# Education:
Not Enough, or Too Much?

By Adrianna Kezar

Adrianna Kezar is an associate professor at the University of Southern California and associate director for the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis. Her most recent books are Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide for Campus Leaders *(2009) with Jossey-Bass and* Rethinking Leadership *in a Complex, Global, and Multicultural Environment (2009) with Stylus.*

The common belief is that change in higher education is both desirable and elusive. Trustees and presidents try to get faculty and staff to adopt new pedagogical techniques, increase prestige, improve services, assess and measure learning outcomes, use technology, and/or become more student- and learner-centered—all, they fear, to no avail. Federal and state policymakers declaim about the importance of access, the alignment of K–12 and higher education, workforce training, community engagement, and economic development—all of which, they believe, are ignored by colleges and universities. Faculty leaders bemoan how their own colleagues will not do more interdisciplinary work and adopt new modes of teaching. New staff and students often are disappointed at the lack of interest on campus in the green movement, sustainability, diversity, service learning, and environments in which students are empowered to learn. National associations and professional societies urge administrators, faculty, staff, and policymakers not to ignore globalization, performance improvement, leadership development, and equity issues. The public and the policymakers who speak for it are concerned that campuses are not accountable, lack transparency, and cannot contain costs. Alumni worry about the quality of the education, reputation, athletic programs, and cultural programs at their alma maters.

In this article I will argue that the notion that change is not of interest to higher education is a myth that prevents needed progress. I argue that it is not a lack of interest in change but the large number of stakeholders and multiple initiatives that are constantly being introduced into higher education that destroy the capacity to implement meaningful change. I draw on research I have conducted over the last 15 years on leadership and change and my experience as a change agent in a vari-

For example, on one campus administrative leaders told me about their efforts to assess student learning, increase diversity, increase technology use, develop the regional workforce, and create greater partnerships with the community. Mid-level administrators (deans and department chairs) both echoed calls for more diversity, assessment, and technology and spoke about creating more interdisciplinary teaching and learning and increasing their units' quality and prestige . Faculty noted the importance of improving student learning and increasing research, and staff described the imperatives of technology and diversity. Even in the rare case where leaders create clear priorities around several agendas—typically in a strategic plan—people who do not clearly see their set of priorities in the one or two items chosen purs4 noyle leader7.nd (deatraty or ta[sity)10(o]TJ-1 -1.2 Othe or ta[ortgeira more di)25(v)1creaouptancenmore diid74(rshipsa
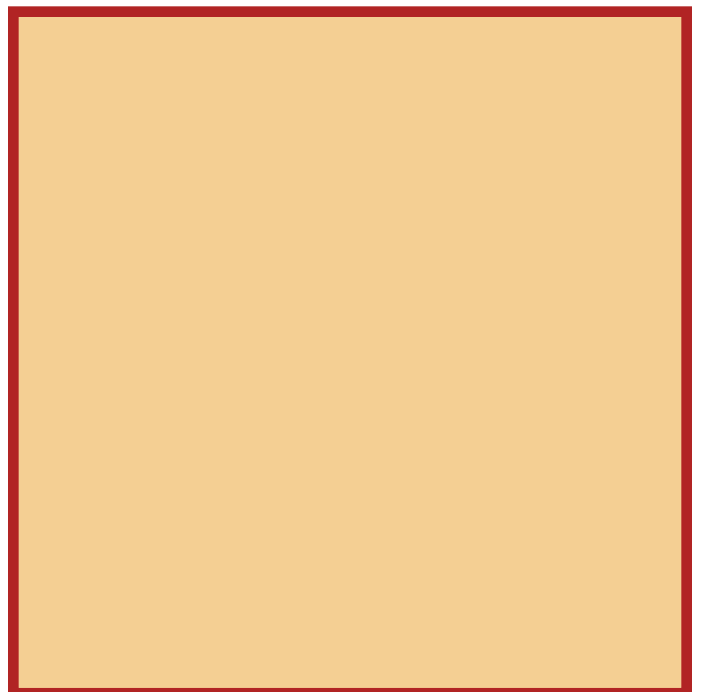
Keeping up with the Joneses: Institutional Isomorphism

Discussions about which changes should become priorities often devolve into efforts by those in positions of power to increase the institution's prestige by adopting the innovations of its aspirational peers. But such innovations may not be best aligned with the institution's culture or mission.

A disturbing trend identified by various researchers, particularly since World War II, is for institutions to become increasingly alike even though they have differing missions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The classic example of this institutional isomorphism is colleges that have traditionally focused on teaching now directing their efforts toward research in an attempt to mimic the universities with which they would like to be grouped.

A state college with a mandate to meet the needs of the regional community and focus on teaching might be led by a president who is trying to redirect faculty effort toward world-class interdisciplinary research. Undergraduate research programs might be undertaken on a campus with no capacity to do the job well. Initiatives such as these can deplete financial and human resources, undermine institutional missions, and shortchange the public good.

Pursuing prestige and money

Internationalism is a hot trend in higher education. Even community colleges have become entranced with bringing students from all over the world to their campuses. Community colleges disproportionately serve low-income students, and they need to expose those students to international students and experiences as much as other campuses that serve middle- and upper-class students. Yet internationalization as a road to prestige and income can lead community colleges away from serving their primary mission.

One community college I visited had begun to enroll so many international students that they were becoming the campus's first priority. Since those students paid higher tuitions than the in-state ones the college was designed to serve, they were also a very important source of revenue. The incentives to continue to attract them and to create numerous international partnerships were thus significant, while there were few rewards in working with local students and in fostering community development and the regional economy.

The campus had changed its character, for which it was recognized nationally and internationally, but was this the right sort of change? Whose interests did it serve? In this case, low-income students and the local community lost out to well-funded international students and interests. And even if this was the right choice, there was no discussion or debate about it. As taxpayers provide less funding to postsecondary institutions and increase the incentives to pursue prestige and money by whatever means, these sorts of discussions need to occur.

Building a True Capacity for Change

If the coexistence of numerous change initiatives is one reason why higher education has difficulty making progress on any one of them, campuses need to agree on a small number of priorities that are aligned with institutional mission, regional needs, and the collective and shared interests of internal stakeholders and create greater synergy and partnerships between them. This will help ensure that the financial and human resources need for change are available. And as an industry and profession, we need to hold people accountable for advancing them.

We also need to change the common perception that change is not of interest to campus constituents, because that perception prevents people from acting, particularly faculty and staff leaders. While there are always individuals who are optimistic and who diligently work to create change anyway, those individuals are few and far between.

In recent years, many foundations and government agencies have stopped funding change initiatives in higher education because they were not seeing the payoff for their investment. For all the reasons I have laid out here, projects funded by outside groups do not progress at an appropriate rate. Higher education would benefit from demonstrating that we can make the type of hard choices that would allow us to improve what we do.

In his classic book *The Uses of the University*, Clark Kerr warned about the increasing number of stakeholders on campus and the various interests that they represent. He noted how in earlier times, alumni, the government, parents, community groups had a much smaller stake in higher education. In addition, the faculty was a less fragmented group, and staff and administrators were less numerous and diffuse. Kerr worried about the university's ability to maintain its integrity and fulfill its mission as it became more fragmented and was called to respond to more stakeholders.

We continue to face this dilemma today. By making it more visible, though, we might begin to address and rectify an ongoing and pervasive problem. **C**
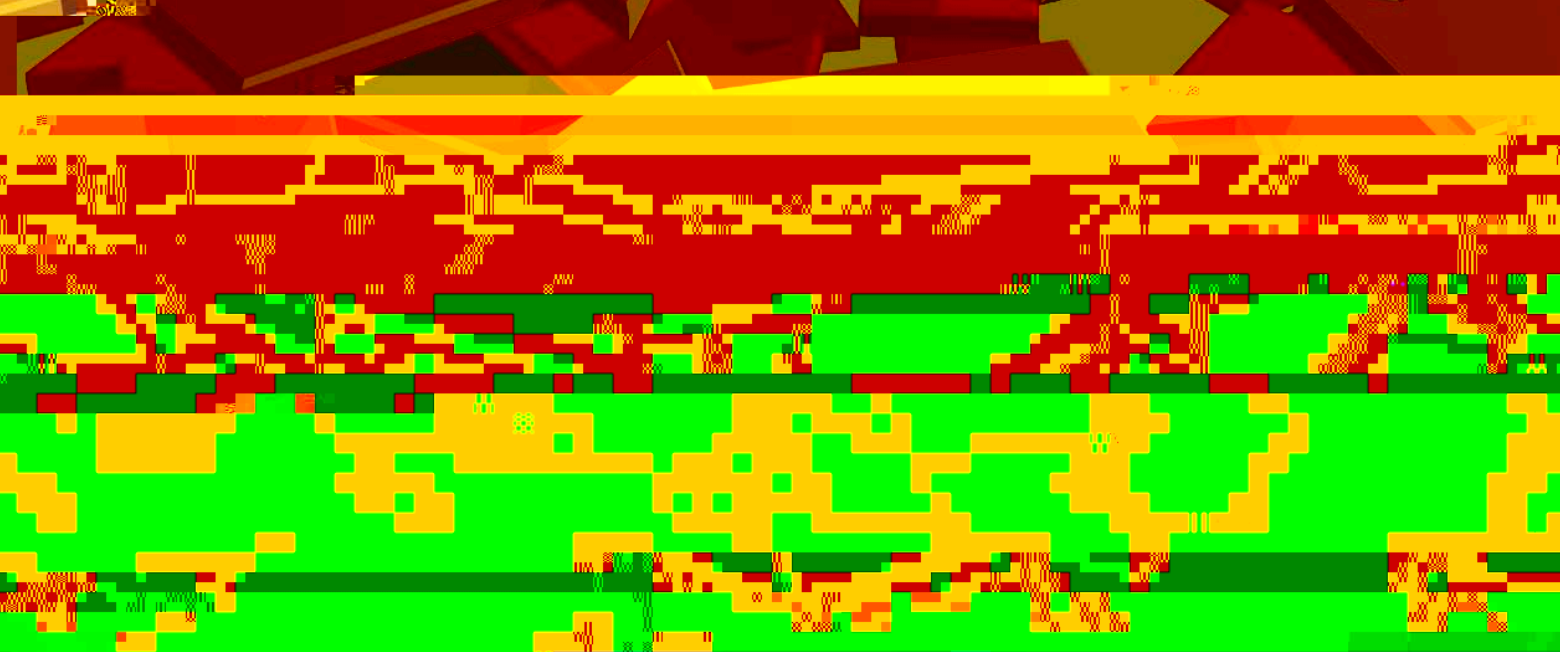
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