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Guest Editorial: An Editorial Review of *Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders*

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Editorial/Review*Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration:
A Guide for Campus Leaders*

by Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester

Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, California, Copyright 2009, 290 pages.

ISBN 978-0-470-17936-9. \$32.00.

by

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Paradigm pioneers are the ones who confront the unexpected hazards and incur the injuries that come from being on the “bleeding edge” before the rest of the academic troops set foot on the ground. Being a paradigm pioneer is not unusual for the ORU College of Education as they led the entire university through a transformational process in implementing electronic portfolios for all their students in fall 2003. Faculty are willing to risk implementing change if they are convinced that a process can help them be successful in making their students successful. The superordinate goal of student learning can unite faculty to endure the pain of a paradigm shift that may entail sacrificing the personal comfort of “that’s the way we have always done it” (Fagin, Hand, & Boyd, 2004). It is with this insight in mind that I set out to gather evidence to propose yet another paradigm shift for the College of Education: the notion of approaching the dissertation process as a collaborative activity, thus the motive behind reviewing *Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders*.

Kezar and Lester (2009) provide a well-organized, research-based resource for how higher education can reorganize to foster more collaborative work. The authors describe the need for higher education to move toward collaboration, provide strategies for reorganizing campuses to implement collaboration, and use exemplary institutions involved in high levels of collaboration as examples of how to execute strategies toward action.

While businesses and other organizations have instituted teamwork and collaboration as a way of doing business, higher education institutions have been historically created as “silos” (e.g., subject-specific departments; faculty, staff, and administration; academic and student affairs; budgets; promotion and tenure; and teaching assignments). Such a silo-oriented organization makes creating a culture of collaboration a difficult process. However, in a time of declining resources, demanding reforms, federal agencies urging educational institutions to become more accountable, and granting institutions bent toward funding projects that are more inclusive, higher education is obligated to look for ways to meet these demands. One might say that people are constantly working together; so what makes an effort collaborative? The authors cite Wood and Gray, Saxton, and Whetten, to answer this question.

There are two types of collaboration (often called alliances) commonly referenced: internal and external. Internal collaborations include areas such as cross-functional teams, interdisciplinary teaching and research, and student and academic affairs collaboration. External collaborations include steering committees, P-16 partnerships, campus-community partnerships, research parks with industry and business, and regional health collaborative.

According to the authors, a major key to successfully reorganizing a campus to embrace collaboration is the leadership. Leaders and change agents must be willing to take on the responsibility of enacting strategies that steer the campus toward collaboration. People must understand the logic, potential barriers, and the need to reorganize if they are going to effect collaborative initiatives that are sustainable. Generally speaking, businesses that have

successfully implemented collaboration have concluded that it leads to increased innovation and learning, cognitive complexity, better service, cost effectiveness and efficiency, and employee motivation. Specific to higher education, institutions that have high levels of collaboration have reported increased levels of student engagement, improved research opportunities, and knowledge production; and it is also helpful in improving governance and management by increasing the range of stakeholders involved, including staff, students, and non-tenure track faculty. Finally, campuses that can demonstrate how they work in non-bureaucratic and responsive ways in the areas of operations and service are more likely to attract attention from philanthropy and business. However, leaders will not be effective in creating partnerships unless they understand that the structures that undergird most postsecondary institutions prevent collaboration.

One of the first steps to eradicating barriers to collaboration is to understand the historical development of higher education and how the structures and cultures that emerged support and reinforce individual—rather than collaborative—work. This requires a review of key areas such as specialization, professionalization, disciplines and departments, paradigmatic differences, faculty training and socialization, loose coupling, reward systems, bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative structures, clashes between academic and administrative cultures, staff subcultures, differentiation between academic and student affairs, and responsibility-centered budgeting, which are all structures that have historical roots as supporting individualistic behaviors.

Kezar and Lester suggest that to address these barriers, leaders must be willing to change the *organizational context*, the major structural, process, human, political, and cultural elements, such as institutional policies, organizational charts, decision-making processes, leadership, training, climate, and politics. They state that Liedtka found a supportive context that provides commitment, process, and resources to facilitate collaboration that was critical to making collaboration a reality.

The authors concluded the organizational features that facilitate collaboration involve (1) mission or vision and educational philosophy, (2) values, (3) social networks, (4) integrating structures, (5) rewards, (6) external pressure, and (7) learning. Because mission creates institutional purpose, it is a critical organizational element in helping a campus be successful in developing collaboration. It can help people reflect on values, develop a shared vision and sense of purpose around why collaboration is a good idea, create a sense of priority around that idea, and provide direction and logic for undertaking the work of collaboration. For this reason, the mission has to be a “living document” that includes specific statements regarding its commitment to collaboration and that is reviewed periodically to ensure the campus stays on its course.

While the mission statement is very important, Kezar and Lester point out that values are critical to collaboration because values define the actions and behaviors of its organizational members and serve as a foundation to organizational culture. Another critical feature of the organizational context for supporting collaborative work is an intentionally created campus network. Networks provide the intellectual resources and cognitive complexity needed to overcome barriers that emerge, and foster dedication, decrease isolation, bring together different perspectives and help move initiatives forward. Many campuses with high levels of collaboration have created integrating structures such as centers and institutes across campus, created cross-functional teams, and revamped their accounting, computer, and budgetary systems as a way of ensuring the health, vitality, and growth of campus networks. As one faculty member says, “Rewards signal where people’s values lie” (p. 154), and while intrinsic rewards are a natural

result of successful implementation of collaboration, the use of extrinsic rewards to enable and reinforce collaboration has been attempted with success on several campuses.

Of particular concern is that tenure and promotion are viewed largely as an individual process. The authors cite numerous scholars (e.g., Boyer, Edgerton, O'Meara, and Rice) as supporters for altering the tenure and promotion process to allow faculty to do collaborative work without being penalized. There are many opportunities to capitalize on external pressures, including funding agencies, accrediting bodies, and state and federal governments that mandate collaboration in higher education institutions. However, there are also many challenges to avoid, such as managing multiple conflicting messages from different agencies; avoiding getting caught up in the faddishness and the changing demands from external groups; and avoiding the temptation of accepting funding from external sources that are misaligned with the mission. Perhaps the most important cited advantage of collaboration is that it creates opportunities for innovation and learning. Learning leads to an understanding of the nature of collaboration and development of the skills necessary to practice it. Therefore, institutional leaders must be intentional about creating both formal and informal opportunities to learn about collaboration and must model successful collaboration.

Kezar and Lester conclude their study by giving readers a three-stage model for developing a collaborative context.

1. *Building commitment to collaboration*—begins with taking cues from external pressures, developing a set of values, and engaging people in the process of learning about the benefits of collaboration.
2. *Commitment to collaboration*—includes three conditions to help solidify the commitment to building a collaborative context and helping move toward action; including supportive statements in the mission, providing rewards, and creating intentional opportunities to network.
3. *Sustaining collaboration*—involves successfully integrating structures.

One of the lessons Kezar and Lester learned is that collaboration is a collective responsibility. Everyone, including internal and external stakeholders, has a shared responsibility in the implantation and sustainability of a campus committed to collaboration. The authors outline specific responsibilities for educational leaders.

One huge barrier to implementing a collaborative culture is the lack of faculty experience and motivation for making the paradigm shift needed. Faculty are socialized into particular disciplines and paradigms, but they also are trained to work mostly in isolation. Graduate students may spend many years working in virtual isolation on archival research or on an empirical research study. Dissertations are an individual activity, and as graduate students become faculty members, they typically are encouraged to develop a research agenda that highlights their individual contribution. Collaborative efforts are highly discouraged before achieving tenure. For many faculty, this means working independently for at least 15 years. After such a long time working alone, faculty are not likely to be inclined to work with others and have not learned the skills to work collaboratively.

While Kezar and Lester do not explicitly recommend dissertations as a collaborative activity, it is important to note that transforming higher education to a collaborative culture involves bringing on faculty members who have had positive experiences with collaborative projects and value collaboration. Why not provide that experience during the dissertation process? Kezar and Lester provide the evidence needed to approach the concept of collaborative dissertation work. We are challenged to consider this as a way to alleviate one of the barriers to

converting a higher education institution to a culture of collaboration. Becoming a campus that values collaboration requires intentional implementation of specific strategies. A paradigm shift of this magnitude is more likely to be successful when those in a critical mass are willing to be paradigm pioneers. Kezar and Lester provided both the plan and the tools to do the job.

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