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# AAC&U NEWS

INSIGHTS AND CAMPUS INNOVATIONS IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

AAC&U News, October 2018

## Perspectives

# How Does Change Really Happen in Higher Ed?

By: [David Scobey](#)

It's a time of turmoil in higher education. Caused by a confluence of many factors—rising debt, languishing attainment, declining public investment and public trust in higher education, to name just a few—the turmoil has prompted conflicting responses from policy advocates, funders, and educators. Yet whatever solutions you support—whether it's high-impact practices or apprenticeships, closing the equity gap or closing the skills gap—my hunch is that you agree that the need for change is urgent.

So do I. And I have my own views about the best way forward. Yet my focus here is not on what changes *should* happen in higher education. It's on how change actually *does* happen. Much of the national conversation about our present turmoil and future prospects makes two assumptions that misunderstand the dynamics of change in higher education—misunderstand it in ways that inhibit creative innovation. I want to offer a different account of how change has actually worked.

The first common assumption is that higher education is inert, “[a change-resistant enterprise](#)” that sidelines innovation in defense of legacy practices and faculty prerogatives. “When I re-engaged with higher education after a 20-year absence in the private sector,” [one dean writes](#), “I felt like Rip Van Winkle: The generations were different, but the landscape remained the same. . . . The pace of change is stuck somewhere between sluggish and glacial.”

Second is the notion that—as a consequence—change requires disruptive innovation, the emergence of technologies and practices from the margins of higher education that will destabilize its market and business

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model. Online learning (including MOOCs) usually gets nominated as the action-forcing innovation, but other candidates include competency-based education and stackable certificates. Only such disruptors, it's argued, can overcome academic inertia and drive change. If not, as Clayton Christensen, the theorist of disruptive innovation, [predicted](#) in 2013, "fifteen years from now half of US universities may be in bankruptcy."

OK, time for a deep breath and a historical fact-check. It's true that external events and forces have had transformative impacts on higher education. The G.I. Bill is one example; the Great Recession, another. It's also true that budget and enrollment pressures are roiling higher education. And it's surely true that MOOCs, online degrees, and competency-based programs are important innovations. But there's little evidence for their disruptive power. MOOCs have turned out to be a good platform for educated life-long learners, international users, and technical micro-degrees. The proportion of students taking at least one online course has grown from [20 percent in 2006](#) to [31 percent ten years later](#). [One-seventh of undergraduates](#) now learn exclusively online. This is real success, but hardly the rumblings of Uber-like transformation.

Indeed, disruptive innovation seems to me the wrong way to understand and advance change in higher education—and not just because it gets met with inertial resistance. The distributed, heterogeneous landscape of the academy means that there is no one market to disrupt, no single Archimedian point from which to dislodge the world. The key "product" of undergraduate education—teaching and learning—is complex and relational, dependent on human bonds and communal norms that disruptive change can undo but not easily resupply. Higher education is certainly susceptible to crisis; we're in one now. But I don't think it's susceptible to disruptive innovation.

Which doesn't mean it's incapable of change. And that brings us back to the first assumption. Is higher education indeed inert? It's undeniable that academics and academic institutions can be virtuosos of inaction; as a former faculty member and a former dean, I've witnessed the trench warfare from every side. Yet it is equally true that the past thirty years have been an era of broad, deep, and often unremarked innovation—and not only in digital technologies. A Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in, say, the mid-1980s would awaken to an academy whose apparent familiarity masked dramatic change. Once she figured out that the old course catalogue had been replaced by a searchable website, she would discover an array of majors and departments—neuroscience, community health, media studies, gay and lesbian studies—that barely existed before she slumbered. In the mid-1980s, only a handful of institutions offered integrative first-year seminars; now virtually all of them do. Back then, she might have heard of a recent start-up called Campus Compact; today, it boasts more than a thousand institutional members and serves as the flagship for a public-engagement movement in every academic sector. She would find still more novelties—undergraduate research programs, learning communities, a bizarre tool called an "ePortfolio"—being disseminated on hundreds of campuses by other networks and consortia.

It's striking how much this map of change involves items from the canonical list of "[high-impact practices](#)." The majority of these practices—and the concept itself—were developed during this era of innovation. Many of the most demonstrably effective practices in undergraduate education point to the dynamism of the academy, its capacity in recent years to generate and disseminate innovation.

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AAC&U News is written and edited by Ben Dedman. If you have questions or comments about the newsletter's contents, please e-mail [dedman@aacu.org](mailto:dedman@aacu.org).

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But how did the change process actually work? The historical evidence suggests a clear answer: networked collaboration. Take the case I personally know best: the movement for civic and community engagement. During the 1990s and 2000s, the growth of Campus Compact and other consortia—Imagining America, Project Pericles, and others—brought together a national community of practice within which faculty and staff developed, critiqued, improved, evolved, and disseminated our models of service learning, community partnerships, and public scholarship. The proliferation of first-year seminars shows a similar story; here the process of iterative collaboration was organized (and often funded) by the National Resource for the First-Year Experience, based at the University of South Carolina. As does the collaborative movement for learning communities, led by the Washington Center at the Evergreen State College. And, of course, AAC&U's development of the [LEAP initiative](#): networked collaboration both deepened its model and broadened its reach. In each of these cases and others, innovation was neither disruptive nor simply replicative, but rather collaborative and ongoing. A network of academic changemakers evolved, debated, and tested multiple models through site visits, convenings, research, and publication.

To be sure, this process of iteration and networked collaboration has taken wildly different forms. Change can start with a single demonstration site or with multiple, contemporaneous experiments. It can be catalyzed by a powerful institution or association (as with LEAP) or activated by grass-roots energy (as with the proliferation of study abroad). Sometimes the scale of change is incremental; sometimes the pace of change, slow; sometimes the quality of innovation, uneven. And sometimes the project of change can be defeated by inertial resistance or the sabotage of academic stakeholders. (There's still a need, for instance, for alternatives to the semester calendar and the unitary credit hour, those great, defensive bulwarks against creative innovation.) Yet with all that, this has been a time of significant, sometimes paradigm-shifting innovation in higher education. And when change comes, it is by weaving together the external challenges and opportunities facing higher education with our own capacities for creative collaboration.

This history, I believe, offers guides with which to navigate the current turmoil and innovate toward the future. Let's invest in, build, and sustain collaborative networks for change, rather than looking for—or defending against—disruption.



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