

STRUCTURED FOR CHANGE

BY MAURY COTTER

Higher education is facing some of its greatest challenges, including rising costs, diminishing resources, higher expectations for service excellence and accountability, and an increasing need for greater access. In response to these challenges, leaders around the world are looking for ways to improve, and sometimes transform, their institutions. They are designing major change initiatives and creating structures to advance those initiatives.

This article presents options to consider as you design your approach to change.

In 1999, a small group of people who were engaged in improving the effectiveness of their respective institutions started a national association to network and learn from each other. As of today, the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI) has 80 institutional members from 32 states and 7 nations.

One of the curious things about NCCI is the range of people it attracts.

Most networking groups bring together people from similar positions responsible for similar functions: registrars, faculty in marketing, provosts, deans of engineering, facilities planners. People who are drawn to improvement come from all these positions. In fact, NCCI has at least one of each of the above positions among its active members.

If you attend an NCCI event, you will find people who are officially charged with improvement responsibilities. Others have become engaged driven by

their personal interest in “how” they do their “real” jobs. Some are directors of continuous improvement offices, with various titles, reporting to different parts of their institutions. A number are faculty who are engaged in research, teaching, and applying concepts of change within their institutions and others. You will find presidents/chancellors, provosts, vice chancellors, directors who are interested in effective ways to transform their institutions and address their most challenging issues. You will find VP’s for administration looking for ways to use resources most efficiently, and student service leaders looking for ways to serve students most effectively.

Among institutions these people represent, you will not find two institutions with the same structure, the same title, the same name for their efforts, or the same approach.

In short, there are people in a broad range of institutions around the world, who are working in an even broader range of positions and functions in higher education, all actively seeking to significantly improve their institutions. And their approaches to improvement vary as much as they do.

We decided that this variation in approaches among our NCCI members was an interesting study waiting to happen. We began by surveying our members to document the similarities and differences. The executive summary of the study, “Models for Organizational Improvement: A Comparison,” is included as an addendum to this paper. The complete report may be found at www.ncci-cu.org/visitors/Publications/.

The survey does not answer the critical questions about which of the many structures and approaches are more likely to be most successful. However, in NCCI, we sometimes see new members

arrive who have been hired or assigned broad improvement efforts, but are placed in structures, or given unfortunate titles, or assigned functions that greatly limit their potential for success. We often wish we could go upstream and talk with the leaders of those institutions while they are designing their approaches, and offer some options to consider that might enhance their ultimate outcomes.

So, based on our experience and collaboration among institutions, together with observations from the survey, we offer the following in consideration of your institution's efforts to structure for change.

Leadership

Who should lead improvement efforts?

The short answer is "anyone can lead improvement efforts." You can personally lead improvement of your own sock drawer. So, it depends on the extensiveness of the improvement you want to take on.

Wherever you cap off leadership, change will be limited to the circle of control, or perhaps the circle of influence, of that position. Wonderful things can happen in a small unit that has a great director or chair or dean.

Often, an institution's improvement efforts start with pioneers in various parts of the institution, experimenting with innovative improvement in their particular areas or functions. These people can become great advocates to jump start broader efforts, with powerful stories and examples of success to build upon. Look for those leaders and engage them.

Many institutions place their efforts squarely in the administrative side of their institutions. And, most institutions

have tremendous potential for gains on the administrative side. The only caution we offer is that if your improvement efforts are led by the VP for administration and named "Efficient U for 2022", you can bet that you won't get invited by Anthropology to help rethink their curriculum. And if you are hoping to make major changes, like creating interdisciplinary research clusters or merging colleges, leadership from the VP for administration will not be sufficient.

At the same time, the loose hierarchy of higher education often enables change to be initiated by informal, thought leaders. Governance can have enormous leadership power – for or against change. Change can spread through "viral" growth, rather than relying on hierarchal deployment.

Bottom line: If you want to take on broad institutional change, an active role of top formal leaders is essential. Our survey indicated that 50% of the institutions' improvement efforts are led by either the president/chancellor or provost.

Engaging both formal and informal leadership can give you the greatest leverage for your change efforts.

Structure

Designing a structure to support improvement efforts

Is it best to create a special position or unit? If so, where should it report?

More and more, we are seeing institutions create offices or units charged with supporting/facilitating change initiatives, staffed with experts.

The survey we conducted indicated that the majority, 65% of the institutions, had developed such units/offices, no two

with the same name! Staffing ranged from a portion of an existing person's time to 65 people. Resources ranged from zero to nearly one-third reporting budgets of more than \$500,000.

A unit designed to support change efforts is best placed reporting to the leadership responsible for the change. Half of the offices in the survey report to the chancellor or provost, with the rest reporting to a variety of locations. One caution: a special unit can support and help drive change, but it cannot be responsible for leading it.

Our survey indicated that some institutions use external consultants to support their efforts and infuse the rest of the responsibilities into the jobs of leaders and key people throughout their institution.

Some institutions rely on improvement efforts to be taken on entirely by people through their existing positions. This can work when improvement becomes part of the culture and expectation of everyone in how they do their "real" jobs. While this is the ultimate aim of most improvement initiatives, most institutions have found the efforts need or benefit from more focused expertise provided by a dedicated staff/unit.

Some institutions see improvement as a training effort and place it in a human resource department. Training and development is a critical component of an improvement culture, but not sufficient if you are looking for significant change.

An interesting result of continuous improvement efforts is more fluidity within the institution with increased horizontal communication and integration. Institutions often see a movement away from our familiar silos and to a more integrated organization. This evolution can lead to many opportunities for process and structural changes over time that facilitate

horizontal connections and capitalize on the potential benefits.

Functions for Improvement

Aligning and integrating to leverage your efforts

Functions that advance improvement include: strategic planning, assessment, process improvement, organizational design/restructuring, project management, leadership development and training, employee assistance, reaccreditation, institutional research, and information technology.

A strong improvement initiative and culture will engage the above functions in an aligned way. Responsibilities for some may be placed in a special unit. The attached survey results indicate that most of the responding institutions have assigned responsibility for strategic planning and process improvement to a special unit.

Developing good partnerships across units with people responsible for these functions can greatly leverage your efforts. Some functions may be fulfilled through hired consultants.

Some institutions focus on process improvement without a strategic plan. Although that can work for awhile, it will not be very long before they start asking, "What is most important to improve? What will have the greatest impact?" That will lead directly into questions of "Who are we? Who do we serve? What do they need? Where do we want to be five years from now? What is the current reality? How do we get from here to there?" These are all questions of strategy. So, while you don't necessarily need to start with strategic planning, design your approach to allow for that logical progression. Make it easy and natural to connect improvement with strategy.

Consider seizing the opportunity of reaccreditation. Once every ten years,

each institution goes through a massive campus-wide review. Many institutions are designing their reaccreditation exercise to engage the campus and extended community in creating a launching pad for a strategic plan.

Bottom line: Align and integrate the many improvement related functions in your institution for maximum gains.

Academic and Administrative

Can you do it on the academic side?

So...can you imagine faculty actively engaging in improvement efforts? Collaborating across colleges and disciplines to advance an institution-wide change? Engaging in determining departments and colleges to merge or eliminate? Collaborating to create a residential learning community for freshmen?

It is possible. Among the NCCI institutions, you will find dozens of such examples. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, over 100 academic units in every school/college have requested help with strategic planning or process improvement from our Office of Quality Improvement. A faculty committee at the University of Minnesota identified and guided organizational transformations, including merging and eliminating colleges. Faculty at Alabama, Penn State, Rutgers, Berkeley, Belmont, Edinboro, Cornell, MIT, and many other institutions have actively engaged in improvement efforts.

If you are going to make significant change in your institution, you can't ignore the side of the institution where the mission is carried out.

"Negative faculty and staff attitudes toward continuous improvement" was listed as a key obstacle to success in

the NCCI survey. The key to faculty engagement is answering the question about what is useful to them. They are busy people. What value will it add for them to get engaged in planning, improvement, assessment, etc? Some will be intrinsically motivated and easily see the value of a stronger institution. Some will need a more direct link to how it will eventually or immediately help their own work and programs.

Most of us are familiar with the "herding cats" joke. It's easy to be distracted by trying to get everyone on board and engaged. Focus on those who want to see positive change. As anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Greater engagement and alignment has enormous value, but start with those who are motivated, create and communicate successes, and let that become a magnetic force.

Adapting Language and Approaches

Ensuring a cultural fit

UW-Madison's former chancellor David Ward came back from a Faculty Senate meeting one day having been soundly berated. He said, "I slipped and said the "C" word." The "C" word was "customer."

Ted Marchese, as editor of *Change* magazine, wrote an article in 1996 called "Bye, Bye, CQI, for Now" following a wave of institutional CI efforts in the early 1990's. The article predicted that "CQI" would return once the memory of the first failed efforts faded and the pressures to change rose. One of the primary reasons for the failings leading to Ted's "bye, bye" was the language and approaches used by institutions at that time. They tried to implement corporate approaches, complete with their language and "games" and came head to head with academic culture. Institutions whose

efforts survived through those times had infused their efforts using academic or common language, good questions, and sound methodology.

This new wave of institutional transformation in the last 5-10 years is owned and designed by higher education. But many who are designing the most aggressive approaches have done so after learning from corporations or other organizations. In fact, if you are looking for leading edge ideas for change, corporations are ahead of higher education by years, even a decade.

Higher education breeds a critical culture. It is sensitive to language and has a difficult time trusting that good ideas for how we run our institutions can come from outside academia.

Successful initiatives are aware and savvy about navigating this culture, but they don't let it confine their ideas to those that come from inside their walls.

I used to complain about the limitations of having to be careful about language and approaches. Then I realized that it forced me to get to the core of an approach; to boil it down to the essence in clear, common sense language.

Bottom line: Seek best practices from outside your institution. Choose those approaches that can be most useful. Then adapt them, including the language, to fit the needs and culture of higher education.

Integrating Improvement

What's on your meeting agenda?

What's on the agenda of your regular meetings? Is it fixing yesterday's problems? Or tackling your priorities for improvement? Are you making budget decisions that advance your priorities?

Are you targeting fundraising efforts to support your initiatives? When you define positions and make hiring decisions, are you considering what skills are most needed to advance your efforts? Are your change leaders and experts engaged in addressing the most critical issues? Is your reaccreditation effort aligned with your planning efforts? Do your speeches, presentations, and publications tell the story about your priorities?

Institutions that make the greatest gains on their improvement efforts have integrated their priorities into their "real" work.

Leveraging Success

Building momentum and multiplying gains

UW-Madison's chancellor, John Wiley, constantly encourages sharing successes and best practices. He notes that if something works well in one of our 120 departments, it's very likely to work, with minimal adaptation, in many of the other departments.

You can leverage improvements by creating venues for sharing successes. Some institutions, including Penn State, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, sponsor an annual campus-wide event to showcase and share improvements. This can result in many benefits, in addition to multiplying the application of a good idea. It provides a deadline for completing the effort, an incentive to measure success and demonstrate it, and the exercise of reflection on what went well that can be applied to the next effort.

Bottom line: Provide the opportunities to have your successes shared across campus and with other institutions, through events, publications, and other national venues. This will multiple the

impact and value added of each successful effort.

Communication, Communication *Telling the Story*

Faculty, in particular, will need a lot of evidence that continuous improvement and institutional effectiveness can make a positive difference for them. Share success stories widely. Provide institutional recognition for the individuals and groups who are making change happen. Keep up a steady stream of conversation about gains in institutional effectiveness, process improvements, and planning priorities. (It is more important that faculty and staff involved get the recognition for gains and successes than the office or initiative.)

Communication efforts can be through speeches, presentations, campus newspaper articles, web sites, brochures, brown bags, blogs, learning communities, how-to guides, and showcasing efforts, as previously mentioned.

The effort required to communicate thoroughly campus-wide should not be underestimated.

The opportunity to shift peoples views through positive examples “close to home” is a powerful tool for change.

Summary

In summary, campus leaders should carefully consider these elements in designing or restructuring continuous improvement and institutional effectiveness efforts:

- Leadership and organizational placement/structure
- Aligning and integrating improvement functions
- Focusing on the academic as well as administrative side
- Adapting approaches and language to the culture
- Leveraging success for maximum gains
- Communicating to increase learning and shift culture.

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More About NCCI

To find out more about the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI), see www.ncci-cu.org.

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Appendix A

Executive Summary

Models for Organizational Improvement: A Comparison

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A survey of members of the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI) was administered in the fall of 2006. The aim of “Models for Organizational Improvement: A Comparison” was to better understand how institutions organize their continuous improvement and institutional effectiveness efforts and to identify the common patterns among members. Thirty (30) institutions responded to the on-line survey for a response rate of 43%.

The majority, 67%, were public universities. The survey revealed great variety among the institutions. The majority, 65%, said that a formal office or unit charged with responsibility for continuous improvement and institutional effectiveness was in place. No office or unit title was the same. Although leaders had a variety of titles, almost half of those included the word “Director.” Half reported to the chancellor, president, or provost.

Three fourths reported that they provided strategic planning and process improvement services and two thirds reported that they provided institutional self-assessment. Half provided project management and training and development. Relatively few provided leadership development or restructuring assistance.

About two thirds (60%) make use of a coordinating or advisory committee and 57% use a campus-wide strategic plan to guide their activities. About half reported web sites for sharing improvement efforts and comprehensive training programs.

The majority said they partnered with information technology (63%), HR/Training/development (60%), and institutional research (57%). Half (50%) partnered with reaccreditation.

Respondents were asked, “What are the top two factors that account for the success of your institution’s continuous improvement efforts?” The factor mentioned most often was support of senior campus leadership including chancellors, presidents, provosts, and vice presidents. Other factors cited included: campus strategic plan, vision or priorities; cross-functional and inclusive approaches; aligning with values and cultures of higher education; reaccreditation; and supportive campus culture.

Respondents were asked, “What are the top two obstacles that inhibit change and continuous improvement?” Negative faculty and staff attitudes toward continuous improvement and resources were cited by about a third of respondents. Inertia, university size and complexity, decentralization, turf issues were also cited. Obstacles to success were more idiosyncratic than factor supporting success.

The survey suggests further discussion and study by NCCI in three areas:

1. What role, if any, might NCCI have in developing and supporting department chairs, deans, directors and campus leadership?
2. How are NCCI institutions effectively using web technology and how could web technology be used to greater benefit?
3. What is the empirical relationship between placement in the organization and impact?

The full study may be found at the web site of the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI), www.ncci-cu.org/visitors/Publications/.