

point of view

Why Education Reform Fails

In The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, T. S. Eliot's main character asks, "Do I dare to disturb the universe?" His question has echoed throughout the world; however, it is rarely answered in the affirmative by people we wish had courage and gumption — politicians, bureaucrats, religious leaders and sadly, educators. In education we have been tagged as a group who find it easier to move a cemetery than to change a curriculum. (In either case, there is no help from the residents.) Roger Moe, former majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate and education reformer, has remarked, "Higher education is a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy." In spite of our determined launching of a reform movement every ten years, we change very little. Each new commission on reform concludes with the same tattered proclamations: We need great leadership; we need more resources; we need better evidence; we need more "will." Eventually, the champions of the latest reform movement turn their attention elsewhere, and the disillusioned practitioners in the field struggle to add on a new practice or tweak a program by grafting on a prosthetic technology. In sum, they wear themselves out trimming the branches of a dead tree rather than digging out the challenges entangled in the roots.



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The root challenges that keep us from major change and reform in higher education are many and complex — some deeply embedded in the social and economic structures of our society about which we can do little as educators. But there are two key challenges that continue to crop up at the edges of reform reports and increasingly as central issues—challenges that we in the education community may be the only ones who can correct:

■ No substantial change will occur in education unless we overhaul the traditional systems of education and create new systems for the 21st century.

■ Substantial change in education will not occur unless the faculty are as deeply engaged as key stakeholders.

Overhaul Needed

Leaders and change agents have known for decades that the traditional systems we have inherited from the past

are major barriers to lasting reform and change. Our systems are stuck in the 18th and 19th century models of education, and we have become comfortable with these systems because as educators we have learned to navigate them with ease. Why change the policy manuals, the guidebooks, the syllabi, the formulae, the curricula, the funding methods, and the designs that we have over time created to support the traditional systems and structures? We have a vested interest in keeping such systems alive. Terrence Robinson, director of business development for Cuyahoga Community College's Corporate College, describes the challenge in a creative simile: "Our current education system is similar to a wealthy patriarch who is brain dead and has had a complete systems failure but is kept on life support. He is no longer functional or productive, but because so many depend on him and have a special interest in his survival, no one is willing to pull the plug."

I have addressed these issues before and cite the following two paragraphs from my 1997 book on A Learning College for the 21st Century. The current systems of education were created at the end of the 18th century, when 90 percent of the population left school after the eighth grade and at the beginning of the 19th century when the industrial revolution began to replace an economy built on agriculture.

In an agricultural society, students were needed by their families to work on the farms. Schools were designed to end in the middle of the afternoon so that students could be home before dark to milk the cows, gather the eggs, and feed the hogs. On weekends school was out. Saturday was a full work day on the farm for larger projects such as mowing the hay, repairing fences, and harvesting corn. On Sunday, agricultural and theological values combined to create a day for rest and religion. Summers were set aside for major farm chores: harvesting crops, tilling new land, building barns, and repairing tools and fences. School tailored its structures and times to the needs of the agricultural society. Clara Lovett makes the point: “Everyone recognizes the academic calendar for what it is: a relic of an agrarian society in which all able-bodied men and women were needed in the fields at certain times of the year.”

When the nation changed from an agricultural to an industrial economy, the old school structure remained but was updated and streamlined to fit the new industrial model. “Scientific management” and hierarchical organization, the bedrock principles of bureaucracy, were introduced in the schools, in part to socialize youth in the virtues of order and discipline. More importantly, the modern factory, pioneered by Henry Ford in the production of automobiles, appeared ideally suited to schooling that up to this point had flourished in the cottage industry of one-room schoolhouses. Now schools could be operated like factories with students as products moving through an assembly line. Teachers were the workers who turned out the products, and they were, in turn managed by principals and presidents, the management bureaucracy. Alvin and Heidi Toffler noted in 1995: “America’s schools still operate like factories, subjecting the raw material (students) to standardized instruction and routine inspection.”

The educational system from kindergarten through graduate school is time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound. Leaders know this and have from time to time addressed these barriers as a major challenge. K. Patricia Cross, a leading advocate for educational reform throughout her distinguished career, said 30 years ago, “After some two decades of trying to find answers to the question of how to provide education for all the people, I have concluded that our commitment to the lockstep, time-defined structures of education stands in the way of lasting progress.” And in 1993, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education, in its seminal report, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, actually recommended the solution to reform: “Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses.” This was a direct call for overhauling the traditional systems of education but one that, after a brief flurry of interest, drifted into the black hole of most reform efforts.

One of those flurries of interest was the 1994 National Education Commission on Time and Learning that pointed out “Learning in America is a prisoner of time. For the past 150 years American public schools have held time constant and let learning vary. Time is learning’s warden.” This was a powerful report that addressed one of the major architectural barriers of the historical educational system. However, the report was a piecemeal approach to larger, more complex challenges. It isn’t just time that creates structural barriers. We are time-bound; but we are also place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound — “a thousand years of tradition wrapped in a hundred years of bureaucracy” stuck in the culture of the agricultural society and the industrial economy.

Faculty Is Key to Change

This proposition seems so obvious — given the central role of faculty in the educational process and given their numbers — but we often fail to absorb this major truth. In a commuting college, and in most institutions of higher education, the primary access linking faculty and students is through the classroom — online, face-to-face, and blended — and the great bulk of educational activity that leads to improved and expanded learning occurs between students and a faculty member. Even if students do not come into face-to-face contact with an instructor, the materials they rely on were developed by a faculty member, and their mastery of these materials is monitored by a faculty member. Famed educator Mark Hopkins defined an ideal college as “Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.” That model has not changed for hundreds of years although the ratio has increased; faculty are central to the success of the college and the success of students, and they must be the key agents of any substantive change.

The Completion Agenda is the overarching reform movement of this decade. Unfortunately, faculty often view it as an external mandate championed by administrators or imposed by state and national leaders. Some community college leaders have exacerbated this tension by moving ahead without involving faculty as full partners in institutional reform to improve student success and completion. In the first major study of the Achieving the Dream initiative, *Turning the Tide*, researchers, commenting on improvements needed in the next phase, noted, “Bringing faculty and staff voices more concretely into colleges’ reform work and focusing more directly on improvements to classroom instruction and services may have important benefits for the next stage of the initiative’s work.” And, the American Federation of Teachers has made a key point about involving faculty, noting, “The

AFT believes that academic unions, working with other stakeholders, can play a central role in promoting student success. Making lasting progress, however, will have to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold a position of respect and leadership.”

We are approaching academic gridlock when teachers’ unions have to make their own case to be invited to the table and point out the need for respect of their roles and leadership. Faculty will always play the key role in student success and completion, and it would be wise for administrators to appreciate the reality of the power faculty hold in delaying or blocking progress. Consider how faculty members outnumber administrators. Moreover, faculty are protected by tenure, unions, and academic freedom. And they belong to a profession that is usually highly regarded by the public. In the final analysis, presidents, trustees, and administrators are temporary appointments—the faculty go on forever.

If we are to achieve any modicum of success in the Completion Agenda, or in any major reform effort, we can only

transform our colleges with the full involvement of the faculty. Most faculty question the current traditional systems of education and confront daily the structural barriers that keep them from performing at concert pitch. For instance, they know the limitations of the traditional A, B, C grading system, and they struggle to make the cumbersome system of student learning outcomes work. Teachers are deeply disappointed when they have to abruptly end a 55-minute class when the learning and interaction are at their peak. They know they have some of their greatest impact on many students in ways that cannot be fully measured and acknowledged. They want to spend more time with students who need more help. Their deepest satisfaction comes when a student has an “aha! moment” or when a student embraces and celebrates his or her potential. Members of the faculty hold the key to any substantive change; and they have the experience, the understanding, the motivation, and the power to create the change we need if we are to meet the goals of student success and completion.

Conclusion

The Completion Agenda, the overarching reform initiative of our time, and the reform movements of the future, are in peril if we continue to ignore two of the intractable barriers we face: overhauling the traditional systems and structures we have inherited and fully involving faculty in that effort. We need to face the dragon head on by creating a National Commission on an Educational System for the 21st Century in which we deeply engage our creative and dedicated faculty and other leaders in a thorough and substantive process to construct a new foundation on which our new ideas and the evidence from research can take root. Until we create those new systems with the help of the faculty it will be business as usual, and all our efforts at reform will end not with a bang but a whimper. ▲

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