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Promoting and Sustaining Innovation

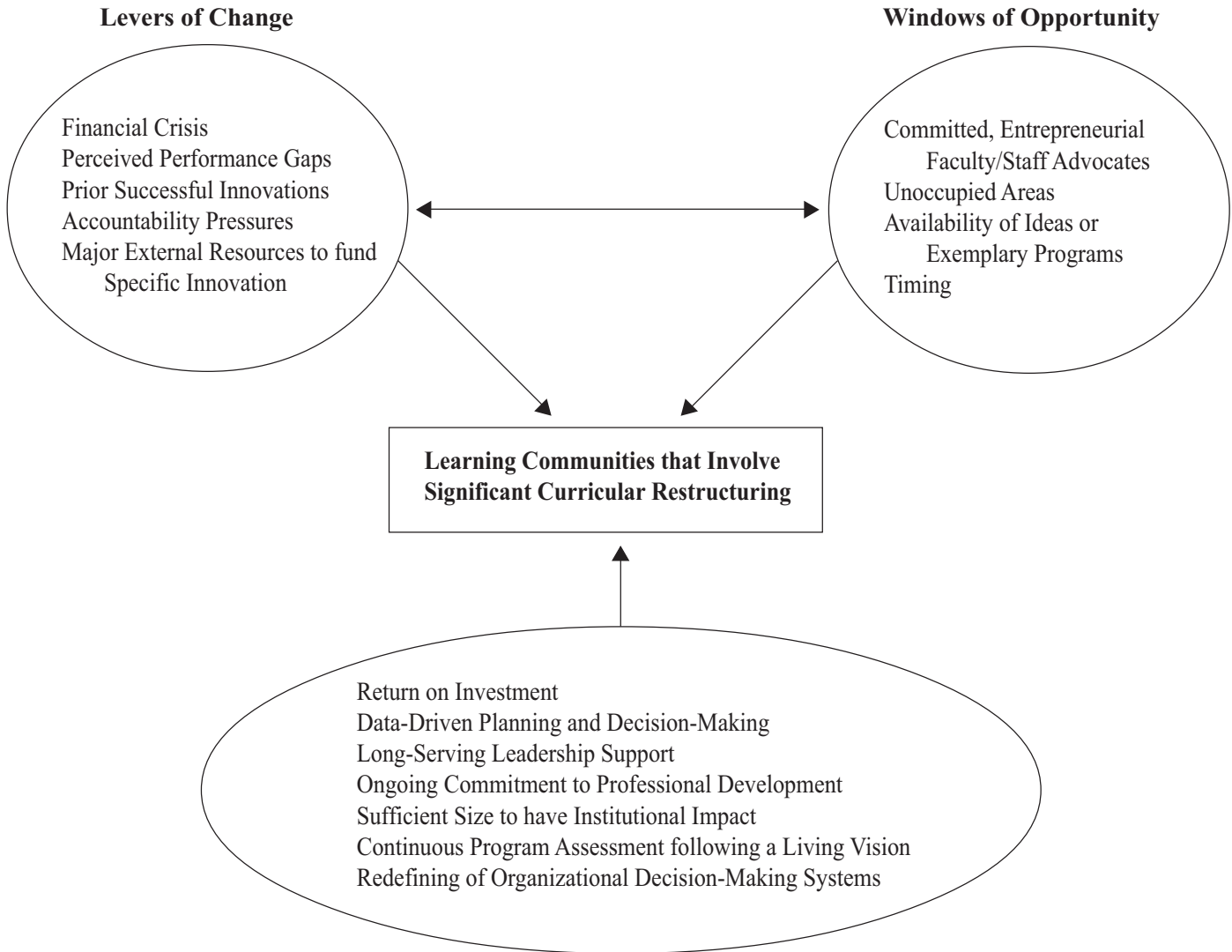
What lessons do successful learning communities that involve significant curricular restructuring offer other campuses? What factors enabled the institutions to introduce significant learning community structures? How have they been able to sustain their learning community innovations in financially difficult times?

At least two sets of conditions enable institutions to create significant learning communities that involve significant curricular restructuring: “Levers of Change,” and “Windows of Opportunity.” There is also a series of conditions that enable such innovations to be sustained over time. Figure 7 describes the conditions that often provide an opening for significant innovation.

Levers of Change factors can be used by institutional and faculty leaders and change agents to push their colleges and universities to promote and implement major innovations. Windows of Opportunity include factors that form the institutional context that create a college or university environment that is conducive to change. For example, having creative, committed department chairs may be seen as a lever of change, while dramatic change in fiscal resources (positive or negative) represents a window of opportunity for change. When the existing levers for change are used with the windows of opportunity, real systematic change is possible. If they are not used but avoided or manipulated to maintain the status quo, then they may form the institutional context (i.e., they could actually constitute a window of opportunity that is missed.) For example, in our earlier discussions of Muddling Through, we find most institutions avoid the implications and opportunities that such financial difficulties present. Rather than treated as a lever for change, serious, potentially long-term financial difficulties are seen as institutional conditions to be finessed and muddled through. Similarly with accountability pressures, most institutions do not respond to demands for demonstration of student learning outcomes. Rather, they treat these pressures as a nuisance that they hope will pass them by.

All four factors listed under Windows of Opportunity—Committed, Entrepreneurial, Faculty/Staff Advocates, Unoccupied Areas, Timing, Availability of Ideas/Exemplary Programs—are part of the institutional context that enhance the possibility for significant change.

Figure 7.
Critical Factors in Sustaining Learning Communities



Levers of Change

Levers of change are events or activities that change agents can use to push for change. In many cases, campuses have a choice about whether to react defensively or to use these levers to push for positive change.

Financial Crises: Faced with difficult revenue reductions, institutions can create sizable learning communities that are able to reduce the costs per student by increasing the number of students who are academically successful (i.e., increasing retention) and by increasing the number of students taught by faculty members and others while enhancing student learning (as demonstrated by the assessment of student learning outcomes). Holding on to enhancing student learning as the overriding objective is critical in this process.

Perceived Performance Gaps: Perceived performance gaps may also motivate change. Events such as the arrival of a new leader, program reviews, and changes in student enrollments and student demographics may heighten awareness of performance gaps and lead to a recognized need for change. At one community college, for example, a statewide study of student pass rates in mathematics courses led to a discussion of using learning communities to increase these rates. At the University of Texas at El Paso, recognition that many of the students in this Hispanic-serving institution were not succeeding in the sciences led to a major learning community intervention.

Accountability Pressures: Increasingly, external accreditation groups, state and federal legislatures, higher education coordinating councils, and the public generally have expressed dismay at the increasing costs of higher education, student attrition, and the lack of demonstration of student learning. By emphasizing student learning outcomes, learning communities have the potential to meet these external demands in a creative and productive way. Many learning communities have produced strong evidence of their effectiveness on such measures as time-to-degree, retention, and graduation rates.

Prior Successful Innovations: A history of successful innovations often creates a campus environment that is receptive to further innovations. This institutional context for innovation and change over time creates a reservoir of faculty and staff talent and a willingness to take risks and to attempt change. Sometimes, prior successful innovations that changed organizational systems now enable subsequent changes. For example, once a registrar's office has developed mechanisms for arranging learning communities with linked courses, it is easier to develop administrative systems for more educationally powerful and cost-effective team-taught learning communities that integrate service-learning. Another example is a library restructuring that provides sophisticated digital resources and facilities for peer-group learning and tutorials, which then increases the potential for greater uses of technology that can reduce faculty time. Such a library/learning environment could also facilitate the redesign of large multisectioned introductory courses. La Guardia Community College and certain departments at the University of Washington which were known for their history of innovation in a variety of areas, became the seedbed for learning community development.

One danger of such a change-oriented institutional culture is that it can encourage too much innovation that is not focused on clear institutional priorities, thereby dissipating precious and scarce faculty and financial resources. Hence, one of the key sustainability issues (to be discussed later) is for large (and small) innovations to focus on a clear institutional vision and have continuous assessment and refinement of the innovation to keep it aligned with that vision.

Major External Resources to Fund Specific Innovations: Obviously, having external resources to create innovations that have the potential to reduce costs per student is a great incentive for implementing a new program. In some states, "funding for results initiatives" has been important in motivating institutions to innovate. Many institutions have initiated learning communities with support from grants or by joining national projects funded by Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education or The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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Nevertheless sustainability is a major concern if the institution has not prepared itself for the integration of this innovation into the campus following the end of the funding. Many learning communities that started with external funding have faced a difficult transition when the external funding disappeared, especially if they used this funding to lower teaching loads to unsustainable levels or paid faculty unusually generous stipends for curriculum planning. It should also be pointed out that most of the learning community initiatives described in Table 3 were started with no external resources, but rather through the redeployment of existing institutional funds.

Windows of Opportunity

Windows of opportunity describe the existing reality of an institution that provides the opportunity to use a lever for change to make something happen. They include the following:

Unoccupied Areas: Nearly all campuses have some areas of significant need but with few faculty and staff members interested in them. Unfortunately, general education and developmental education often fall into this category. This is also usually the case when dealing with students who are marginally prepared for college or the masses of first-year students in large universities, many of whom drop out before the beginning of their second year. Selection and weeding out of students rather than education remains a priority in too many instances. In the past, such attrition was considered an indication of academic quality. Today, given accountability pressures and magazine rankings, high attrition is no longer a mark of rigor: it is an indicator of failure. It is also considered a significant cost—in terms of serving students who return and need to take a course a second, or third, or fourth time, and marketing and recruiting new students. There are also the social costs of students lost to college learning, and of lost aspirations. Many of the learning communities described in Table 3 focus on first-year students and general education since these are areas of both high need and relative neglect.

Committed, Entrepreneurial Faculty and Administrative Advocates: The presence of entrepreneurial advocates is a boon for every successful major innovation. For individuals or groups of individuals to champion the changes against what sometimes seem insurmountable odds, they must have commitment, perseverance, and skills. Often, these individuals are reinforced by senior administrators who are persuaded by these champions directly and indirectly to support the innovation. These champions organize the support networks, create the innovation design, and devote considerable time to the creation and implementation of the change.

Availability of Innovative Program Ideas or Exemplary Programs: A critical aspect of the “windows of opportunity” and “levers of change” is the availability of innovative program ideas and exemplary programs to key campus people—the champions of the innovations as well as campus faculty and administrative leaders and opinion leaders. In higher education, especially when dealing with academic changes, new program ideas do drive change when institutions are struggling with one or another issue—“an idea whose time has

come.” Rather than generating new ideas through institutional research and development, most innovations come from the outside. These ideas may emerge on one or another campus or group of people and then are disseminated in a number of arenas. Sometimes the dissemination is passive—as in the case of campus people attending national higher education conference sessions. Other times the ideas are spread through intentional organizational change initiatives such as the National Learning Communities Project and the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, and similar programs that actively try to educate and influence campus people through workshops, publications, and meetings of campus leaders who have an interest in pursuing a set of program innovations.

Timing: Timing is everything in creating innovations, whether it be the result of plain luck or a special moment in the life of the campus—the arrival of a new president or provost, the receipt of a major grant, external accountability pressures, or an unanticipated crisis. Being able to strategically intervene at these critical moments can determine whether a major innovation is successfully introduced. Often the key to such strategic interventions is that the advocates of the major innovations are knowledgeable about the change and know how to organize institutional resources—human, technological, and financial—to make it happen. The success of the timing is the result of the momentary relaxation of institutional controls due to these special moments in institutional life—a sense of fluidity, even chaos, that envelops the institution.

Factors that Enhance Sustainability

In times of restricted resources, the pressures against maintaining innovations that enhance learning and reduce costs are often great. More often than not, administrative and faculty leaders will protect the traditional programs thought to be at the heart of the campus. This tendency is based on the assumption that restricted resources are a very temporary phenomenon (one to two years) and the academic “core” must be protected. Striving to maintain the status quo places a special burden on innovations. Learning community leaders should be cognizant of these issues and prepared to face these challenges squarely. The factors that promote sustainability are described below.

Sufficient Size to have Institutional Impact: Innovations are often created by a small number of creative individuals and require few institutional resources, flying below the radar of the institution. This is a common occurrence at large universities. While these programs might continue with external funding or through finesse of small institutional resources, often faculty burn out or are unable to sustain the needed resources for the long haul. Clearly, the greater the demonstrated institutional impact of the innovation—in terms of student learning, costs per student, and the number of students being educated—the greater the likelihood the innovative program will be sustained. Focusing the innovation in high impact areas increases the likelihood that such an investment in the creation and maintenance of the innovation will occur; e.g., retention of first-year students, reducing the faculty costs per student in high enrollment areas.

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Return on Investment: In an environment of restricted resources, it is essential to demonstrate how the innovation contributes to the goal of enhancing student learning and doing so at reduced cost when compared to other more traditional areas. (Or, at a minimum, enhancing student learning at the same cost as other programs.) Demonstrating this enhanced learning and reduced costs is essential in a campus environment where there are few measures of learning outcomes—and, sometimes, inadequate measures for assessing the costs of educating students. In order to overcome the institution’s strong tendency to maintain the traditional systems and teaching-learning processes, and, also, to influence campus leaders at all levels, it is essential both in the creation and the maintenance of innovations—especially in periods of fiscal stress—for the initiative to have clear goals and to be able to describe and to communicate the returns on the investment.

Data-driven Planning and Decision-Making: Data-driven planning and decision-making is a necessary part of any attempt to optimize learning and to influence key decision-makers about the need for significant change. The process starts with analyzing the current situation. Many features of the typical college curriculum drive up costs, including under-enrolled courses; course proliferation as a result of overspecialization and accretion of courses over time; lack of sequence in a disjointed curriculum; poor student retention; student failures and withdrawals and course repeats; and faculty time devoted to purposes other than teaching. Many practices can be changed to support student learning. As Ann Ferren and Rick Slavings point out in their monograph *Investing in Quality: Tools for Improving Curricular Efficiency*, financial models can be developed to demonstrate how quality can be increased and dollars saved by tackling such problems through a selective process of pruning and investing. (Ferren and Slavings 2000)

A beginning point is to do an internal audit of the curriculum to identify areas of under-performance and duplication. This audit should include an examination of how well the curriculum is serving different groups of students. Following the footprints of the students is a key strategy in deciding what areas of need learning communities might address. Student footprint information is embedded in various forms of institutional data—enrollment patterns, grade reports, course drops, number of credits attempted and completed, success and failure rates of specific groups of students, student satisfaction reports, surveys of institutional climate, and levels of engagement. This analysis must include understanding the differences among students and building programs congruent with this diversity, an increasingly important element of decision-making as the student population becomes more diverse. The growing literature on what works with diverse learners is an important resource (D. Smith 1999). Leading first questions might include—where do students fail and why? Which parts of the curriculum are “gateways or platforms” that are critical to the future success of students? Are specific groups of students having difficulty in specific parts of the curriculum and why? Answering these questions can also provide answers to how, where, and on what scale a learning community intervention can be most effective.

The Gateways project at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is a good example of how one large research university uses data and a team approach to design interventions, including learning communities. This faculty-led, inter-unit initiative (involving University College, the Office for Professional Development, academic departments, the Office of Information Management and Institutional Research, the Office of Student Life and Diversity, and the Office of Enrollment Management) won the Theodore Hesburgh Award in 2004 for an outstanding student retention initiative aimed at courses with high enrollments of first-year students. Initial analysis of introductory courses revealed important differences in the DFW (“D” and “F” grades and Withdrawals) patterns of students and suggested where learning communities or other interventions might best be located. An ongoing process of tracking results helps IUPUI plan next steps and further refine the process.

Continuous Program Assessment Following a Living Vision: Given the increasingly powerful accountability pressures, especially in the demonstration of student learning outcomes, continuous assessment of learning outcomes can become a critical ingredient in influencing decision makers to support an innovation. Communicating assessment results and using them for future planning are also critical. Any assessment effort depends upon clear goals and a clear vision that places learning communities within the larger institutional goals. Without a clear and coherent vision, institutions will tend to fall back on traditional academic activities as the primary work of the campus and they will have difficulty carrying the innovation into the next generation. Only a living vision that is continually revisited will survive the inevitable transitions that occur in an institution. Too many vision statements and strategic plans are produced and then put in a drawer and forgotten. Many learning communities now face the challenge of transition and succession that requires rebuilding the vision over time.

Long-Serving Leadership Support: Significant curricular restructuring requires the support of key institutional leaders and for that support to continue over time. While smaller innovations that “fly below the radar” of the campus might be successful for a period of time, significant curricular change that challenges the traditional educational values and processes needs the continuous support of those individuals who control the allocation of resources and the exercise of traditional organizational systems. While Christensen and Overdorf (2000) work in the business environment, their comments about leadership apply as well to higher education.

One word of warning: in our studies of this challenge, we have never seen a company succeed in addressing a change that disrupts its mainstream values without the personal attentive oversight of the CEO—precisely because of the power of values in shaping the normal resource allocation process. (74)

The need to have the continuing support of those who shape the allocation of resources is critical. Resource allocation includes the type of people hired in critical positions. Top leaders can sustain major innovations by hiring people

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who support the norms and values that underlie the innovation. They can also protect the major innovation from organizational systems that have been built to maintain traditional, mainstream values and processes.

Although supportive leaders are important for sustaining significant curriculum restructuring, even more important is the longevity of such leaders. Very creative leaders who have provided the environment, resources and political support for important major innovations, but who leave early in the life cycle of the implementation process make these innovations vulnerable to new leaders who do not fully share the underlying values of the innovation. Institutions that have undertaken major successful and lasting restructuring (i.e., Alverno, Evergreen, Hampshire, IUPUI) have usually had long-term leaders who paid careful attention to hiring and socializing new members of the community.

Ongoing Commitment to Professional Development: Institutions with large and successful learning community programs invariably pay close attention to faculty and staff development. Because they understand that learning communities require pedagogical approaches that are new to many teachers, they make faculty and staff development a key underpinning of the learning community initiative. Since many learning communities involve collaboration between faculty and other professional staff, or faculty of disparate ranks and status, new venues for team building are important. Professional development activities often become the key arena for building these relationships.

Professional development activities can also become a venue for community-building, problem-solving, and continuous improvement. Summer institutes, staff-faculty retreats, and workshops are common in leading-edge learning community institutions such as Iowa State University, Temple University, The Evergreen State College, Wagner College, Skagit Valley College, La Guardia Community College, Portland State University, and Appalachian State University, to mention just a few.

Redefining Organizational Decision-Making Systems: Institutional leaders who shape the implementation and sustainability of large-scale innovations help redefine the organizational systems that maintain traditional campus values and teaching-learning processes. At the outset, these campus leaders may create the protective boundaries for the innovation to be created and tested without the intervention of these larger organizational systems. Once the innovation becomes a significant part of campus life, these systems must be redefined to support the restructured educational environment. At Skagit Valley College, for example, the learning community program became so large that staffing and compensation issues needed to be worked into the union agreements and the faculty hiring procedures.

The real power of learning communities in terms of gains in student learning and decreases in costs usually requires significant curricular and institutional change, which are discouraged or prevented by the organizational systems that have been built to maintain the status quo. Even when an institution uses one or another cost-saving activity, there are limits to how far a particular activity (e.g., curriculum audits, course redesign) can go before the pressures will build to limit their influence. Wholesale curriculum audits that fully realize the power of this

methodology will ultimately require dealing with the role of faculty, how education is being delivered, and how student learning will be assessed. There may be enthusiastic acceptance of the redesign of one or two large enrollment courses utilizing technology, graduate students, and/or learning labs, but if the underlying assumptions of how we count, assess student and faculty workload, and allocate resources remain unchanged, eventually too many redesigned courses will lead to restrictions on their creation as the competition for resources becomes more acute. It is one of the paradoxes of successful innovation that the more success and the greater the potential for scaling up beyond isolated units, the greater will be the restrictions in doing so, unless there is a concomitant change in the underlying organizational systems and values.

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