1998

Are They Singing from the Same Hymn Book?

Peter D. Eckel
University of Pennsylvania, eckelpd@upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs

Part of the Community College Education Administration Commons, Community College Leadership Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Education Economics Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Higher Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/460
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Are They Singing from the Same Hymn Book?

Abstract
A fact of academic life is that faculty and presidents primarily concern themselves with different institutional tasks, attend different institutional meetings, and pursue different institutional goals. In short, faculty do "faculty things" and presidents do "presidential things." They have different perceptions of institutional life (Peterson and White 1992). Differing perspectives can easily lead to standoffs between the two powers in academe—those who teach and those who administer—and those standoffs happen quite frequently (American Council on Education & Pew Higher Education Roundtable 1996; Schuster et al. 1994). Faculty-administrator differences are not a new phenomenon; examples exist at Williams and Dartmouth Colleges from 100 years ago (Finkelstein 1984).

Disciplines
Community College Education Administration | Community College Leadership | Education | Educational Leadership | Education Economics | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/460
Faculty and presidential perceptions of comprehensive change are not always as different as you would suspect.

**ARE THEY SINGING FROM THE SAME HYMN BOOK?**

*Peter Eckel*

A fact of academic life is that faculty and presidents primarily concern themselves with different institutional tasks, attend different institutional meetings, and pursue different institutional goals. In short, faculty do “faculty things” and presidents do “presidential things.” They have different perceptions of institutional life (Peterson and White 1992). Differing perspectives can easily lead to standoffs between the two powers in academe—those who teach and those who administer—and those standoffs happen quite frequently (American Council on Education & Pew Higher Education Roundtable 1996; Schuster et al. 1994). Faculty-administrator differences are not a new phenomenon; examples exist at Williams and Dartmouth Colleges from 100 years ago (Finkelstein 1984).

But during periods of institution-wide change, it is important that faculty and presidents (as well as senior administrators) work together (Kennedy 1994; American Council on Education & Pew Higher Education Roundtable 1996). They must come to share some common institutional perspectives as they face the mounting problems of the institution as a whole. Without some degree of alignment, an institution will be at odds when determining what should be done and how the institution should do it.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the extent to which faculty and presidents share some common perspectives about institutional change. In what ways are their perspectives the same? When colleges and universities undertake comprehensive change, to what extent do faculty and presidents agree on the sources pressing their institutions to change, on change strategies needed to succeed, on obstacles to be overcome, and on the various leadership responsibilities of faculty, presidents, and senior administrators required to affect change? In other words, on these issues, do they sing from the same hymn book? Are they on the same page?

As part of our efforts through the American Council on Education’s (ACE) Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation, we were curious about the extent to which presidents and faculty share common views. The ACE Project is a national project, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, involving 26 colleges and uni-
versities to help them succeed with comprehensive change. Our operating principle was that institutions must have a critical mass of leaders throughout the organization who share some common insights. Shared perspectives help institutions change in ways that are at least palatable to diverse institutional constituencies.

The institutions in the project reflect a diversity of Carnegie Classifications and include both public and private institutions. They are engaged in large-scale change

The most agreed-upon source of high pressure compelling institutions to undertake comprehensive change, as reported by both faculty and presidents, came from presidents and cabinets.

agendas on issues such as transforming the learning environment, developing faculty for the 21st century, and implementing a new teacher-scholar model in a technology-rich environment. The ACE Project helps institutions “take charge of change” by working with them to identify their own agendas for change. It also helps them make progress on those agendas by helping them articulate their cases for change and by focusing on both the substantive change themes (i.e., improving teaching and learning, enhancing the intellectual life at the institution) and on the change processes (i.e., changing the culture, creating an ethos of shared leadership).

Through the project, ACE works with campus project teams from each campus comprised of faculty, administrators, and, in some cases, students. The faculty members on these project teams and the president at each institution were asked to complete questionnaires addressing their perceptions about forces for change and leadership needed to accomplish their goals. This survey was undertaken to gather insights that might challenge assumptions about the roles and perspectives of faculty and presidents on leading institutional change. It was originally intended to foster discussion among project participants, not to provide conclusive empirical evidence. However, the findings are instructive for institutions beyond the ACE 26 as administrators and faculty grapple with developing shared agendas for institutional change.

The results outlined below were obtained from questionnaires returned by presidents (16 of 26 returned for a return rate of 62 percent) and faculty members (56 of 82 returned for a return rate of 68 percent). The respondents are members of the ACE project team, making them highly involved in their institution's change efforts (and creating an admittedly biased and limited sample).

What They Said

We were curious about four elements that might be important for faculty and presidents to agree on—forces pressing institutions to change; strategies that lead to successful implementation; obstacles to change; and the role of various campus leaders (e.g., presidents, faculty, and senior administrators) in affecting change. A high degree of congruence between the two groups might facilitate the change process, minimizing tensions over why the institution should change, how it should go about implementing change, what might lead efforts not to succeed, and who should do what in leading institutional efforts.

Four items from the survey are explored below. Each section includes a table presenting the responses of both faculty and presidents. The results for each item are reported as percentages of presidents and faculty who responded affirmatively to the question and are listed in ranked order by the frequency of the responses. Following each response in parentheses are percentages noting respondents who cited that factor or response.

Forces for change. Institutions face a multitude of pressures to change and adapt.
Table 1: A Comparison of Sources Pressing Institutions to Undertake Comprehensive Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources From Which Presidents Noted High Pressure</th>
<th>Sources From Which Faculty Noted High Pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President/Cabinet (100 percent)</td>
<td>President/Cabinet (69 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Industry (36 percent)</td>
<td>Faculty (38 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Government (31 percent)</td>
<td>State Government (33 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some pressures are extremely low, while others are high. Institutions attend to some and ignore others. But what do presidents and faculty pay attention to? What sources do they recognize as strongly pressing their institutions to change?

The most agreed-upon source of high pressure compelling institutions to undertake comprehensive change, as reported by both faculty and presidents, came from presidents and cabinets (see table 1). Thus, both respondent groups acknowledged the role senior administrators play in focusing institutional attention. For presidents, the next most agreed-upon source of high pressure came from those outside the institution (business/industry and state government), while for faculty, the next most consistently identified source of high pressure was themselves, an internal source.

It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of presidents and faculty reported their own roles in pressing their institutions to change than was acknowledged by the other group. For example, 100 percent of presidents sensed high pressure from themselves, but only 69 percent of faculty said they felt high pressure from their presidents. Similarly, 38 percent of faculty said they felt high pressure from themselves to undertake change, while only 7 percent of presidents noted pressure from the faculty.

Strategies for change. Once institutions feel the need to change, how do they go about it? The range of strategies is vast, and some strategies may "sit better" or be seen as more effective with one group on campus than with another. What strategies do faculty and presidents see as central to getting things done?

Presidents and faculty had a high level of agreement among themselves and with each other when identifying very important strategies to achieve change (see table 2). All of the presidents agreed on three very important strategies, and more than 90 percent agreed on the six most frequently identified strategies. Also, 100 percent of faculty respondents concurred on the importance of two very important strategies, and more than 90 percent identified three additional strategies as very important. Presidents and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies Very Important for Presidents</th>
<th>Strategies Very Important for Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain Faculty Support (100 percent)</td>
<td>Gain Faculty Support (100 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate Information (100 percent)</td>
<td>Communicate Information (100 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve Key Groups (100 percent)</td>
<td>Involve Key Groups (93 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain Administrator Support (93 percent)</td>
<td>Gain Administrator Support (90 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain Dean/Chair Support (93 percent)</td>
<td>Gain Dean/Chair Support (90 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alter Faculty Culture (93 percent)</td>
<td>Alter Faculty Culture (75 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish and Communicate Presidential Vision (87 percent)</td>
<td>Design and Utilize Planned Strategies (75 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: A Comparison of Strategies Cited as Important to Accomplishing Comprehensive Change
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified by Presidents</th>
<th>Identified by Faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited Financial Resources (60 percent)</td>
<td>Institutional Inertia (55 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Inertia (60 percent)</td>
<td>Lack of Trust (55 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Rewards (47 percent)</td>
<td>Inadequate Rewards (50 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different Perceptions of the Need for Change (43 percent)</td>
<td>Different Perceptions of the Need for Change (46 percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor History With Change (38 percent)</td>
<td>Faculty Resistance (40 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: A Comparison of “Very Significant” Obstacles to Succeeding with Comprehensive Change

faculty also strongly agreed with one another. It is not until the last item that the two groups diverged, highlighting the tremendous agreement between faculty and presidents on change strategies. An interesting point to note was that fewer faculty (60 percent) agreed presidential vision was very important, as compared to presidents (87 percent), ranking it ninth on the faculty’s list versus seventh on the presidents’ list.

Obstacles to change. Institutions do not succeed with their change efforts for a variety of reasons. A shared perspective of significant obstacles may be a first step in helping to overcome some of the obstacles because differing groups can agree on appropriate next steps. To what extent do faculty and presidents agree on obstacles to change? What very significant obstacles do presidents and faculty identify that prevent their institutions from succeeding with intended changes?

The responses to this question reveal a moderate level of agreement by each group among themselves on very significant obstacles to change (see table 3). A curious point is that less agreement within each group exists for obstacles than for strategies for change (the previous question); they agree on the solutions, but not on the problems. For presidents, the two top obstacles (limited financial resources and institutional inertia) were only cited as very significant obstacles by 60 percent of the respondents, followed by less than half of the respondents agreeing on the other 10 obstacles from which they were able to select. Faculty disagreed among themselves as well, with the most agreed-upon choices identified by only half the respondents. But similar to the responses on the strategies question above, faculty and presidents concurd with each other, as both identified three of the top five very significant obstacles (institutional inertia, inadequate rewards and different perceptions of the need for change).

It is noteworthy that a higher percentage of presidents than faculty perceived limited financial resources as a very significant obstacle (60 percent versus 36 percent) and that a higher percentage of faculty (40 percent) than presidents (25 percent) identified faculty resistance as very significant.

The role of leadership. Now that we have explored the various perceptions on the sources pressing for change, on strategies to effect change, and on the obstacles that must be overcome, who leads this process? Who is in charge? Who does what? Three groups share the responsibilities for effecting institutional change—presidents, senior administrators (e.g., provosts and deans), and faculty. But who is supposed to do what? The more interesting, and possibly more important, question might be, who thinks who is supposed to do what? The responses below are ranked by the number of votes each received in relation to other choices (see table 4). Respondents were able to pick from a list of 15 choices.

Presidents saw their most important tasks for leading change as providing vision, seeing the “big picture,” empowering others, and championing the initiative. Faculty concurred in their views on the tasks of presidents, adding only the category of making
Table 4: A Comparison of the Leadership Roles of Presidents, Senior Administrators, and Faculty

resources available to the list of important tasks. In contrast, only two of 16 presidents saw the category of making resources available as one of their responsibilities important to leading comprehensive change, and no presidents identified it as a task important for senior administrators, even though faculty identified it as an important role for both.

Faculty and presidents also agreed on two of the top four leadership tasks of faculty. They agreed that faculty should formulate change strategies and champion the initiative, but presidents ranked the categories of consulting with administrators and consulting with faculty as important faculty leadership tasks while faculty felt they should provide vision and direct the change process—two very different responsibilities. Only two of 16 presidents saw providing vision as an important faculty leadership task and only three of 16 presidents noted directing the change process as an important leadership task of faculty. Presidents ranked the category of consulting with administrators as second out of 15 tasks for faculty, but faculty put this task in eighth place for themselves.

This divergence is suggestive of different "world views" of faculty and presidents on who is in charge of both setting the course for the institution and leading it.

Surprises and Confirmations

1. Neither faculty nor presidents perceive that external pressure is as important a force for change as internal pressure from the top. Less than a third of the presidents and the faculty reported that groups outside the institution (i.e., state government, alumni/alumnae, local community) were strongly pressing them to undertake change. All presidents identified themselves and their cabinets, and 69 percent of faculty identified presidents and their cabinets as pressing for change (internal sources of pressure).

2. Presidents and faculty frequently agreed among themselves and surprisingly with each other.
  - Within their own ranks, both faculty and presidents concurred on very important strategies for change. All of the faculty agreed on two of the strat-
egies (gain faculty support and communicate information), and more than 90 percent agreed on three additional strategies (involve key groups, gain administrator support, and gain dean/chair support). All of the presidents agreed on three strategies (gain faculty support, communicate information, and involve key groups), and more than 90 percent agreed on three additional strategies (gain administrator support, gain dean/chair support, and alter faculty culture).

- All presidents noted that they are putting high pressure on their institutions to change.
- Presidents and faculty strongly agreed with each other as to the very important strategies for change. They both identified the same top six (in the same order)—gain faculty support, communicate information, involve key groups, gain administrator support, gain dean/chair support, and alter faculty culture.
- Faculty and presidents both identified the categories of institutional inertia, inadequate reward systems, and different perceptions of the need to change as three of the top five most agreed-upon very significant obstacles to change.
- Both groups identified the same four leadership tasks for presidents—provide vision, see the “big picture,” empower others, and champion the initiative (only faculty added the category of making resources available).

3. Even though they frequently agreed on many issues, presidents and faculty disagreed on who does what.
- Faculty (39 percent) said they are strongly pressing their institutions to undertake change, yet presidents did not acknowledge that pressure, as only 7 percent noted high pressure from faculty.
- Faculty identified the categories of providing vision and directing the change process as important leadership tasks for themselves, while only two of 16 presidents identified the category of providing vision and only three of 16 presidents noted the category of directing the change process as important faculty leadership tasks. These responses highlight faculty-president disagreement on the role of faculty in leading comprehensive change.

Who is in charge? Who does what? The more interesting, and possibly more important, question might be, who thinks who is supposed to do what?

- More faculty (40 percent) identified themselves as very significant obstacles to change than did presidents (25 percent).

4. Presidents and faculty have different takes on financial matters.
- Presidents identified the category of limited financial resources as a very significant obstacle to change, but faculty did not.
- Faculty later identified the category of making resources available as an important leadership task of presidents and senior administrators, while presidents did not.

Final Thoughts and Potential Implications

The purpose of this exercise was to raise questions, challenge assumptions, and spark discussions. The small sample and nonrepresentative nature (limited to 26 institutions participating in the ACE Project and only to faculty who are involved with their institutional change initiatives) preclude a rigorous study. But the findings are suggestive.

First, this study shows that presidents and faculty agree more often than the conventional
wisdom would suggest. Both sides are “singing from the same hymn book” when it comes to potential obstacles that impede change and the role of presidents in leading change, and they are even on the same page of the hymn book when it comes to strategies to effect change.

Second, the findings reaffirm common beliefs that presidents and faculty disagree on who should be doing what when it comes to leading institutional change and setting the institutional change agenda—same book and same song, but a different lead vocalist and a different conductor. “Whose vision of the future” is clearly an area of disagreement, as well as who should do what to make that future come about.

---

This study shows that presidents and faculty agree more often than the conventional wisdom would suggest.

---

These tentative findings are informative of how the “other side” thinks about sources of institutional pressure and defines its own role and perceives the role of others in setting and executing the change agenda. The results might challenge the ways administrators view faculty—who, as reported here, say they are eager to provide institutional vision and direct the change process, which is different from the commonly held view that faculty are disconnected and uninterested. It might inform faculty that presidents value the involvement of faculty in formulating change strategies and championing change initiatives and are not always trying to control the process. The findings should be instructive to both faculty and presidents who strongly concur on the necessary strategies to implement change.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, because on many issues (except who should do what) faculty and presidents are not very far apart, suggesting that institutional change might be easier to achieve and face less resistance if faculty and senior administrators discussed their roles, perspectives, and assumptions. If they identify their common views and resolve their differences early in the change process, progress may occur more smoothly. By surfacing the assumptions each party holds about the roles for themselves and others, strategies for change, and potential obstacles, institutions might be one large step closer to making the change process more successful.

---

References


