Change and Departmental Success

by Charles R. Bantz

In this inaugural issue of Spectra, I have the license to imagine the operational model of a communication department of the future. Historically, this would be an uninteresting task, since predicting the future in university structures has been relatively easy—predict “what was, will be” with a footnote (“during financial stress, small, academically weak and internally troubled units may be reorganized or eliminated”). The challenge of restructuring is so great that the few examples of dramatic restructuring—for example, Arizona State University in the 21st century—stand out from a field of numerous examples of exceedingly high cost-low change.

Over the past 20 years, however, our environment has changed and the operational models for universities and departments are more dynamic and complicated. Let me briefly sketch six changes in the current environment and how they are altering the context for academic departments: (1) the decline in state support, (2) the rise in accountability, (3) increased diversity of students and faculty, (4) internationalization of U.S. higher education, (5) increased interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration and (6) faster pace. While these changes are not complete, they are already transforming the world I have worked in as a chair, vice provost, provost and chancellor over the past 20 years.

Reduction in State Support

As reported in the State Higher Education Executive Officers FY 2009 Finance Report, those in public universities have faced a decline in state support measured either as a percentage of state budget or a percentage of university budget (see Tom Mortenson’s blog in Postsecondary Education Opportunity, February 2010). This decline began long before the “Great Recession” that has now seen actual dollar reductions in state support.

For those in private universities, the recession produced a dramatic decline in the value of endowments. Despite the recent recovery, the stock market still shows a multi-year decline, as reported in the July 1, 2010, Chronicle of Higher Education. Even more challenging, most endowments pay using a multi-quarter rolling average that means the decline in payouts will occur in universities for several years—a 12-quarter rolling average means the decline in the 4th quarter of 2008 will affect payouts through the 4th quarter of 2011.

These financial changes have meant universities and departments have had to find additional sources of revenue. In addition to increases in general tuition rates, they have had to be far more entrepreneurial. Departments are making greater efforts at gaining philanthropic support; encouraging technology transfer with its consequent revenue through royalties or ownership of companies; increasing externally funded support for research, learning and programs; differentiating tuition by charging more for higher cost or higher demand programs; and creating new programs such as online, executive education and adult education.
Increased Accountability
The second significant contextual change for universities has been a dramatic rise in the expectation of accountability. The emergence of report cards, dashboards and performance reports is pervasive. Particularly critical is the emergence of assessment and outcomes measurement within disciplines and across undergraduate education in areas such as liberal education (or “general education” on some campuses). Over more than 20 years, the regional accrediting bodies such as the Higher Learning Commission (formerly North Central), Southern AC, WASC and Middle States have not only required assessment plans, but also expected the plans to be implemented, with the results integrated into subsequent actions (e.g., revision of the curriculum).

When I began as department chair at ASU in 1989, discussions of assessing our performance in preparing students either in service courses or in our major were rare. Today, IUPUI is implementing measurement of student learning course by course to assess whether students are experiencing courses that cover all the principles of undergraduate learning—and, in a pilot, how well they learned those principles. These changes are systemic as they are now integrated into the decanal campus accreditation review as well as other assessments—by specialized accreditors, boards of trustees and governmental bodies.

Growing Diversity
The third significant contextual change is the increased diversity of students and faculty in U.S. higher education. While we are not yet as successful in providing both access and success to a student body that represents the U.S., our student body is fundamentally different from 30 years ago, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This change is critical to the success of both the U.S. and universities in serving our mission of enhancing opportunity. Of course, the diversification of our faculty and staff follows a similar, if “lagged,” trend—more diverse than 30 years ago, but not yet matching the population.

Rising Internationalization
A fourth and related contextual change is the internationalization of U.S. higher education. We have continued to see growth in the number of international students coming to our campuses, as well as the number of students pursuing some international experience. At the same time, we have dramatically increased the number of our faculty who have international experience both by birth and choice, our researchers are expected to be familiar with the literature of the world and technology has made interaction faster. The internationalization adds diversity to our campuses and enriches learning by both students and faculty.

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Greater Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The fifth contextual change, which is not new to most communication scholars, but has been dramatic in many other disciplines, is the rise in the value of and expectation for interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary collaboration. Many in my graduate school cohort were assiduously studying in sociology, psychology, computer science, statistics, history, English, political science and philosophy departments, to name a few. Some of us even did research and published in those disciplines’ journals. We pursued these studies to build a better understanding of communication and enjoyed the innovation that occurred at the edges of disciplines. Sometimes communication was criticized as a weak discipline because it was so interdisciplinary. But, as it turned out, communication faculty were pioneers. These days, grant proposals often require interdisciplinary teams and some very large grants can only be submitted as multi-unit collaborations (e.g., NIH’s Clinical and Translational Sciences Awards). Thus, the ability to partner and navigate among disparate disciplines is extremely valuable and correspondingly, there is little patience for interdisciplinary disputes.

Faster Pace

A sixth change is simply that things are moving faster today—virtually everyone notices that technology has made messages move more quickly (and seemingly never stop), the growth in knowledge is widely documented and the current volatility in the financial markets reflects the rapidity of both communication and actions as news turns into buying or selling almost instantaneously. This is adding stress to university faculty and administrators as the mantra of “do more with less” is compounded by “do all of it faster.” The result is there may actually be less patience for change to occur.

These six changes are not the only ones touching universities and departments, but they nonetheless have created a pattern of change that will influence departments of the future. Some, such as the diversity of faculty hires, will directly affect departments. Others, such as financial model changes, also will have a more indirect impact.

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Changes and Departmental Success

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Before speculating on the future, there is one thing that has not changed: doing great work is appreciated and often rewarded. Doing poor work is sometimes a negative in rewards, always a negative in perception. Senior campus leaders want departments to succeed—and that is measured by excelling at our mission: making sure learning is occurring, doing quality research, being civically engaged, enhancing diversity and managing yourself well.

The Future of Departments

Departments that flourish will be entrepreneurial, collaborative, innovative and disciplined in using evidence-based decision-making. In addition, they will incorporate diversity and internationalization into the core of their mission, expect the highest quality of the faculty and students and get on with their work in a professional manner.

Departments always need to work to ensure they are doing an excellent job at their mission, but we must recognize the tension of change and stability that is fundamental to universities. Universities are one of Western societies’ longest lasting institutions—partly because they have not overreacted and changed willy-nilly and forgotten their core mission and partly because they have been able to adapt to a society that has changed dramatically through the centuries (e.g., University of Bologna founded 1088, University of North Carolina founded 1789, IUPUI founded 1969). There is no reason to assume that the next 100 years will provide fewer opportunities to improve our work than the past 100 years.

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