Focus Groups for Transformative Change in Higher Education
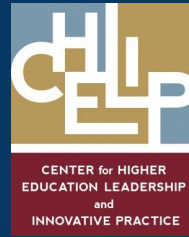
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Executive Summary

The first focus group met on Monday, March 14th, 2022. The participants included higher education leaders representing a broad cross section of institutions including private, public, church affiliated, for profit, career education, and online. The second group met on May 3, 2022 and included private, non-profit and for profit, and career college leaders.

There was consensus that due to foundational, if not unprecedented disruptions, traditional models of leadership, operations, and business are broadly inadequate for the challenges and pace of change currently affecting most of higher education, and this was true even before the pandemic, which has served as an accelerant. As such, for many institutions, incremental change will no longer suffice as a means to surviving and thriving now and through the next normal. It is therefore exigent that leaders in higher education be prepared to manage efforts to reinvent key elements of their mission, business and revenue models, target markets, student value proposition and ROI, delivery models and other items related to long term sustainability, relevance, and financial viability. It is also clear that while traditional higher education (credit bearing, degree granting, Title IV funded) is in decline, other elements of the post-secondary ecosystem are growing. In short, a decreasing number of potential students are choosing traditional post-secondary options, while turning toward shorter, less expensive, more career-focused alternatives. While there is clearly opportunity for traditional colleges and universities to grow and thrive, for most, that cannot be achieved without some level of transformation.

Purpose

To memorialize the learnings of executives who have navigated institutional transformation such that others can benefit from what has worked, not worked, been learned, and how the process can be operationalized to effectively support transformation in other institutions.

Areas of Focus

The participants discussed the current state of higher education, with a focus on transformation and how the operating environment has changed. In particular, the group addressed both barriers to and factors that support significant change, the role of leadership, what has been learned from previous change efforts, why genuine transformation is so rare, and how institutions might counteract deep cultural and operational inertia.

Group Findings

What has changed in higher education since you became a leader?

- Consumer behavior and perceptions of value
- Student perspective: From "What do I want to be?" to "What do I want to do?"
- Lessening of stigma about short-term, vocational programs
- Colleges as businesses that must generate multiple revenue streams and operate with a retail lens
- Multiple alternatives to higher education across the post-secondary ecosystem
- Necessary leadership skills (strategy, business development, M&A, marketing, finance, risk-taking, innovation, people leadership). "Having the heart of a non-profit, but operating like a for-profit."

What are typical barriers to transformative change and how have they been overcome?

- Ignorance, overcome by broadly inclusive communication and empowerment
- Fear of loss/aversion to risk, overcome by intentional use of change management tools
- Lack of perceived individual benefit, overcome by focus on value that matters to multiple groups of constituents
- Lack of adequate leadership skills, overcome by professional development and recruitment of higher level leaders
- Layering new initiatives on top of a poor, inadequate foundation, overcome by a genuine commitment to reinvention rather than incremental change

What has to be true for transformative change to succeed?

- Executive and board commitment
- Adequate/Incremental resources
- Amenable culture
- Functional governance structure and process
- Aligned organizational structure, operations, strategy, technology, etc.

What is required of executive leadership relative to transformative change?*

- Vision
- Tolerance for risk
- Courage
- Trust
- Disciplined view of what needs to be accomplished
- Optimism
- Resilience
- Self-awareness

*Please see a comprehensive Transformation Collaborative™ model of [transformative leadership here](#).

Why are transformation change efforts so rare and success even more rare?

- Culture, values and governance designed for the status quo
- Turf and political battles
- Regulatory barriers
- Leadership egos and lack of courage
- Low quality collaboration
- A preference for control and comfort over risk and potentially better outcomes
- Failure to recognize need for transformation rather than incremental change
- Higher ed grows its own in environment that doesn't develop transformational/entrepreneurial leaders

What is the most important variable for moving IHEs toward reinvention in the face of nearly intractable inertia?

- Severity of crisis
- Person or group that works *really hard*
- Someone with influence that is driven by the change
- Capacity to widen the number of participants/collaborators
- Aligned governance
- Confidence in high integrity leadership

Next Steps

The Transformation Collaborative will collaborate with our higher ed partners on multiple channels of dissemination such as whitepapers, articles, webinars, workshops, and direct support for change efforts such as leadership development and change models.

For More Information on the Transformation Collaborative & Our Partners:

Transformation Collaborative

Center for Higher Education Leadership and Innovative Practice

Ingenious Podcast and Blog