

The Collaboration Imperative

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As I write about my experiences in higher education, I want to make one thing clear: I don't believe the issues we are facing have a one-size-fits-all solution. I see too many articles that pronounce the end of higher education as we know it and that the solution is [insert latest buzzword here]. But the reality is that there are many different kinds of institutions with many different kinds of issues that are complex and not easy or quick to solve.

What I hope to address in sharing my experiences is that we all need to honestly assess where we are with various issues and look for good solutions that are evidence-based and make sense for our specific type of college or university. What makes sense for a large public institution won't necessarily make sense for a small liberal arts college.

Perhaps one of the most important things that I've learned in my time as an academic administrator is the importance of collaboration. The challenges that many colleges and universities are facing today require us to take a new look at curriculum and many other processes that influence enrollment and retention. It is vital to understand that any changes or innovations, particularly to curriculum and approaches to learning, need to start with the faculty. You can throw all kinds of software and data at a problem, but if faculty aren't brought in early to the process in a collaborative way, effective change is unlikely to happen.

Unfortunately, demands from outside actors like legislators and federal bureaucrats can often lead to friction between groups on campuses and thwart their ability to collaborate. I found that external mandates and the need to focus on compliance issues related to accreditation have stymied innovation.

The faculty are at the core of what we do in academe, and I have experienced the ups and downs of the relationship between administration and faculty as a professor and an administrator. From my perspective as a provost, I'm concerned that it is becoming more difficult to maintain collaborative relationships with faculty members as colleges try to balance internal budget pressures and external mandates. Increasing demands on faculty members can leave them feeling burned out and as if they have little voice within their institution.

When I became provost at Menlo College, I was a recently promoted full professor, having spent the previous few years on the faculty after being a vice provost for three years. I hoped that the faculty at Menlo would be more willing to consider me an ally, given that I was coming directly from their ranks. I knew that wasn't a given, considering how my colleagues had greeted my initial foray into upper administration during my prior work at the University of Texas. From one day to the next, I had gone from being their recently tenured colleague to an administrator with a portfolio at the highest level of the university. It felt awkward as I transitioned into the role, but things had smoothed out over time.

At Menlo, I was greeted with a mix of optimism and suspicion, but it was easier coming into an administrative position from the outside. I was also walking into an existing culture that had developed over many years of continuous administrative change. The college had gone through five presidents in 10 years and was looking for stability. The faculty had gotten used to operating without much leadership, and some wanted to hang on to the spaces they had created out of the view of the administration. I was intent on developing a more collaborative relationship but knew that would take some work.

It did not help that I was facing an accreditation visit during my first year as provost. Our mostly new administration wasn't going to get a break from the visiting committee, and we had to account for any deficiencies of our predecessors.

One area that I know is a cause for concern for many colleges like Menlo is assessment. I have read many accreditation reports, and the story is the same: there is much room for improvement in the development of course, program and institutional learning outcomes, particularly in terms of developing appropriate data-gathering tools and feedback loops. Although I had been through accreditation processes at UT, we had only begun to put learning outcomes in the syllabi at Menlo, and we were at the early stages of collecting data from courses on those outcomes.

The resulting report on Menlo from our accrediting commission led to the creation of a new institutional effectiveness position to improve our approach to assessment and data gathering. I personally learned a great deal in working with our new hire, but I also saw the toll it took on our faculty members to get up to speed on the new assessment tools and to take ownership of the process. We were conducting strategic planning, and the faculty had regular committee work, including hiring and promotion, that was a priority, as well. Although our faculty members didn't have the same kind of research requirements as those at an R1 institution, they were still expected to conduct research and stay current in their field. It all added up to a stressed-out faculty and provost.

The demands of accreditation, research and service often leave little room for the kind of work that faculty members and administrators want to be doing on developing new courses, updating curriculum and taking part in professional development. It had been my hope as provost to provide more opportunities for the faculty to work on new teaching techniques, develop relationships with local companies and take better advantage of our location in Silicon Valley. We all felt bogged down with the demands of compliance -- and the irony is that the goal of assessment is developing the tools and data that will allow for innovation.

Collecting data is important, but we in higher education must be practical about what can be done by faculty members with limited resources and time. Colleges and universities need to find ways to develop appropriate assessment processes that use the types of data that are feasible for them to collect -- much of which may be qualitative -- and focus more on giving faculty members the space and incentives they need to get beyond compliance and innovate.

I know that is the goal, but for many institutions, that is not the reality. At many colleges and universities, teaching excellence is the norm, but it is important to understand the impact of policy changes like new assessment requirements on the balance of teaching, service and research. There are often unintended consequences when actions are taken without input from all who may be affected. It will take a collaborative approach, working with accreditors, to find a path that helps us all provide the best education for our students.