

Admin 101: Why It's Hard to Operate 'Outside the Box' in Academe

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Academe has plenty of its own clichés, but one that we've eagerly adopted from the business world is "thinking outside the box." You'll see that phrase again and again in administrative-job postings and in applicants' cover letters. But what does it really mean in higher education?

More important, however good you are at thinking outside the box, is it possible to act on your outside-the-box ideas once you're on the job as a chair, dean, provost, or president?

This month the [Admin 101 series](#) on campus leadership explores some of the reasons why leaders encounter resistance in carrying out unconventional proposals, and what you need to know before you jump outside the box.

The box may be there for sound reasons. The word box connotes a set of shadowy limitations on imagination and action. The implication is that the box exists out of tradition or inertia. Thus, escaping it is seen as an innately good thing: It demonstrates the kind of innovation or entrepreneurialism that institutions claim to embrace. Indeed, we live in a society that seems to hold all organizations up to the mystical ideals of Silicon Valley, so boxes are viewed negatively.

But box may also delineate levels of acceptable risk and practical realities for an organization — in this case, colleges and universities. In Silicon Valley, acceptable risk is high, and disastrous consequences are shrugged off. One can, apparently, plow billions into

an idea that never succeeds (Theranos), that ineffectually churns with no success in sight (WeWork), or that succeeds for a while but then ultimately collapses (Myspace).

A college or university, by contrast — unless it is facing actual closure — can't just jump off a cliff that way with other people's money and futures at stake: The human cost would be catastrophic and criminal.

A box may also represent the adage, "the perfect is the enemy of the good." To take an example from my field, a typical intro video-production course trains students in the fundamentals. Obviously, such courses have changed radically over the years. Still, there's only so much material you can cover in 16 weeks. I've seen departments flounder when too many "bright idea" concepts stuffed into the basic video course crowd and obfuscate the fundamentals so that students end up unprepared for the advanced classes.

In short, the box you're trying to think outside of is not infinitely elastic. Too much innovation and complication can be counterproductive.

People may distrust the motives of "change agents." Faculty members often believe — although it's not quite the reality — that we are in an era of revolving-door leadership at colleges and universities. A new provost or dean comes along with many big ideas about big changes, but the "lifers" among the faculty, staff, and administration — the people who have been there for a number of years and plan to stay — are not enthusiastic. They suspect, sometimes with good reason, that these so-called innovations are just CV enhancers for the new leader's next career move.

If you want your leadership to be truly innovative, you must do the following:

- Invest the time it takes to complete the innovations you've proposed. (Pertinently, your institution should make staying on an attractive proposition for you.)
- Build a strong consensus that the changes you advocate are extensions of the box — that is, they naturally build upon the strengths and opportunities already in place in the program or institution.
- Prove your changes are sustainable and won't suddenly disappear if you happen to be hit by a bus. You want to empower constituencies and other leaders who value the innovation and would carry it on, with or without you. After all, the best evidence of good leadership is that your works remain functional and productive long after you are gone.

You didn't find out what the "end user" needed. I once attended a meeting with other administrators in which an outside consultant presented case studies of innovative budget models. All were purported to be successful. When I asked about case studies of failed

models, the consultant responded, "Those were not shared with us." Clearly, no one likes to revisit all of those expensive new ideas that flopped, or talk about the ones that still linger ineffectually, making the situation worse than before.

Consider, for instance, all of the software and tech products that seem to be designed by people who will never use them. A friend recounted his university's purchase of a learning-management system (LMS) that administrators guaranteed would "revolutionize" the interface between students and faculty members. Instead of making everything easier for everybody, as was promised, students complained, faculty members complained, parents complained ... and several years later a new system appeared. At no point did anyone actually ask professors and students what they wanted in an LMS.

A basic management lesson is that purely top-down innovations tend to fail. Thinking out of the box and then imposing radical change may work in some situations in some industries, but it's inherently problematic in academe. So before you jump out of the old box, make sure you understand exactly what people want and need from a new one.

You have to work with the team you have. Another hard wall that innovation hits in academe is that — while we hire new people and enroll new students all the time — turnover at the faculty and staff level tends to be incremental. That, in itself, does not squash doing something new or doing something routine in an unusual way.

The problem is: Administrators on a campus can't reassign and retrain people unilaterally to some new venture, like executives in a company would.

Here's a case I heard about that shows what I mean: A foreign-language department wanted to start offering courses in a language of growing interest to students. The dean and provost agreed, but didn't have the money for a new tenure-track position to teach the new courses. So the department had to wait until one of its professors retired and then go through the lengthy internal debate over whether to hire a replacement in the retiree's subfield or in the new language. Eventually the department did offer the new courses — *four years* after the original idea was conceived.

The business world would laugh at that glacial pace, but it is a reality we face in academe. The point is: While you can think outside the box, sometimes it is physically hard to place anyone outside it. If you want innovation, you may have to "divest" from one area in order to invest in another, and that takes time.

Some budget models do not reward innovation. A dean I know at a major university in the Northeast described plainly why she sees no value in innovating at all: Her budget model is a padlocked black box. She literally does not know what allocation she will get each year. She could double her enrollment and still get the same amount of money. Funding at

her university is so centralized and so opaque that there is no reward system for doing anything differently. By contrast, at my university, I can predict exactly how my college's bottom line will be affected by upticks in enrollment and credit hours.

If you want people in your department, college, or institution to innovate, you have to answer a simple question: What rewards are in place for innovation, and what obstacles are blocking it?

Given the many problems facing higher education, we clearly need lots of out-of-the-box thinking. Part of your job as a leader is to help that change along. Before you leap, however, just make sure you've carefully assessed the costs and benefits — as well as whether it makes sense to find your solutions inside the box.

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