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Managing for Improvement: Part I

By John V. Lombardi April 21, 2008
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NOTE: *This semester we've had an active conversation in a graduate course on Managing Universities here at LSU. This blog has suffered as my*

enthusiasm for arguing about university issues has been diverted to the class discussion list. The participants in this course have provoked some good discussion, and what follows is some of the traffic on my side of a conversation about how universities (and in this context we mean research universities) manage themselves to achieve improvement and enhance competitiveness.

University people maintain a permanent and continuing conversation about change. Change is often the watch word for higher education rhetoric. If we look at the publications that reflect the industry, such places as *Change Magazine*, *Inside HigherEd*, or the *Chronicle*, a large proportion of the discussion is about change. Change is what we university people are led to believe we should want, or that we need to lead. Change is what many commentators see as a crisis, an opportunity, or a challenge. Reading these publications, we might think that universities are incredibly dynamic places in constant flux.

As we know, universities are actually places of great stability where change comes relatively slowly. When large change occurs, it often comes from the outside through large scale enrollment growth from demographic shifts as has occurred in recent times in some parts of the South or West like Florida or Arizona or in an earlier era in California, or as a result of social or governmental action such as took place as a result of the post WWII GI Bill. Yet even these changes are mostly changes of scale and scope rather than rapid changes in the fundamental structure or business model for these institutions.

It helps us understand this stability if we observe the competitive behavior of the universities at the top of the prestige stack. This competition is almost entirely focused on the least change oriented parts of the institutions: the quality of students and faculty, the competitiveness of the instructional and research programs. Our understanding of what makes first rate instructional programs and our metrics for identifying the best research programs have changed little.

In some sense the obsession with "change" is a reflection of the constant need to persuade some of our constituencies that in spite of our great stability and relatively rigid structure, and in spite of our somewhat archaic guild-like organization, we are nonetheless "with it" as we track the major transformations of our society. To be sure, our faculty and students do track the major transformations of society, they study them, they analyze them, and in some instances they cause those transformations by the invention of new knowledge that restructures how we work and live. Yet the university organizations within which we accomplish these things are, in fact, quite stable.

We can have a good philosophical discussion about the reasons for this, but for the purposes of this conversation,

which is about MANAGING universities, we take a different perspective. Although we pay attention to the inflated claims of dramatic change that appear in university self-promotion pieces and in the popular magazines that document the enthusiasm for change, the real issue for us is how to manage the university so that it becomes increasingly more competitive with its institutional counterparts. Although it is always more fun to talk about the forces of change, because it makes us feel as if we are in the middle of important transformations, most improvement in university performance occurs by managing effectively, consistently, and even ruthlessly over time.

The first thing to establish in any conversation about managing an enterprise is the goal we want to achieve. If we want to achieve profit, we manage one way; if we want to achieve good for society, we manage another way; if we want to be as large as possible, we manage for that result. If we don't know what we hope to accomplish through management, then we are managing for the sake of doing it, not for the sake of any result.

Most university management is well intentioned and focuses on many things. Universities want to do economic development, community involvement, student development, graduation of undergraduates, production of graduate students, production of research, and an endless list of other things. Universities want to be Green, they want to be inclusive, they want to be responsive to the needs of their state, they want to be successful in sports, they want [fill in the blank with your own enthusiasm]. To achieve all these wants, the university hires managers whose job is to organize and deploy the available resources to produce the goods and services encompassed by the description of the institutional goals (or description of things we want).

Although many people associated with the institution will agree with some of these goals and many other people will agree with others of these goals, and everyone would like all the goals to somehow be achieved, we know that we cannot do everything at the highest level of quality. Even so, to meet all the expectations of their many constituencies, universities often attempt to find a way to do something significant in almost every domain of university activity, although they know they cannot produce top quality everywhere. The richer and more effective the institution, the more activities it can pursue with high quality. The poorer and less effective the institution, the fewer activities it can pursue with high quality. Most universities, whatever their level of wealth and effectiveness, try to participate in as many of the activities that are available to universities and that their constituencies favor as possible. This is why for the most part university profiles look remarkably the same on their web pages. They want to have an entry for everything that every other university has an entry for.

If the purpose of management is to improve the university's competitiveness, however, we have to make some choices among all these things. In every case, universities make choices, but often those choices respond to the ebb and flow of politics, external pressures, internal politics, and targets of opportunity. They change quickly and as a result provide the illusion of change but not necessarily the process of improvement.

We focus on improvement because improvement, as opposed to the common enthusiasm for change, suggests a continuous, focused, and consistent effort to get better on the margin of an operating and stable concern. This is what universities are, operating and stable concerns. Improvement can, if done well, result in substantial change over time, but it is the focus on improvement that works, not the focus on change.