

Innovation for Tomorrow, Today

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Building a team that can help evolve a traditionally slow-moving organization into one focused on innovation and change requires a specific mindset and approach from leadership.

No land in Disney's fantasy world suffers the ravages of the future more than Tomorrowland. It's not a lack of design talent, creative imagination or financial resources that causes Tomorrowland to slip forever into the past. It turns out, keeping the future fresh is an impossible task. Retro rocket rides and Carousels of Progress rapidly turn to quaint nostalgia.

I think that's a good starting point for talking about the role of innovation in higher education. Despite our best efforts, today's flipped classroom or learning analytics soon become the laser disc and gamified biology lab of our failed futures.

On one hand it's easy to be cynical about innovation—do we really need buckets of new ideas when we still struggle with basic problems like convoluted business processes, baroque tuition and fee schedules and occult course requirements? On the other hand, when the future seems to be on our doorstep, if not in our laps, don't we need to think differently just to keep up?

As a person responsible for keeping an eye on the future of technology as it relates to my university's academic mission, this is a topic on my mind and on the agenda of many meetings. As a scholar of fun and its impact on organizational motivation, engagement, creativity and, yes, innovation, I have some thoughts on how to make innovation work in solving the pressing problems we face in moving higher ed into the land of tomorrow.

Here are three key things I try to keep in mind:

1. The difference between creativity and innovation

Creativity is the phase of frothy, exciting generation of ideas and options. It's the blue-sky phase of thinking outside of the box and spinning castles out of clouds. But for those day dreams to mean anything, you have to put them into practice. Too much of what passes for innovation in higher education is really nothing more than arm chair quarterbacking and entertaining punditry. Want to change the future? Being a thought leader is a dead end. You need to be an actor.

On my team, we tackle this problem by encouraging creative testing. By reserving budget for new ideas, we have a culture of encouraging experimentation through targeted pilots and real work trials. Sometimes these tests lead to new opportunities (a new partnership with an automated test proctoring vendor) and sometimes they lead nowhere (say, a media streaming platform we worked on launching before mothballing it some years back). In every case, we try to put new ideas to work as soon as possible to see if they, well, work.

2. The importance of failure

Trying new things means constantly facing failure. Contrary to what many believe, the secret of innovation is usually failing first. Success comes later. Dean Keith Simonston's book, "Origins of Genius" makes a Darwinian point about the skewed distribution of creative output. In his analysis, the people who create more are much more likely to be successful. For every Beethoven masterpiece you can name, there are several others that have slipped into obscurity. The academics with the highest citation counts tend to be those who published the most. Not every swing is a homer. Remember, Babe Ruth's 714 career homers came at the cost of 1,330 strike outs. (And yes, Lou Gehrig did heroically hit 49 homers with only 31 strikeouts one season. Then again, he only amassed 493 career home runs).

Our team embraces this idea of swinging for the fences through the core value of "fail fast." This attitude provides a foundation for our culture of innovation and inspires constant testing and backing out of dead ends.

3. Know when to quit

A corollary to the "tolerate failure" axiom is to admit defeat and move on. One of the biggest obstacles to future success is falling into the trap of the sunk cost—whether it is time, money or reputation. From Domain of One's Own to invasive advising, high-impact practices to virtual reality, test your organization's new ideas against outcomes. If the latest and greatest new learning intervention fails to make a meaningful impact, trash it. Ultimately, our organizations are measured by the success of ideas that work, not on the number of mistakes we have to make to get there. Keeping failing projects on life support to avoid admitting defeat only prolongs the agony and poisons a culture of success.

Following this principle, my group was an early adopter of everything from Adobe Connect to Second Life. Once these cool tools outlived their use, at least for us, we shut them down. Our team has a reputation for retiring tools and even keeps a "kill list" of old tech ready for early termination.

To Start: Build Your Team

Of course, there is more to innovation than these pocket principles. You need people who know how to create and innovate. You need an organization that values innovation and knows how to scale success. You need resource and even a little luck. One book I can recommend from my bookshelf that helps focus the desire to innovate is Frans Johansson "The Medici Effect." This smart, readable

classic provides practical advice on how to build diverse and, yes, innovative organizations—ideas that will work even in the Tomorrowland of higher ed.

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