

Innovation Perseverance: Launching Innovative Ideas into the Main Campus Culture

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Innovation can flourish on the margins, but for continuous improvement to find success on main campus it requires dedication, commitment and leadership from senior administrators. Universities are fantastic proving grounds for new ideas, invention and discovery. It is baked into the academic culture and especially

visible in researcher-led laboratories and grant-funded research activity. However, any trigger for “change” impacting campus culture has the potential to cause relentless resistance and even steadfast innovators are challenged to objectively defend ideas, compromise on the original vision or pivot into a completely different direction. Or even worse, fail due to lack of continued support. This seems to happen over and over again and is where perseverance comes into focus.

As innovators, we have millions of ideas that have the potential to lead to tangible product, process or service innovations. These great ideas in higher education have revolutionized online learning, taken learning to scale through free and open courseware, resolved some of the issues of textbook affordability, partnered with companies to support adult learners, re-imagined housing for the Gen-Z student, identified technological solutions to support student success and much more. Some of these innovative ideas may be formed collaboratively through a healthy dose of design thinking, empathy building, discussions with all of the right people, extensive brainstorming and prototyping. Other ideas are just an abstract and fuzzy spark written on the back of a cocktail napkin waiting to be embraced. In either case, ideas are just ideas. The innovation culture requires evidence of successful execution and teams that persevere on a daily basis to visibly bring ideas to life.

To bring innovation into the main culture of higher education is an ongoing battle with several institutional readiness factors to consider. Moving ideas into the institutional culture requires framing around the value of the institutional priority of the moment. When there is a direct connection to current issues, ideas are going to be better received and have a stronger likelihood of getting the right people to support the innovation. Being able to frame the problem that is being solved by the work will help leaders, decision makers and opinion leaders continue to listen and even begin to support, at least in theory. Having the drumbeat that “in this effort, we are trying to grow enrollment, move to scale, attract a specific audience, etc” will go a long way to maintain focus on the issues at hand and be able to answer the question of WHY a change is even needed. To be able to have these kinds of discussions up and down the organization requires institutional readiness.

Factors for consideration include the following:

- Does the campus have visible support from the president, the board and senior leadership?
- Is there an innovation champion on the senior leadership team?
- Does the leadership team really understand the role of the innovation champion and the fact that ideas will come to the leadership team that are not always as straightforward as those about enrollment numbers, budgets, events and policies?
- Is the senior leadership team ready to engage in less structured conversations or will this leader be perceived as an outsider? (back to the first question of visible support)
- Does the innovation champion have the platform to pitch ideas, share and gain feedback across the campus to leverage support, listen for concerns and ensure that issues are heard and acted upon appropriately?
- Is there a group responsible for innovation design thinking and doing? Is this group visible, well staffed for innovation practice and aware of the real and perceived environment where the innovations may live?
- Does the leader of this group concurrently support the innovation design team, giving them the tools and insights needed, and serve as target for controversy and concern outside of the “innovation bubble?” (Does the leader have their backs?)
- Does this group bring in key collaborators for training, incubation and ideation sessions and collaborative co-creation activities?
- Is this group a trusted partner to the university?
- Is there a sense of urgency?
- Is there a channel to communicate regularly on issues being addressed?
- Do the deans and other leaders throughout the institution embrace the idea of change in general and are they willing to have conversations regarding new ways of doing business? (are they a “yes, but...” or a “yes, and...” group?)
- Are there channels for providing a voice to all involved in specific innovation thinking and design efforts?
- Is there ongoing bridge building to execution?
- Is there some form of communications relative to successfully executed innovation?

To create an innovation culture is complex on a good day. There are some tangible things to put in place that can support innovation recognizing whoever carries the “innovation flag” will be constantly defending processes, timelines

and the messy parts of the innovation process. Institutional boards and the president want to see results and are not usually as interested in the process. Yet as innovators, we always say trust the process and the right solution will emerge, be tested and executed.

Even if innovation teams have been successful a hundred times, this will always be a tension. The innovation leader must have a tribe to support efforts. Without it, success within the institution will not occur and the leader will fail.

Good first steps to launching an innovation culture include appointing an innovation senior leader, laying out a plan for campus innovation and establishing a responsible, creative, likable team to deep dive into design thinking and doing. Innovation centers or institutes that serve as a second set of rails to think outside of the traditional daily operation of an institution should be put in place. Innovation teams can flourish when there is place to do the work, and ideas are supported and encouraged. It is up to organizational leaders to create a place where these teams can do their best work.

Institutions wishing to take great ideas to execution inside of the campus culture also need layers of support in place to recognize that the work is different and valued, and to give it a chance to succeed. This is easier said than done. Without visible support from innovation leaders all the way up to the executive teams of institutions, innovation efforts will begin to unravel due to lack of understanding, politics, traditions or perceived (or real) relevance. Innovation that is supported has the potential to significantly impact campus operations, promote new processes toward student success, develop new tools to solve key issues and radically impact the bottom line of an institution.

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