INSIDE HIGHER ED

Menu

Views

15

159

Technology Is Not Enough

November 10, 2015

By Serena Klempin

Higher education is increasingly looking to technology as a means of tackling persistent equity challenges and improving student outcomes. Yet technology in and of itself is not a solution -- unless people use technology to create new systems, behaviors and student experiences.

Encouraging various individuals across an entire institu
It requires thoughtful leaders who understand how to
those that fundamentally reorient the way an instituti
and staff members in that challenge.

INSIDE HIGHER ED

You may also want to read:

Mitch Daniels draws praise and criticism for his comments on...

www.insidehighered.com

AddThis

Many colleges are particularly interested in applying technology to student support services, which have traditionally been underresourced and overburdened. Technology-mediated advising systems are commonl used to plan educational programming, identify and intervene with students who may be at risk, and monitor student progress. They have the potential to clarify program pathways and connect students to vital support services, thereby increasing student retention and completion.

But how does a college move from putting an electronic advising tool in place to creating large-scale technology-mediated change? My colleagues and I at the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, studied colleges engaged in this work, and we have learned a great deal fron their experiences.

One of the most intriguing findings is the role of leadership -- and not just high-level leadership. Both senio and midlevel project leaders must share a commitment to the same actionable vision of technology as a tool for change. Although it is often assumed that presidents and senior leaders are the key to success, ou research supports James Jacobs's assertion in *Inside Higher Ed*, which said midlevel leaders are "the real change agents."

Colleges often consider the implementation of a technological tool as simply a technical problem -- a set of solutions to address inefficiencies. But technology-mediated advising tools ideally provide the gateway to a much larger discussion about a college's entire approach to advising, moving from a shallow service model focused on course registration to a holistic model that provides individualized support throughout a student's time in college and that actively intervenes to keep students on track. As other scholars in education leadership have noted, such a major realignment requires transformative change across three levels of a higher education institution: structural, process and attitudinal. Without change at all three levels, opportunities to better serve students through improved systems will be missed.

This kind of transformative change qualifies as what change experts refer to as an adaptive challenge -- one that requires each institution to develop new ways of problem solving because there are no obvious or clearly "correct" answers. For a college or university to undertake such change, it must have leaders in place across all levels of the institution who are capable of motivating people to have difficult, honest conversations and of encouraging them to think and act differently. As opposed to the authority conferred through a title or an organization chart, leadership for transformative change is a complex, dynamic process.

Four Key Approaches

Through our research, we identified four different leadership approaches:

- *Presidential.* Senior leaders have a clear vision for change, but have not fully articulated their vision to project leaders.
- *Visionary.* Senior leaders and project leaders collaborate to develop a shared vision of change, and senior leaders grant project leaders the authority for carrying out that vision.
- *Technologically focused.* Neither senior nor project leaders have a clear vision for using technology to drive change; both are focused on the mechanics of implementing the technology.
- *Divided.* Project leaders understand the potential for change, but they lack support from senior leaders. For these deeply rooted changes to occur, support from both levels of leadership is crucial.

At the institutions we studied, senior leaders controlled financial resources, shaped the institutional culture to encourage receptiveness to new technologies and had the authority to mandate use when necessary.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the colleges with a presidential leadership approach were unsuccessful in achieving change, even though they had strong senior leaders. It was only when both senior and project leaders were aligned around an adaptive vision of change (a visionary leadership approach) that structures processes and attitudes were altered.

For example, at one college, the introduction of an education planning tool sparked several major changes. The senior leadership team championed technology-mediated advising as a crucial component of the institution's student success agenda. Meanwhile, the project leaders were deeply committed to improving advising services through a greater emphasis on multisemester education planning.

As a result, change occurred in the three key areas. The college lengthened advising appointments to allow more time for using the planning tool and also made the creation of an education plan a requirement for a student success course -- a mandatory course for most first-year students covering a range of topics related to acclimating to college and making use of college resources (structural change). Advisers began interacting with students differently, focusing on mapping out courses for an entire degree, rather than jus selecting courses for the upcoming semester (process change). They also started to view themselves as professional counselors supporting institutional goals for improving student success rather than administrative clerks (attitudinal change).

Together, all of these changes transformed the way the college approached education planning. Prior to the introduction of the digital planning tool, the only tool available for long-term planning was a paper worksheet that was used randomly and inconsistently. Describing the switch, one adviser explained:

"When you just have a piece of paper that somebody handed you, it has very little meaning. But if you get to drag and drop and move things around and read course descriptions… it's a little bit richer. It's more interactive …. The interactive piece, both with the digital materials and with the adviser, I think, allows for an experience that improves their ability to internalize their plan."

For these deeply rooted changes to occur, support from both levels of leadership was crucial. Senior leaders controlled financial resources, shaped the institutional culture to encourage receptiveness to new technologies and had the authority to mandate use when necessary. However, midlevel project leaders were the ones who ultimately drove change on the ground. Placed in the difficult position of serving as a communication channel between frontline staff, such as advisers, and senior leaders, they were responsible for translating the vision for technology-driven change into action, integrating technological tools into existing systems and processes, and encouraging both advisers and students to use the tools.

Without the support of senior leaders, project leaders did not have enough legitimacy or institutional backing to create the change that was needed. And without the support of project leaders, senior leaders did not have enough knowledge of day-to-day advising functions to create that change, either.

What was the impact on the students? Even though we were only studying the early stages of rolling out these technologies, at the colleges with visionary leadership, significant numbers of students were using the education plans to begin more long-term thinking about their educational and career goals. They were also responding to early alert messages received through risk-targeting systems, and following up with their instructors and advisers to get help when needed

Interestingly, we also found through our research that it is not necessary for senior and project leaders to begin with a shared adaptive vision. Only one of the three colleges that was beginning to demonstrate signs of change started off with aligned leadership. At the other two colleges, the technology implementation itself served as a learning process for both senior and project-level leaders. In both cases,

at least one leader recognized the technology's potential and was able to convey that vision to leaders at the other level.

Thus, based on our findings, we recommend that colleges considering engaging in technology-meditated reform consider three key steps. First, they should assemble implementation teams that include both strong senior and project leaders. Second, they should provide adequate support for project leaders so tha they have the authority to be seen as credible by advisers and other frontline staff, as well as have the legitimacy to convey staff needs to institutional leaders. And finally, they should focus on an adaptive, reform-oriented vision for change occurring at multiple levels -- structural, process and attitudinal -- a vision that connects technological tools to larger advising reforms.

Transformative change is challenging work requiring a great deal of collaboration. Implementation of new technologies and processes usually takes longer than anticipated. Identifying the right combination of senior and midlevel project leaders will not be easy. Supporting project leaders so that they have the authority to enact changes and the credibility to convey staff needs to senior leaders may be even harder still.

But investing in the careful selection and support of midlevel leaders is critical for visionary change to take root. Once aligned, the right kind of leadership supporting both the project implementation and the larger institution can make technology adoption a powerful tool for institutional transformation.

BIO

Serena Klempin is a research associate with the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Get the Daily News Update by email every weekday »

WANT TO ADVERTISE? CLICK HERE

INSIDE HIGHER ED CAREERS

WE HAVE 14,719 JOBS TO BROWSE

POST A JOB

I'm looking for ...

Keywords

Search Jobs

SEARCH TIPS

RELATED JOBS

BROWSE ALL

Associate Dean of General Studies (16-057)
North Idaho College
Coeur d'Alene, ID

PROVOST
Wofford College
Spartanburg, NC

VICE PRESIDENT FOR INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT
Austin College
Sherman, TX

DEAN OF NURSING
Mercy College of Health Sciences
IA

Program Director (SSSP) (COF)
Kern Community College District
Bakersfield, CA

Provost and Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs
University of Louisiana System
Baton Rouge, LA

Dean of the School of Art & Design
Fashion Institute of Technology
New York, NY

Dean of Academic Support Services
Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College
Orangeburg, SC

FEATURED EMPLOYERS

VIEW ALL

Pratt

About Pratt Institute Pratt Institute is a coeducational, private, professional college offering associate, bachelor and master's degree programs in...

SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Located in California's premier wine country 1 hour north of San Francisco, Sonoma State is a small campus with big ideas.With a tradition of...

MOST Viewed Commented

PAST: Day Week Month Year

Mitch Daniels draws praise and criticism for his comments on Yale and U of Missouri
Claremont McKenna dean resigns amid protests over race
University of Missouri looks ahead as it tries to combat race issues on campus
U of Illinois settles with professor unhired for controversial comments on Twitter
Trump, Carson, Clinton, Sanders on Mizzou
SUNY white- and black-only signs may lead to new public art guidelines
U of Louisville President Apologizes Again
A Mizzou president in the 1930s and '40s may have set the tone for today's crises (essay)

BACK TO TOP

1015 18TH STREET NW, SUITE 1100 | PH: 1-202-659-9208

COPYRIGHT © 2015