

Perceived Barriers to Innovation:

First Report from a Study on Innovation in Higher Education

Laura Palmer-Noone

Decent articles in popular journals and newspapers, as well as a plethora of books, have contained a running commentary attacking the three hundred-year history of higher education in the United States. This attack supports the general public's perceptions of the inadequacies of traditional academic programs. In short, the public perceives higher education to lack any ability to effect change and finds that most institutions are anything but innovative. Institutions that fail to adapt and change ultimately die. While higher education has been largely successful in America with relatively little change and innovation, the new millennium has brought with it a renewed sense of urgency regarding the need for higher education to remake itself. Accrediting bodies, the United States Department of Education and corporate America are all reflecting the public's demands that higher education become more innovative and accountable.

This study was undertaken in an attempt to identify barriers to change. Although the participants may not be able to identify the actual cause for the inability to innovate, the perceptions of key decision-makers in institutions of higher education are instructive as to the realities these institutions face.

Methodology

Over a period of six months, chief academic officers, presidents or other key decision-makers of regionally accredited institutions of higher education were interviewed. The sample was limited to institutions that awarded degrees at the baccalaureate level or higher and the sample was stratified by size of enrollment, regional accrediting body, and public versus independent status. The interviews were semi-structured around a scripted set of thirteen discussion topics. These questions appear at the conclusion of the article.

Study Demographics

Approximately 125 colleges and universities were asked to participate in this telephone interview study. Twenty institutions declined participation. The most frequent reason given for declining participation was fear of revealing proprietary information or trade secrets. At the time this article was written, 47 institutions had participated. The individuals responding were 81% male and the majority of the respondents were chief academic officers (68%) or presidents (28%.) Twenty-six percent of the responding institutions had enrollments of less than 5,000 full-time students, 21% had between 5,001 and 15,000 full-time students and the largest participation came from insti-

A Disturbing Study?

This article is based on partial findings of an ongoing study sponsored by InterEd and the Phoenix Institute. When Laura Palmer-Noone approached us to sponsor her as an intern in connection with her doctoral program we felt indeed fortunate. Her experience as provost of an institution that is widely regarded as a leader in innovation provides her with unique qualifications to interview other senior administrators regarding the challenges they face in positioning their institutions to meet the rapidly changing needs of our society.

A quick read of this report may leave the reader discouraged, perhaps disturbed, by the narrow choices and bland prospects for innovation. There is much to support this view. Most notably, the fact that existing institutions will not change quickly enough to preserve their markets. A second read, we are convinced, will suggest several paths toward more rapid innovation, although most will involve creative destruction and re-birth. Phoenix chose its image well, it seems. This study will continue.

Robert W. Tucker
Editor-in-Chief

tutions with enrollments over 15,001. All six regional accrediting bodies were represented in this sample, but the highest participation came from the North Central Association region with 47% of the respondents coming from that region. Eighty-nine percent of the responding institutions were not-for-profits, and 11% of the responding institutions were from the for-profit higher education sector.

Most of these leaders believed that their greatest challenges to innovation were to be found inside their institution.

Internal Barriers

The first question asked of the participants was for them to identify the primary obstacles to innovation faced by their institution. The pattern of response to this question was unmistakable. Most of these leaders believed that their greatest challenges to innovation were to be found inside their institution. A majority of respondents (38) cited tradition, institutional culture, or institutional inertia as a significant barrier to innovation. As one leader put it, “inertia is a villain in the marketplace but is worshiped in higher education because we relish tradition.”

Inertia is a villain in the marketplace but is worshiped in higher education because we relish tradition.

The effects of faculty governance also led the list of barriers. In various ways, a majority of the institutions working under faculty governance (19 mentions) believed innovation would be possible if their school was managed rather than gov-

erned in such a loose way. Other forms of internal bureaucracy and process were cited as barriers to innovation by nine respondents. Of the frequently mentioned external barriers, participants cited state government oversight (12 mentions) and costs, funding or other resource issues (11 mentions).

Barriers mentioned less frequently were accreditation, the federal government including the United States Department of Education, governing boards, politics and tenure. One large private institution described the primary barrier as the “yes, minister” phenomenon. “Academic leadership is often separated from those doing the work. Innovation driven from the top isn’t successful unless subordinates see the value of it for them.” Another public institution viewed the primary barrier to innovation as a function of expectations. “People lack the expectation that innovation is a part of what they should be doing in teaching. We simply haven’t required it.” Two large public institutions referenced the “department as an island” issue. “The world has challenges but the university has departments. Most issues require integrative thinking that is interdisciplinary and our departments don’t allow for that.” This phenomenon was also described as the horizontal university in that faculty are more concerned with what other faculty in their discipline are doing at other institutions and not as concerned across departments or disciplines within the university structure. When asked what these institutions planned to do to overcome the barriers, one public institution interviewee suggested that the best plan to overcome the

problem of human resistance to change was to “kill large numbers.” “HMOs will be the model of higher education and the pressure will be on institutions from the public and the legislature to curtail the power of the faculty.” Another large state university chief academic officer responded “I plan to crawl into a fetal position and hope that it will all go away.” The primary plan to overcome obstacles of faculty and human resources related issues was generally along the lines of finding a way to reward innovation in those individuals that showed interest and use their performance as a grass roots effort toward change. One large institution characterized this as “trying to prime the pump.” When it came to dealing with issues surrounding current structures, policies and regulations, one state institution described the process as “creative insubordination” and admitted that it was rarely successful. “At best we get partial victories, and they eat up time.”

People lack the expectation that innovation is a part of what they should be doing in teaching.

Decision Processes as a Barrier

The second question asked participants if their ability to innovate was constrained by institutional decision processes. Sixteen of the institutions stated that there was little to no adverse affect on innovation as a result of institutional decision processes, but 23 respondents cited that these were substantial barriers to innovation. Public institutions were more likely to perceive institutional decision processes as a

substantial barrier. In response to this question, one state institution respondent felt that the appropriate first step to make it more innovative would be the elimination of tenure: “It isn’t really a shared governance issue as much as it is that we have tenured dinosaurs. We have implemented post-tenure review, but faculty tend to protect themselves as a group.” Another state institutional representative quipped: “All innovation is faculty centered. Administration has given in and there is absolute confusion over the roles. We aren’t managers — the control mechanisms are all centered on faculty. There is an assumption of right by faculty and the faculty senate.” Finally, one state institutional leader went so far as to challenge unified state university systems: “Systems never foster distinctiveness — they always homogenize.”

When asked what these institutions planned to do to overcome the barriers . . . a large state university chief academic officer responded “I plan to crawl into a fetal position and hope it will all go away.”

External Barriers

Accreditation, Licensure and Government

The third question of this survey asked whether the respondents felt their ability to innovate was constrained by federal laws, accreditation guidelines or state regulations. Those institutions that found accreditation to be problematic toward the implementation of innovation were substantially more likely to reference programmatic accreditation

as an impediment than regional accreditation. Those institutions that were within the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools were more likely to see regional accreditation as a barrier. One institution that operates within the Middle States region said: “Middle States has been very supportive. WASC and SACS used to be, but now they just react and are phobic about abuses. The irony is that the abusing institutions were never accredited anyway.” As one private institution described it, “accrediting agencies are there to perpetuate themselves.”

Systems never foster distinctiveness—they always homogenize.

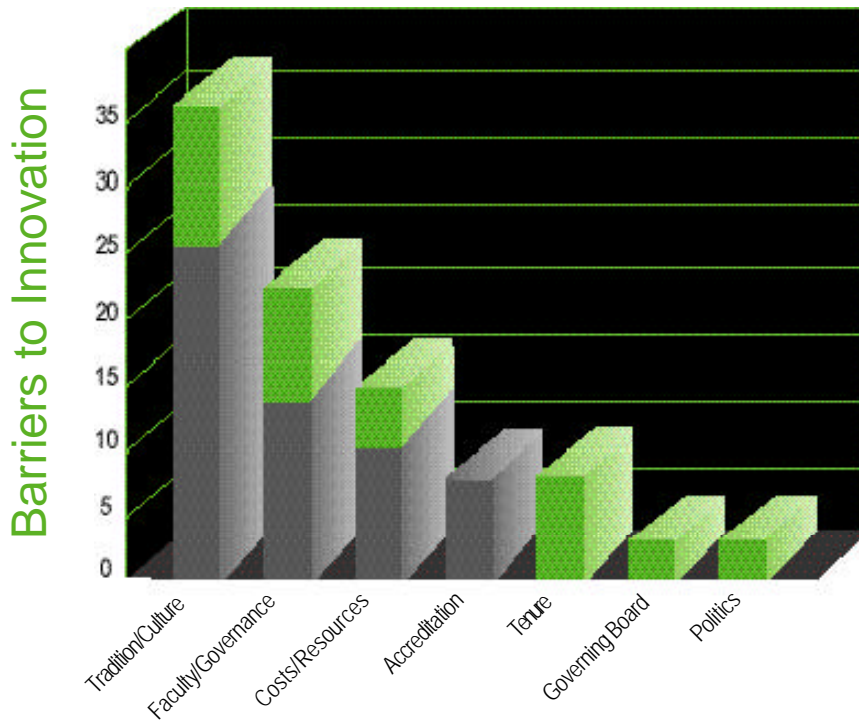
Most institutions felt that accreditation needed to focus on outcomes-based evaluation in reality rather than empty rhetoric and move away from criteria-based evaluation. Many institutions supported the standardization of accreditation and a focus on accomplishment of the institution’s stated mission and goals. Among the most likely cited barriers to innovation in the area of programmatic accreditation were AACSB accreditation and NCATE accreditation. A state institution described these specialized accreditations as ‘protectionistic’: “They are inhibitive of innovations. They are merely an external mechanism through which faculty extend their power and control.” As stated by another large public institution respondent, “specialized accreditation is used by the disciplines to block innovation. The faculty say we can’t do something because it doesn’t meet our accreditation restrictions. Often that isn’t true,

but it is used to block innovation.” Among those institutions that mentioned federal barriers to innovation, the issues likely to be mentioned were the United States Department of Education’s provisions on Title IV funding for guaranteed student loans and grants. These regulations are believed to be presumptive of process outcomes and they encourage the process based on very little practical skill.

The Internet changes everything. We need to make geography and time irrelevant.

Geography

Participants were asked to what extent geographically defined boundaries constrained innovation. Although many institutions had defined service areas, many institutions that were not so encumbered also felt geography created limitations. One independent institution stated: “Accreditation makes boundaries out of states. Moving across state lines requires accreditation approval as well as state licensing.” Most institutions referenced some constraint by virtue of geography. One state institution viewed its service area limitations as a substantial barrier: “We are not a system, we are tribes. Internal competition is great in metro areas and our underlying antiquated structure of higher education has created a system that inhibits cooperation and integration. Our geographical separation isn’t a rational distributed model. Our system assumes a rational model and that doesn’t exist.” Another state institution stated: “Much of this is turf wars. The Board of Regents doesn’t do a



good job in thinking about these issues because there is no political or public pressure to do so. Competition among the state institutions has created unnecessary paranoia. I don't know how to overcome this." When asked what might be an effective way for institutions of a state to join with other organizations to get the advantages of scale and leverage, most institutions pointed toward partnerships, joint ventures and statewide consortia. One large public university pointed out one of the issues of service areas: "The Internet changes everything. We need to make geography and time irrelevant."

I would change the belief that faculty's work occurs on campus

Outsourcing

Question four of the structured interview asked participants whether they felt their ability to innovate was constrain

ed by barriers to outsourcing educational services to competent vendors. Only 12% felt in any way constrained in their ability to outsource. As stated by one large institution respondent, "We are willing to outsource. The issue is finding competent vendors who can do it better than we can and for less money than what we pay." State institutions were slightly more likely to perceive the ability to outsource as restricted. One large state institution indicated that real outsourcing takes a lot of planning and approvals throughout the system. This same administrator felt that the only way to remedy the situation would be to change state personnel rules to allow more partnering and outsourcing.

Future Markets and Preparing for Change

Participants were then asked about new and emerging markets that would challenge the

ability of their institution to respond. The vast majority of the responding institutions saw many new markets and most felt that responding to these new markets would be a challenge for their institutions. However, the institutions were split on their relative ability to respond to the challenges. Among the most often cited new markets were online education, distance education, international education, business and corporate training, continuing education for lifelong learning, and technology related instruction. The most often cited challenges the respondents felt would be encountered in meeting these new markets were faculty and the expense associated with adopting technology. One administrator from a state institution stated: "Faculty aren't interested in coping with this. They want to get the teaching out of the way so that they can get to their research. They aren't flexible and it would take a very big green wave to change their interest." Most institutions noted that the role of the faculty would have to be different: "The local challenge will be faculty. They are unwilling to teach at night or off campus and don't want to adopt technology." "Faculty must rethink their roles and be willing to create something different. We need more flexibility."

(Faculty) . . . are unwilling to teach at night or off campus and don't want to adopt technology.

Distance Learning

According to the United States Department of Education, between 1994-1995 and 1997-98, the number of U.S. postsecondary institutions offering distance

courses increased from 33% to 44%. During that same time, the number of course offerings and enrollments in distance education doubled and the percentage of institutions using asynchronous Internet-based technologies nearly tripled from 22% to 60% and the number of degree and certificate programs nearly doubled. A series of questions were posed to the participants to determine the extent to which their institutions have joined in the clear trend toward offering distance education. Participants were first asked whether they had a coordinated or institution-wide plan to promote distance learning, especially via the Internet. Of the independent institutions, only 50% had any type of coordinated plan to promote distance learning and only 54% of

the state institutions had such a plan. Many institutions that answered candidly stated they had no plan and also indicated that they would publicly proclaim that they did have a plan. Many of the institutions that felt they had a plan also admitted that they were not aggressively developing the plan nor was it a fully developed plan. When asked whether the institution had a separate department dedicated to addressing distance learning issues, only 46% of the independent institutions responded in the affirmative. Fifty-seven percent of the public institutions claimed to have such a separate department or function. However, given the percentages of those institutions that claimed to have a plan, it would appear that many of these separate departments are functioning with-

out a plan or any mode of integration into the rest of the university or college system.

Of the independent institutions only 50% had any type of coordinated plan to promote distance learning and only 54% of the state institutions had such a plan.

Choices for Change

The final two questions posed to the participants asked what policy or deeply held beliefs they would change to encourage innovation. Thirty-nine percent of the independent institutions and 10% of the public institutions could point to no specific policy that was inhibiting innovation. However, among those independent institutions that did note a

Question Topics Employed in Interviews

1. What are the primary obstacles to innovation? What do you plan to do to overcome these obstacles?
2. In what way, if any, is your ability to innovate constrained by institutional decision processes?
3. What might be done to give top administrators more freedom to make quicker, more entrepreneurial decisions?
4. Do you feel your ability to innovate is constrained by federal, accreditation or state regulations and traditions? If so, what federal, accreditation or state regulations and traditions might be altered to allow more flexibility?
5. Do you feel your ability to innovate is constrained by barriers to outsourcing selected educational services to competent vendors? If so, what might be done to lower barriers to buying educational services from outside vendors?
6. Do you feel your ability to innovate is constrained by geographically defined boundaries? If so, what are the most effective ways for institutions of a state to join with other organizations to get the advantages of scale and leverage?
7. Looking forward the next five to ten years, do you see new and emerging markets that will challenge the ability of your institution (as presently configured) to respond? What are these markets? What challenges do they present?
8. Looking forward the next 5-10 years, do you see substantial changes ahead in the form of learners' preferences for the delivery of higher education? What changes do you see? Will these changes challenge the ability of your institution (as presently configured) to respond? If yes, what challenges do they present for your institution?
9. Do you feel that you have an accurate picture regarding the distance learning programs at your institution? Do you offer degrees solely via distance learning? How many? What are they? Do you offer certificates solely via distance learning? How many? What are they?
10. Does your institution have a coordinated or institution-wide plan to promote distance learning, especially via the Internet? Does your institution have a separate department or other administrative authority to address distance learning issues?
11. Does your institution have a coordinated or institution-wide plan to create and manage corporate learning services? Is the growth of corporate learning services a significant part of your development plan?
12. If you could change one major policy to facilitate innovation, what would that be?
13. If you could change one deeply institutionalized belief (culture) to facilitate innovation, what would that be?

policy barrier, most were related to budgeting and funding of research and development: “We need to allow for research and development funds. It is hard to budget for things that are not created yet.” Public institutions were far more likely to articulate specific policy barriers related to state regulations (7 mentions) and faculty governance (6 mentions). Several state institutions focused on tenure and faculty reward systems: “The tenure system needs to change so that the criteria for tenure decisions could include more innovative expressions.” “Change the faculty rewards and incentives to move toward Boyer’s definition of scholarship.”

Businesses don’t look for someone with a narrowly focused degree in economics, they look for more broad-based thinking. We need to break down the departmental thought process.

When asked about the institutionalized beliefs that they would change to facilitate innovation, all but two institutions had something to say. Many independent and public institutions (38%) pointed toward faculty beliefs regarding roles: “We need to change the attitude of traditional faculty that the only way to learn is direct student-to-faculty interaction in a classroom.” “Tenure.” “Faculty governance models need to change.” “We need to change the belief that you can’t fire tenured faculty.” “I would change the belief that faculty’s work occurs on campus. We need to be offering contracts that commit faculty to instructional services any day of the week and at any time to accommodate new technologies.” “Alter current expectations about tenure to enable individuals to do

things differently.” “I would change the belief that research is more highly valued than teaching.” “We need to get away from the departmental mode of thinking. We need to be more interdisciplinary. Businesses don’t look for someone with a narrowly focused degree in economics, they look for more broad-based thinking. We need to break down the departmental thought process.” “I would change tenure and implement post-tenure review. It needs more teeth.” Five institutions would change beliefs that technology assisted or distance learning is inferior: “I would change the belief that there is less quality to distance education.” “I would change the belief that distance education is a plot to do away with quality of classroom instruction.” Three institutions specifically mentioned seat time as a belief or culture they would change: “I would change the belief that time for deliberation is directly related to quality.” The attitude that learning must occur within 50 minute sections, on campus for 15 weeks.” Six other institutions noted inertia, tradition or resistance to change in attitudes: “I would change the legacy of routine – inertia. We do it that way because we always have. We need to promote partnerships with community and provide incentives for good service.” One state institution remarked: “We need to change the belief that we are fine. We aren’t and we are going to have someone eat our lunch. Don’t rail against change just because it is change.” A very innovative public institution may well have characterized it best: “The reformer of today is the dictator of tomorrow. Today’s innovator is tomorrow’s keeper of the orthodoxy.”

I would change the belief that there is less quality to distance education.

Conclusion

While the results of this study may not be surprising, it should concern each of us in higher education that we are still struggling to find ways to be innovative and that these struggles often conclude in failure. The types of problems cited by the responding institutions are not recent issues, but are the same ones that have plagued colleges and universities for years. But the new millennium may well spell the death of many institutions that fail to change and embrace the new economy and the new student. Those that survive are likely to be vastly changed institutions from those we attended.

Laura Palmer-Noone, JD, is Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Phoenix.

*Phoenix Institute
824 W. Ashbourne Drive
Eagle, ID 83616
208/938-9007 208/938-5003 (fax)*