**How to Create a Problem-Solving Institution (and Avoid Organizational Silos)**

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Abstract:

The author discusses the "silo mentality" in higher education, which is related to conducting multidisciplinary research and all of the bureaucracy that such endeavors entail. The author considers the problems of creating new academic units for such endeavors and reorganizing academic units that already exist, which are both traditional approaches. It is suggested that schools focus on changing their culture and not their structure and that schools avoid looking for an easy solution.

BIG, COMPLEX PROBLEMS require the work of multidisciplinary teams. Consider prostate cancer. Decades of research and billions of dollars have led to the understanding t that neither doctors, chemists, biologists, nor engineers can r arrive at a cure on their own. That multifaceted approach is gaining acceptance among the various individuals and organizations concerned with solving great problems. When giving research money to colleges, foundations and government agencies often require that investigators come from multiple academic disciplines as a condition of financial support.

Yet inside higher education, it's hard to talk about a college's impact on the world's great problems without getting immersed in a conversation about institutional structure and faculty rewards. The silo mentality and viciousness of academic infighting in higher education are legendary. Discussions of innovation and how to attack big problems often bring up questions about how the college should be organized, whether the new program ought to report to a dean or the provost, or if the leader should be a center director or a department chair.

Of course, actually dealing with the issue of global warming is more important than determining who gets credit for it or whether to create a new unit to house the project. Creating the right culture and the right team with the expertise, resources, and passion to tackle a problem will certainly have greater impact than arguing about developmental structures or the overhead allocation for a particular grant or contribution. But while academics usually agree in the abstract that solving crucial problems is more important than debating organizational issues, putting that belief into practice is difficult.

Unfortunately, many of the traditional ways that institutions have tried to avoid a silo mentality do not work. The conventional responses are fundamentally flawed. Consider the following common examples and stories:

**Creating permanent interdisciplinary structures.** An entrepreneurial faculty member decides to tackle global warming. To do so, she has to bring together colleagues--chemists, biologists, and physicists--who have the technical expertise to produce new energy sources. She must also have the participation of those who have the ability to understand environmental impacts: marine scientists, climate specialists, and computer modelers. People who recognize the policy implications--political scientists, policy, studies faculty, sociologists, and even philosophers--are also needed.

Rather than simply assemble the team, the entrepreneurial faculty member proposes to the provost the creation of a new School of Climate Change. He protests that the administrative COSTS of the program will he high because a new dean and development staff as well as lab and office space are required.

But our enterprising young faculty member gets a big oil company to provide a $50-million gift, creating the new School of Climate Change. The provost relents because there's now enough money to support the new project and attendant costs for administrators and faculty members. The president agrees because a high-visibility project has been created on his watch, and the development staff gets to count the big gift in its campaign total.

A high-profile dean for the new school is recruited with great fanfare, but the appointment triggers the need for more administrative infrastructure than the big gift provides. Years later, the $2.5-million in revenue from the endowment gift has generated a new vice provost and scores of new nonacademic employees. Meanwhile, the earth is still getting warmer.

**Reorganizing existing units.** A new president comes to a university. In her initial listening tour, she hears of growing frustration from students who are interested in solving the world's great problems but fail to see a correlation between the academic disciplines and their social concerns. As a result, many of the best students spend huge amounts of time and energy on causes they believe in at the expense of the classroom experience.

Other people are also frustrated. The alumni of the university hire recent graduates and conclude they cannot write. For some reason, those graduates have not taken "Introduction to Shakespeare," which the alumni think everyone should study. In their view, the great problems of society are the result of the erosion of traditional academic values. Faculty members also express frustration. Humanists believe it is obvious that theory is where the action is; social scientists are stampeding to quantitative models; and the scientists are harshly divided between those who want to work on multidisciplinary problems and those who want to protect the core of their disciplines.

The conversation escalates to the trustees. The president announces that she is appointing a blue-ribbon panel to examine the organization of the university. There is much infighting and politicking over who is to serve on the panel. After a year, the panel produces a list of recommendations that involve the reorganization of the institution into new units such as life sciences, humanistic theory, environment, and quantitative behavior. The new plan is put in place, but the faculty members and chairs in the traditional disciplines never buy into it because it does not reflect any fundamental change in the way teaching and research are undertaken. At the first hint of an economic downturn requiring university budget cuts, the traditionalists assert their point of view under the auspices of fiscal discipline, and the old organization predominates once again.

How can colleges avoid such situations? What can and should be done instead? Some suggestions include:

**Focus on culture, not structure.** Colleges should create a culture that values solving problems over organizational self-interest. Such cultural change will not come without sustained effort from academic leadership. Presidents and provosts cannot put "make the university more problem-focused" or "break down the silos" on their to-do lists and then hope to cross it off after the completion of a short-term effort. Institutions can become more problem-focused only with a sustained commitment and broad support from leaders throughout the campus.

In 10 interviews we conducted at Stanford University, the conversation invariably began with the statement that Stanford's mission was to deal with the world's biggest problems, a message that is consistently heard from the president's office. Equally important, virtually all of the collaborative programs we learned of at Stanford received early moral and financial support from the president's office. In short, with a consistent message over a significant period of time and strategic encouragement, cultural change can take place even in an institution as complex and diverse as a research university.

**Beware of the quick fix.** Making leadership appointments almost always generates enthusiasm and optimism in organizations. But it is unlikely that a single person has the ability to solve what university leaders have struggled with for years. A president committed to a problem-solving culture needs help from the deans of the various schools, and those deans must be committed to the mission and have a mind-set that values collaboration. Drew Faust, president of Harvard University, asked Michael Porter, a professor at Harvard Business School, to run a session at a dean's retreat that focused on the competitive advantage that "being part of Harvard University" gave to each member of the university. The idea was to build a collaborative mind-set based on mutual self-interest. In making leadership appointments universities must put more emphasis on such an institutional mentality.

**Use task forces sparingly.** As a means of seeking community wide consensus, task forces are a great temptation for university leaders. When a difficult problem arises, it is easy to name a panel to examine it and produce recommendations. That provides a respite for six months or a year while the task force does its work. But the recommendations can be difficult or impossible to put in place because the people making the recommendations are not responsible for carrying them out. The end result is often another report that sits on the shelf, with little follow-through. Meanwhile, months or years elapse while important problems remain unsolved.

**Focus on the mission, not external rankings.** Colleges will be ranked as long as producing lists sells magazines and draws readers to Web sites. But unfortunately, performance that is driven by external rankings can produce unintended consequences inconsistent with the institutional mission and conducive to a silo mentality. Most ranking formulas provide external measures that are unlikely to encourage a focus on the world's great challenges. The alternative to being driven by external rankings is to devise measures that are consistent with the university's mission and clearly measure the objectives of the institution. This allows the creation of a mind-set that says, "Here's what we want to do," instead of, "Here's how we get ahead of Universities X, Y, and Z in the rankings."

**Encourage temporary combinations as alternatives to permanent structures.** Colleges should work to assemble problem-based, multidisciplinary teams to attack issues without encumbering the institution with a major long-term commitment every time such a team comes together. These teams would be assembled to carry out projects, not to make recommendations on new initiatives for the university. If administrative support and recognition can be achieved without creating something new and permanent, or reorganizing some existing department or school, people can direct their energy to solving problems and away from protecting their turf.

Such problem-oriented teams could have five years to demonstrate their utility and could generally be supported with expendable, one-time resources during that time. The assumption should be that most of such groupings will maximize their use and sunset at the end of that initial period. That is what happens with most start-up ventures.

A few of the undertakings will survive the first five years and become candidates for more-permanent status based upon the achievement of clearly articulated, measurable goals. In the second phase, which might reasonably be expected to span another five years, the enterprise would attempt to reach sustainability through whatever means made sense. Of course, the second phase will, in all probability, look quite different from the first, but what exists will have stood the test of time and have a much higher likelihood of long-term success.

At Stanford, for example, seed funding for Bio-X, a major interdisciplinary program in life sciences that has stimulated more than 200 scientific partnerships and spawned many biomedical innovations and scientific discoveries, was completely accomplished with one-time money. When we asked John L. Hennessy, the president of the university, what would have happened if Bio-X had failed, he said, "Well, I would have had a very nice building that I could do something else with."

It is certainly easier for academic leaders to make a commitment to a project that is battle-tested and has proved its viability as opposed to one that is merely a glimmer in the eye of a promising young faculty member--even if it has been converted into a spectacular PowerPoint presentation. The major advantage of a temporary approach is that it places time, energy, and focus on tackling problems and relegates organizational structure to the back of the room--at least in the initial stages of a new enterprise. At some point, such matters must be dealt with, but only when new ideas have become viable concerns.

University presidents, deans, and provosts hear good ideas every day. Turning the right ideas into reality and empowering the people who create them requires sustained leadership and management qualities like compassion and empathy. At bottom it demands leadership that will stay the course with a commitment to creating a culture that places solving world challenges ahead of organizational structure, rules, and regulations.

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By Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein

Holden Thorp is chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Buck Goldstein is an entrepreneur in residence and a senior lecturer in the department of economics at the university. This essay is adapted from Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century, being published next month by the University of North Carolina Press.

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