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Changing Institutional Culture to Advance Civic Learning

■ FRANK P. ARDAIOLO, vice president for student life at Winthrop University

Years ago, I overheard a new academic vice president extolling the commitment to diversity shown by our university, a public master's level institution that was segregated by law in my lifetime but that has now established one of the highest graduation rates in the country for African American students (Lynch and Engle 2010). Reflecting on this, the vice president indicated that he had no idea how we had achieved such progress, but he sure was proud of our accomplishment. I corrected him on two accounts. First, I said, a vice president should never say he has no idea how institutional change occurred; second, I told him he needed to learn our story. We were about to apply its lessons to our next endeavor, having just been selected to participate in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U's) Core Commitments initiative on teaching personal and social responsibility (Ardaiolo, Neilson, and Daugherty 2011). Just as our earlier lessons in cultural change informed that effort, they are now informing our work to advance civic learning and democratic agency on campus.

What does it mean to change institutional culture? Many institutions genuinely promote their commitments and even appear to take action toward achieving them—but too often, their work produces few sustainable results. To achieve lasting transformation, colleges and universities must face the challenges of institutional change directly. How can those responsible for leading change initiatives systematically address the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of faculty, staff, and students in

a manner that is influential, assessable, and sustainable? How can they involve an institution-wide audience that may not be psychologically present or even predisposed to addressing such matters? How can they move beyond superficial commitment and create real cultural change that crosses many institutional domains and involves many actors?

In my view, the key to systemic cultural change lies in engaging the individual agency of faculty, staff, and students. The following approaches have helped Winthrop University achieve marked success in establishing institutional diversity, teaching personal and social responsibility, and now, advancing civic learning and democratic agency. Appearing in no particular order, these ingredients can be combined in varying proportions to achieve the flexibility, institutional adaptability, situational variation, and balance needed to reach desired ends.

Actively Involve the President

Chief executive involvement is critical to engaging the campus community. The chief executive must demonstrate personal commitment and constantly promote the vision and goals with all constituencies—particularly cabinet-level administrators, who yield similar top-down influence. These administrators face multiple, constantly shifting demands on their time, capabilities, and resources; but when the institution's highest authority vows to hold them accountable for a goal, that goal becomes a priority. It is impossible to overstate the distributed power of many vice presidents and deans all engaging their own

staff and faculty members in envisioning and attaining a goal. Their enthusiasm is a force multiplier, with results that permeate the entire institution.

At Winthrop University, we have seen that the chief executive can be very persuasive in connecting goals and needed reforms to the institution's mission, identity, and culture. Upon becoming chief executive twenty-four years ago, our just-retired president created a *Vision of Distinction* that stated, among other goals, that Winthrop would become “an institution of choice for historically underrepresented students” (Winthrop University 2012, 7). The president extolled this vision wherever he went, with every audience he addressed. Concomitantly, he evaluated his top administrators annually on our demonstrated adherence to and fulfillment of the vision, which we in turn supported professionally and personally.

Create a Collaborative Implementation Team

The chief executive should create an implementation team that includes vice presidents, senior experts among faculty and staff, thought leaders, and key influencers of opinion. It is critical for this team to cross divisional and disciplinary lines and to include students selected by the student governance structure, if possible. The members of this team will be responsible for researching and crafting recommendations fitted to both the institution's existing culture and to its aspirational culture. They will become experts on the goal and on affecting change within their own areas and at the institution at large.

When Winthrop University leaders decided to apply to participate in Core Commitments, they assembled a broadly representative team cochaired by the vice presidents for student affairs and academic affairs. In writing the grant application, this team was able to draw on disparate and sometimes

little-known aspects of the university. When Winthrop was accepted into the initiative, the implementation team reached out to inform and involve constituents at all levels, even those who did not typically see themselves as part of institutional change. Campus professionals presented about the initiative to various faculty, staff, or student audiences, inspiring lively and intellectually invigorating discussions. These newly empowered and attentive constituents helped craft sustainable plans for addressing the initiative's goals while changing the institution incrementally.

Use Internal and External Resources

The team should consider reviewing philosophical governance documents as well as current admissions marketing materials. Juxtaposing such statements can help the team identify aspects of the current institutional culture that will facilitate planning. Outside resources may also be helpful; for example, both AAC&U and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education offer websites, workshops, and conferences focused on civic learning. Attending relevant events together can help team members get to know each other, become vested in each other's success, and become better able to collaborate.

On initiating our work in support of diversity and, later, advancing personal and social responsibility, Winthrop University sent campus teams to attend various AAC&U institutes. These events offered access to national experts and scholarly information while engaging participants in multimethod workshops that challenged their assumptions and thinking. The opportunity for multiday dialogue with colleagues in a residential environment free from campus distractions proved most fruitful. On returning to campus, the teams created websites to share what they had learned with others engaged in each initiative.

Focus on Student Learning

Focusing team discussions on student learning in and out of the classroom tends to reduce if not eliminate political differences across divisional lines. Faculty and staff can come together around liberal education as a means of fostering student development and meaning making, the *raison d'être* for faculty and student affairs educators (Ardaiolo 2007). During conversations around such shared priorities, faculty can become consultants to student affairs educators and vice versa, with each contributing expertise from their respective domains and functional responsibilities.

In 2002, Winthrop University's president formed a cross-campus working group charged with exploring the nature and intellectual character of the university and evaluating what the institution should become. Over four years, this task force consulted widely with the Winthrop community through e-mail requests, web surveys, discussions, and forums. Ultimately, the task force created a document that continues to guide the institution, largely because of its focus on student learning. Situating Winthrop as "a community of learners," the document states that "the Winthrop Experience [centers] on student development inspired by our commitment to the liberal arts traditions, to national caliber professional education, and to developing leadership and civic responsibility," and that the Winthrop community "embrace[s] multiculturalism and the broadest possible diversity of people and perspectives" (President's Task Force on the Nature and Character of Winthrop University 2004, 4).

Promote and Manage Change

Understanding that change can be difficult, leaders must be unfailing drivers of their vision. Regular staff meetings, vice presidential involvement in departmental or unit programming,



Winthrop University students work in a soup kitchen during an alternative spring break trip to St. Augustine, Florida. (Photo courtesy of Winthrop University's Center of Career and Civic Engagement)

and personnel evaluations that reward innovation, collaboration, and staff-faculty partnerships can mitigate the risk that individual players will be distracted by the complex and competing demands of their institutional roles. Structured interactions between faculty and student affairs professionals (such as day-long workshops) and periodic updates from the president or vice presidents to the entire university community are effective tactics. Professional development funding and websites documenting successful efforts can also advance campus efforts.

Winthrop's 2009 campus-wide conference on Student Excellence, Engagement, and Development (SEED) is one example of an activity that effectively promoted change. The SEED Conference convened professionals from academic and student affairs to propagate efforts related to personal and social responsibility. The relationships this event fostered between over one hundred participants, many discovering their colleagues' work for the first time, have helped sustain Winthrop's work in this area to the present day.

Plan Deeply and Evaluate Regularly

Initiating a major campus program can seem daunting. Consider beginning by reviewing existing data and identifying

gaps in current activities. An initial assessment that includes these items can be a launching point for the deep planning that is instrumental to long-term systemic change. In the case of civic learning and democratic engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* includes in its appendix a Civic Institutional Matrix that can be very helpful in guiding such assessments (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). (Editor's note: See page 30 of this issue for more information about the matrix.)

Planning deeply often involves setting goals, objectives, benchmarks, and outcomes for various functional

Assess and Improve Learning

As any multiyear project advances, it is important to move beyond functional evaluation to multidimensional learning assessment. Are students gaining new knowledge, developing new capabilities, and making meaning of content that will inform their lives? With rigorous assessment of student learning, institutions can hold all participants in the learning process accountable and make clear the gains accomplished and challenges remaining. When aggregated over many years, the incremental progress that regular assessment and evaluation reveal will result in significant change.

Building on lessons learned from the initiatives described above, Winthrop's

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areas. As a vice president, I gather my managers and department heads (from areas as diverse as admissions, judicial affairs, campus police, student activities, service learning, and health services, to name a few) before each academic year to chart the activities they plan to implement to further the overarching vision. At the end of the year, we evaluate goal attainment and decide whether each activity should be continued, discontinued, modified, or morphed. Winthrop's African American graduation rate provides a case in point. For over twenty years, my staff has developed objectives that, when completed, demonstrate appreciable gains in promoting diversity on campus, driving incremental and sustainable improvements into every corner and crevice of the institution over time. This work has changed the culture dramatically for the better.

faculty recently articulated the capacities essential to student success, both in college and later in life: "the capacity to think critically and solve problems," "the capacity to be personally and socially responsible," "the capacity to understand the interconnected nature of the world and the time in which they live," and "the capacity to communicate effectively, successfully expressing and exchanging ideas" (Winthrop University 2013). These University-Level Competencies—each of which is critical to civic participation—form the basis for assessing student learning in our general education courses. They also inform specific learning objectives developed by the Division of Student Life. At the conclusion of the upcoming academic year, each department or functional area will document student learning in relation to these competencies and identify ways to improve it.

Conclusion

By engaging faculty, staff, and students in collaboratively creating and pursuing a vision, institutional leaders can empower teams to create campus-wide change. For many, the opportunity to gain the attitudes, skills, and knowledge required to fully participate in democracy is the promise of American higher education. By creating and sustaining institutional change in support of civic learning, colleges and universities can help deliver on this promise. ☐

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