, and witnessed the results. Without bearing the risk from a central position, the university would have never been able to graduate hundreds of students and enroll thousands more in the first three years of its operations.

The lesson is simple—when central administration invests in support services that take the financial and administrative burden off local units, people within our institutions are allowed to think creatively about how they can drive change. Put another way, when central administration drives conversation, builds consensus, and then locates support services in the right places, faculty and staff colleagues are freed from the everyday pressures of also figuring out how to “get more done with less.” The trick is finding the right balance between a central administrative structure that provides that support and the local entrepreneurialism that is creating new opportunity.

### **Enable Your Colleagues to Succeed *and* Fail With Purpose**

The other half of bearing and cultivating risk is finding ways to reward both success and failure. Once the university creates a stage where it is encouraged for people to try new ideas, its leaders also have to be prepared to support its colleagues when they both succeed and fail. How will you support the people who will undertake the initiatives you’ve asked them to implement? How will you be okay knowing that some ideas just won’t work?

At the University of Arizona, there have been plenty of ideas that have hit the mark—our ability to bring new technologies into the student learning experience over the last several years is but one such example. These technologies take early adopters to test them, risking that students might not respond positively to their implementation. When students do respond positively, you have to reward those early faculty adopters by supporting their ongoing work. This often takes financial and human capital investment to scale such innovations. Financial investment comes in the form of supporting these technologies. Human capital investment takes the form of support staff to train faculty and work with new technology companies to address the bumps in the road that come with implementation. Without both investments—financial and human—scaling new approaches and pedagogical innovations is almost impossible.

So, what about failure? Failure is successful when it is managed effectively and rewarded appropriately. At the University of Arizona this means creating a culture of ongoing evaluation and assessment that allows us to pinpoint when a

new idea is working and when it is not. If it is not working, we must not be afraid to change course and re-invest in a new idea. This goes back, however, to the culture of “no” that exists in so many public higher ed environments. After a while in a culture of “no” people will simply stop asking the question. But, if you become an office of “yes” and “let’s see how that might work” even if you don’t support every idea, you will get people coming back to you with new options, creative solutions, and innovative approaches. Eventually one of them will work. Eventually one of them will scale. And, eventually, failures will turn into successes.

### **The Long Game**

With innovation finding fertile soil to grow inside universities, the challenge for administrators now must be to use their central institutional position to find new ways to encourage risk without putting undue burden on the teams who are forced to implement those new ideas and program models. The minute administrators throw big ideas around as unfunded mandates is the minute that change won’t be adopted. Creating a culture of dialogue that allows everyone to challenge the status quo and adopt new approaches that may or may not work changes the conversation on the campus and establishes possibility for change.

This doesn’t mean that everyone gets to do whatever they want. Hard choices remain. But, when small opportunities become big possibilities it takes institutional will and investment to make those innovations happen. This is as much a cultural issue on campuses as it is a financial one.

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