

# How Can a College Improve Decision Making?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 11-27-2016

Page: 01

You don't have to look very hard to find numerous articles that outline the challenges facing colleges today: Declining enrollments, dramatic increases in tuition and student debt, lower state subsidies, almost half of students failing to obtain a degree in six years, the resulting increase in pressure from the federal government on outcomes, and questions about the relevance of traditional curricula to today's environment. The list goes on and on.

But you may have to look a bit harder to find colleges and universities that have made significant changes in an effort to meet these challenges.

I don't think that anybody working on a campus today would deny the need for decisive action. But who is actually empowered to make these decisions, and to implement new strategies in a timely way?

The first three decades of my professional life were spent in a corporate environment, and there wasn't much uncertainty about who had decision power. Corporations are your basic command and control environments. The Board of Directors might listen thoughtfully to strategic plans and capital spending budget presentations, but their primary purpose was to select a CEO whom they felt could capably lead the company, and they empowered him or her to run the show.

A good CEO is also a good listener, but when the time came for a decision to be made from among competing alternatives, the CEO made it – and the implementation flowed quickly through the ranks of employees.

College decision making is much different, though, as I found out when I arrived on campus to begin my second career. The process is much slower, and more circular than linear. As for the identity of the final decision maker – well, that wasn't really clear to me.

As far as I can tell, a college Board of Trustees operates in many respects just as a corporate Board of Directors does. Their primary function is to pick the president of the institution, and let that person lead the organization.

While corporate Boards usually consist of 10-12 directors, college and university Boards can sometimes comprise over 40 members - an unwieldy number which makes their selection of an effective president that much more important.

Once in office, the college president has decision making power in many areas – setting the size of staff and their pay levels, making basic decisions regarding technology and facility spending, approving the entrance standards set by admissions, and generally overseeing the efficacy of all staff departments.

As important as all of those things are, none of them lie at the essential core of the enterprise. The one constituency on campus that has by far the most contact with the students, and delivers the curriculum that is the entire reason for the institution to exist, is the faculty. And over that constituency the president has much more limited power.

The increase in the use of adjunct faculty (who teach about half of all college courses nationwide) has actually served to increase the relative power of the core tenured faculty – who comprise about a third of all faculty, half the proportion compared to a few decades ago. (The balance of the faculty consists of “visitors” who operate under contracts generally ranging from 1-3 years.)

Tenured faculty have institutional protections that allow them to often operate independently of the administration – both at the department and the individual levels. As a result, they are a force to be reckoned with, and inertia among faculty members can slow down the pace at which colleges need to adapt to changing times. Faculty may argue that a good curriculum should change gradually, and they may have a point. But the simple fact is that the environment in which graduates now operate is changing more rapidly than ever before, and they will be at a loss if their academic preparation doesn't keep pace.

Faculty engagement with admissions, career services, development and finance is more limited than it should

# How Can a College Improve Decision Making?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 11-27-2016

Page: 02

be, in my observation. Faculty members are quite busy during the roughly 30 weeks of semester time each year, and as a result the faculty representatives assigned to these departmental functions manage to interface with the staff groups on a less than desired frequency.

So, when the school needs to change, and change quickly, there is this built-in barrier of tenure protections, natural inertia and time limitations. What, then, can be the structural improvements that would enable decision making to proceed on a more rapid, fully informed, and cohesive basis across the enterprise? It seems to me that there are two major improvements that could greatly enhance the decision making process.

The first is a careful re-look at the numbers, backgrounds and categories of the faculty members who are recruited. It is unlikely that schools will turn away from low-cost adjuncts, so the emphasis has to be on the 30-40% of faculty who are tenured or tenure track.

The decision to grant tenure is key. Of course, schools need committed faculty that will be contributing for the long term, and the tenure system in theory helps to provide that stability. But because that core faculty segment is becoming more concentrated, the tenure decision needs to be made on as broad a basis as possible. Tenure should be granted not just on the basis of degrees and the number of academic papers published, but also their demonstrated ability to teach, to engage with professional organizations off campus, and to demonstrate the openness and willingness needed to fully evaluate market changes, and translate that into initiatives needed on campus.

High performing faculty are not easy to find, and they need to be leveraged. Much of their time needs to be dedicated to working across the campus enterprise, aggressively injecting their energies into strategy development and tactical implementations. Adjuncts and visiting professors should be solely devoted to teaching, which would allow the tenured faculty to be

involved in both teaching and institution-wide thought activities, as active partners to the president and the administration.

Secondly, these tenured faculty would need to spend full time on campus, year round. Not much cross-silo work occurs during 15- week semesters, as everybody is much too busy with courses and students. The ideal time to engage with the other key campus constituencies is during the semester breaks, which account for almost five months of calendar time. This is when the assessment and planning with admissions, finance, career services, and development must occur – with faculty working to help develop new programs, and to sharpen their thinking through meetings with prospective students, alumni and employers.

Some faculty will object, saying that these semester breaks - especially in the summer - are needed for them to work on their professional development. But employees of organizations of all types routinely develop their skills, and add to their education, while working full time. This is the world in which the graduates have to operate, so faculty need to be willing to do the same.

Strong leadership at the presidential level, along with a thoroughly engaged and farsighted faculty, are the keys to move quickly, in order to survive and thrive.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)