

The Game Changers

By E. Lander Medlin

The familiar construction crane punctuating the campus landscape is certainly a definitive indicator of growth, development, and change. However, change is now even more deeply rooted by such disruptive forces as enrollment competition by the for-profit sector and lack of traditional high school graduates; an unattended aging infrastructure; workforce shifts that threaten our ability to hire a skilled workforce; and an underlying skepticism about the value of a college education overall. All of this amid continued concerns for safety and security, an unsustainable business model, and an increased interest in outsourcing more programs and services.

Have I got your attention?! I hope so, since these are considered the *Top Strategic Issues for Governing Boards* (based on AGB's latest 2016-17 publication titled same). Furthermore, other key publications from NACUBO (*Drafting the Future*) and EDUCAUSE (*Sketching our Future*), have outlined similar challenges facing higher education. The environment is not only changing, it has already changed and continues to morph at a rapid pace. Indeed, technology is the driver of rapid structural change in the economy.

FACTS VS OPINIONS

So, what do we do? Where do we focus our time and attention? We must commit to making the best decisions possible for the right reasons—with evidence and facts that support those decisions. Daniel Patrick Moynihan aptly said, “We are free to have our own opinions, but not our own facts.” To further illustrate, Abraham Lincoln once asked, “If I told you that a sheep’s tail was a leg, how many legs would a sheep have?” Everyone said, “Five.” He retorted, “Saying it’s so doesn’t make it so!” Are we currently basing our decisions on facts or opinion? If we focus on the facts, we can change the game! That said, what are the game changers moving forward? Here are just three:

Technological Innovation—In a presentation by Dr. Donald Bobbit, president of the University of Arkansas System, he recounted Bill Gates’ skepticism that we could sustain our institutions with the current funding, present business model, and delivery system. He may be correct. However, Gates then asked the audience to consider two important questions:

- How can we use technology as a tool to recreate the entire college experience?
- How can we provide better education to more people for less money?

Important questions, yet just as instructive and informative is what Michael Crow (Arizona State University President) stated in his interview with John O’Brien (EDUCAUSE, CIO association president and CEO), “We must be willing to be disruptive at a scale (breadth and differentiation) to solve very, very intractable problems. We’re not shooting for a perfect outcome but a measurable difference...we must lower costs...must find ways to do things in new ways or we won’t achieve the level of service needed at our institutions.” So there it is! We must employ greater technological capacity to proactively upend many old practices and assumptions about what’s possible. And, Dr. Bobbit said, “Don’t confuse the difficult with the impossible.” It will certainly be difficult but we are up to the task. Technological innovation informs the other two game-changers.

Space Management/Utilization—Yes, we must tackle this one! Technology and informed policy can help us optimize and further maximize campus facilities utilization rates. Thereby providing opportunities for greater space and energy/utilities efficiencies, a positive impact on capital investment and our campus sustainability goals, and a blended educational experience to enhance, not limit, learning opportunities.

Performance Metrics & Data Analytics—Both the NACUBO and EDUCAUSE articles emphasized the power of using metrics and data to change the

culture. Michael Crow put it succinctly when he said, *“Analytics is essential to the process of change. If you don’t know where you are in time and space, you don’t know how you’re performing.”*

Or, how about an entirely different illustration. Let’s take the Chicago Cubs baseball team’s recent historic win of the 2016 World Series. It took 108 years but by no means was it by luck or chance.

Under Theo Epstein’s leadership as the GM, they didn’t just analyze data and information from every source and angle, they used that data to inform and influence every organizational decision they made (over a painstaking but deliberate period of five years). *“The Cubs committed to a plan, executed that plan to perfection, and did not allow themselves to be distracted from their ultimate goal”* – winning the World Series! As a matter of fact, baseball’s culture change toward the use of data analytics has occurred in less than fifteen years—to the point where teams are mocked for NOT using analytics (versus traditional scouting and player development from within).

Analytics doesn’t mean “numbers.” It means cutting through the chaff with a reason for every decision you make, and that reason is not based on a gut feeling, or “because that’s the way it’s always been done”. The CUBS questioned conventional wisdom and gathered tons of data/information to give them a competitive edge. Theo Epstein *“ended baseball’s long-running analytics war by proving that an objective, data-driven approach can change the game.”*

ANALYTICS IS THE EDGE

Using data of all types to make informed decisions spawns the competitive urge to find an edge over your competition, which spurs innovation over time, and allows the reexamination of past strategies to secure a competitive advantage. In today’s competitive environment, we need every competitive edge we can get, and we definitely need to spur innovation.

In this environmental backdrop of disruption and discontent, we must rewrite our own game-changing strategies

and get serious about data analytics. Paraphrasing Jerry Garcia, *“It’s really a shame something has to be done and we have to do it!”* This will take disciplined execution but can and will change the very culture of decision-making. Let’s step up our game and change the playing field altogether. ☎

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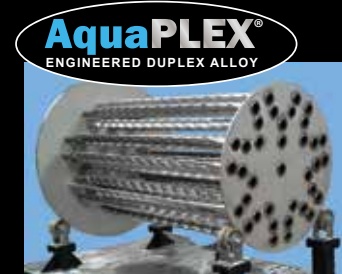
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