

Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education

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Michael Fullan and Geoff Scott. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. 2009. 170 pp.

The central premise of *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education* is that institutions of higher education need to become more “change-capable” to meet successfully the economic and societal challenges of the 21st century. Fullan and Scott propose that effective, or what they label “turnaround,” leadership is the key to transforming colleges and universities from their current “change averse culture” to one that is “change-capable.”

The Imperative for Change

Change is a topic of critical importance for higher education and the leaders who are responsible for guiding the operations and progress of their institutions. Colleges and universities in the United States are currently faced with major challenges that in some cases threaten their existence. Financing institutional operations jumps out as a foremost concern for all institutions. While always an issue of importance, the financial crisis now experienced by all sectors of our country has had an immediate impact on colleges and universities. Private institutions have experienced a sizable, and in some cases crippling, loss of funds in their endowments; public institutions are faced with severe cost cutting dictated by drastic reductions in state revenues. The simultaneous reduction in income of many families exacerbates the dire financial picture, making it difficult and often impossible for families to afford college tuition for their children. In Connecticut, for example, the nation's wealthiest state in per capita income, the number of applications for student financial aid is growing faster than college enrollment, and both the number of applicants found eligible for federal aid and the severity of need are increasing (Connecticut Department of Higher Education, 2008).

All these financial obstacles are occurring during a time of rapidly rising institutional costs. For example, recent information from the New England Board of Higher Education (2008) indicates that more than 60 percent of family income is required to cover college costs at New England's private college and universities, and in some of the region's six states, the figure exceeds 80 percent. Total yearly charges for resident students, including room and board, top \$40,000 at New England's private four-year institutions and \$20,000 at the region's public institutions. While these costs are relatively higher than national averages, they provide a

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snapshot of the overall challenges to higher education in the United States since New England has the largest number of colleges and universities, particularly private institutions, of any region in the country. Half of New England college students attend private institutions compared with less than one quarter nationally (New England Board of Higher Education, 2008).

While the grim financial picture is the immediate priority for institutional leaders, it is occurring within a larger societal context that already was predicted to require significant changes in some basic college and university operations. Reflecting the country's changing demographics, projections for the future college age population suggests that the greatest growth will be in racially and ethnically diverse populations, while the white population is expected to decline (New England Board of Higher Education, 2008). In New England, for example, between 2005 and 2025, the number of Hispanics and African-Americans in the 18-44 age group is expected to increase by a larger percentage than the projected decline in the white population (New England Board of Higher Education, 2008).

For the nation's colleges and universities, these figures mean that new measures for student recruitment and retention are needed. Nationally, despite some gains in higher education participation and attainment, wide disparities by race and ethnicity persist. Currently a larger percentage of young people from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds are growing up in families that have limited experience in higher education and have lower incomes than their white counterparts. These factors are critical for the future of institutions of higher education because family income, as well as family educational background, are the most significant predictors for college attendance (New England Board of Higher Education, 2008). The higher the family's income and the greater the family's level of educational attainment, the more likely it is that a high school graduate will attend college. The nation's impending demographic changes represent both challenges and opportunities for colleges and universities to attract and support a growing student population that differs in background from that of the students who have traditionally attended college. Among the strategies for recruiting a more diverse student population is working closely with local school systems to insure that all students entering college, regardless of racial/ethnic background and family income and educational experience, are prepared to succeed academically.

While these concerns may be uppermost for institutional leaders, they are not directly addressed in Fullan and Scott's work. In their review of the challenges for universities in the 21st century, for example, Fullan and Scott do note a worldwide drop in the proportion of higher education funding provided by government. And in referencing the significant increase in access to higher education experienced during the second half of the 20th century, they identify student retention, although not student diversity, as the new challenge for colleges and universities. This lack of acknowledgement of some key current challenges for American colleges and universities may reflect Fullan and Scott's basic perspective on higher education. Neither author has had direct experience with colleges and universities in the United States. Michael Fullan's principal expertise is in the field of education. Among other capacities, he served as dean of the faculty of education at the University of Toronto for a number of years during which he led two major organizational transformations. He currently works as an adviser and consultant on several education reform initiatives around the world. Geoff Scott is the pro-vice chancellor at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, and the provost of its Penrith Campus. He has conducted research in schools, postsecondary and higher education in Australia and several countries around the world.

To a great extent *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education* reflects the authors' individual experiences and global perspectives on higher education. For this reason, while many of their findings and conclusions are relevant to the American experience, the absence of

distinctions between the basic structures and educational approaches of higher education in the United States and that of other countries detracts from the potential usefulness of their work. Among other pertinent factors, the majority of colleges and universities in other countries are publicly supported. The United States tradition of private colleges and universities, which goes back to colonial times, is fairly unique around the world.

Fullan and Scott's case for change follows a format that is fairly familiar to the academy: what's wrong; how it should look; how to fix it; and what type of people can accomplish the transformation. The authors first provide an analysis of the current inadequacies of higher education change processes (the "failed strategies"). This is followed by their vision of how institutions should function ("the new agenda"). Mechanisms for implementing the "ideal" university are then laid out ("making it happen"). Finally the characteristics of the leadership needed to bring about change are delineated, as well as the process for selecting leaders ("leadership capacity for turnaround").

What Needs to be Fixed

To support their proposition that institutions must become change-capable, Fullan and Scott outline what they consider the "failed strategies" that result in a change resistant university culture. Here are a few examples of what they view as barriers to effective change management:

1. *Inefficiency.* "Indicators in this area include decision making which is ad hoc and reactive; a failure to set priorities, with everything seeming to be of equal importance; and an excessive amount of time being taken up with meetings, usually with no clear outcome. . . . [This can be described as] 'Christmas tree' universities where every day there is a new change on the agenda" (p. 34).
2. *Poor Decision Making and a Lack of Focus.* Indicators include "more emphasis being given to 'consensus around the table' than to 'consensus around the data' . . . being more informed by anecdote than evidence" (p. 34).
3. *Disengagement from the Core Purposes of the Institution.* Key indicators include "the existence of pockets of excellence which are unknown to others; . . . a senior executive that is not in regular contact with line staff about key issues; . . . high levels of micropolitical behavior, back stabbing, passive resistance, anomie, back-room deals, little shared moral purpose, and small cliques of people being in the know whilst others feel completely left out of the action" (p. 35).
4. *Too Little Focus on Implementation.* Universities "invest most of their effort into developing plans, running retreats, undertaking reviews, and identifying what should happen, with far fewer resources being put into making sure that what emerges is consistently and effectively being put into practice" (p. 39).

Fullan and Scott's detailed analysis of what they characterize as current university culture is clearly provocative and in many cases induces a chuckle of familiarity. On the whole, however, it is too general to be very useful and represents one of the factors that detract from the persuasiveness of their arguments. Throughout the book Fullan and Scott portray colleges and universities as a monolith without acknowledging the range of differences in mission, size, programmatic offerings, and resulting support functions. The authors seem to assume that "one size fits all," and, therefore, their critique of institutional failures and remedies for ameliorating institutional effectiveness, which form the body of this work, are similarly uniform in nature. For

example, in introducing the book, Fullan and Scott indicate that it “tackles the question of how universities can effect change from within” (p. ix). Their perspective is exacerbated by the fact that, as previously indicated, the differences between colleges and universities in the United States and those in other countries are not acknowledged, and many of the case examples are from Australian universities. The authors’ presumption of uniformity reflects the fact that the main source of data from which they draw their conclusions is a study conducted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council which involved a survey of administrators from 20 Australian universities. Additional perspectives were derived from workshops and discussions with university staff in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States to review the findings of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council study. The findings of the multi-national review are aggregated with no differentiation by country.

The tendency to describe and analyze institutions of higher education as if they were homogeneous entities is not unique to Fullan and Scott but is widespread in the higher education literature. Perhaps this case can serve as a reminder to all of us that in our desire to understand and recommend ways of improving institutional effectiveness, we need to give greater attention to differentiating individual institutional issues and concerns. Institutions’ specific change agendas and approaches for implementing their agendas will vary according to their individual characteristics: mission, size, range of programs and, degree levels, and whether they are public or private. One example of the importance of differentiating institutions in my own experience is depicted in a study by Dalton and his colleagues. In a survey of over 160 colleges and universities, presidents were asked to identify the key factors for creating a campus culture that support the character development of their students (Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm, 2006, pp. 254-258). The resulting data analysis identified statistically significant differences in presidential responses based on institutional type and size. These differences clearly will have an impact on decisions about campus programs.

A Change Agenda

To remedy the change resistant culture characterized as pervasive in higher education, Fullan and Scott define a new agenda for colleges and universities. Their proposals for change are intriguing and go to the heart of higher education’s mission to educate students and society. At the core of the authors’ model for revitalizing universities is putting teaching and learning at the center of the higher education enterprise. Fullan and Scott reason that implementing their proposed transformation of university priorities and processes will address student retention, one of the critical challenges to higher education. “The importance of this new centrality of teaching and learning is that it will engage students in productive learning, retain them to degree completion, and result in better graduates” (p. 55).

The key element of Fullan and Scott’s vision of a transformed approach to teaching and learning is modifying current approaches to curriculum and methods of teaching. They propose making practical reasoning a “central integrator in the new agenda of universities and colleges” (p. 46) and the driving principle for all courses. They emphasize that placing practical reasoning at the center of the curriculum is not antithetical to traditional educational approaches. Referencing the work of Sullivan and Rosin, *A New Agenda for Higher Education: Shaping the Life of the Mind for Practice* (2008), Fullan and Scott assert that practical reasoning helps students “move back and forth between the general theory typical of their fields and the demand to make their learning and intentions concrete in particular judgments and decisions” (quoted in Fullan and Scott, p. 45). And practical reasoning supports efforts in applied and engaged research.

The authors further suggest that implementing this new educational emphasis “has substantial implications for universities to move toward more transdisciplinary programs that reconnect critical analysis with engagement in society and culture” (p. 50). The authors cite Boyer’s influential work on the scholarship of integration as parallel to their proposals.

Boyer’s conception of the scholarship of integration concerns making connections across the disciplines . . . [and] aligns with our view that a new, more integrated conception of learning and teaching is central to the future of the academy over the coming decade. (pp. 52-53)

Fullan and Scott acknowledge that their proposed educational revisions are not new. Integrating practical reasoning with theoretical analysis has been used in individual classes for decades, and some universities have emphasized problem-based learning. What they are advocating, however, is a radical change across higher education, including that “Sullivan and Rosin’s focus on practical reasoning and Boyer’s focus on the scholarship of integration now be pursued with consistent, strategic intent *across the whole university*” (p. 53).

To accomplish this goal will require major changes in the current approaches to teaching and learning and must be supported by extensive faculty development. Underpinning the new agenda is the notion that institutions of higher education must operate as learning organizations that “gather focused data on their own practices and outcomes, have mechanisms for implementing improvements, and to do this continuously and consistently, not in a pocketed fashion” (p 67).

Turnaround Leadership

Fullan and Scott identify effective mechanisms, what they term “turnaround strategies,” for producing the change-capable university culture that they envision. The Australian Learning and Teaching Council, with which Geoff Scott participated, developed these strategies. Evidence-based decision-making is one of the primary effective strategies recommended by Fullan and Scott. They assert that while turnaround universities recognize the importance of building consensus, they will transfer the focus to consensus on the data: “A university culture characterized by a commitment to continuous evaluation, inquiry, and quality improvement concentrates on using evidence to identify what aspects of its current provision are working well and what most need enhancement” (p. 80). The authors advocate the use of evidence both to improve the current situation and to determine future directions: “Whereas quality improvement focuses on making sure existing provision is working well, strategic positioning focuses on making sure that the university remains in alignment with a rapidly changing external environment” (p. 80). The model for the quality improvement and strategic positioning process depicted by Fullan and Scott is similar to that used in regional and professional accreditation processes by colleges and universities in the United States, as well as in individual institutional strategic planning initiatives. As the authors’ state, it consists of the current “cycle of review (self-study), plan (identify a response), implement (put it into practice), monitor (check the outcomes), improve (retain what works but address what doesn’t)” (p. 87).

Fullan and Scott emphasize that leadership is the key to achieving their vision of a change-capable university. As they suggest,

Having good ideas for building a change-capable culture and advocating a new approach to strategic change and quality improvement will not make change happen in daily practice. Such change does not happen, especially in university cultures which have many autonomous and isolated parts. Leadership—ever-widening circles of leadership—is absolutely critical to grappling with the forces of change. (p. 93)

The essence of Fullan and Scott's work is their concept of turnaround leadership. They suggest that leaders

encounter considerable frustration in trying to deal with arcane systems and a change-resistant culture as they work to engage and support people in necessary change. Yet we have also found that there is often little attention paid to the capabilities and experience necessary to lead change in the position descriptions for leadership roles in higher education. Furthermore, the sorts of support which university leaders identify as being most productive in developing their capabilities and performances as leaders is [sic] only rarely promoted by university staff development units. Finally, effective and systematic approaches to identifying and developing potential leaders is [sic] neglected. (p. 39)

To address these deficits, Fullan and Scott formulate a model of the critical capabilities and competencies required of turnaround leaders. This model is derived from the Learning Leadership study of the University of Western Sydney, the Australian Council for Educational Research, and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The study resulted in identifying a set of personal, interpersonal, and cognitive capability items and scales important for effective turnaround leadership. These include the following:

Personal Capabilities: self-regulation, decisiveness, and commitment
Interpersonal Capabilities: influencing and emphasizing
Cognitive Capabilities: diagnoses, strategy, and flexibility and responsiveness.

The study also identified key leadership competencies including learning and teaching, university operations, and self-organization skills.

The selection and development of turnaround leaders are critical to producing the change-capable university that Fullan and Scott advocate. Fullan and Scott indicate, however, that "the identification, selection, and development of our higher education leaders are generally not well managed" (p. 130). To assist institutions in selecting and developing change-capable leaders, they propose an academic leadership development program that addresses the key capabilities and competencies identified through the Learning Leadership study. This program centers on the "Rated Class A" quality assurance framework and checkpoints summarized as follows:

R-Relevance
A-Active Learning
T-Theory-practice links
E-Expectations management
D-Direction and coherence
C-Capabilities that count
L-Learning pathways that are flexible
A-Assessment
S-Staff

S-Support
A-Access

The authors also used the data from the Learning Leadership study to formulate a set of academic leadership development scales that define effective approaches to providing academic leadership development and learning. They recommend that professional learning for academic leaders follow “an action learning cycle in which a combination of proven formal, practice-based and self-managed methods are used” (p. 143). These include informal conversations with peers about specific issues, as well as participating in peer networks; accessing leadership information and studies through the leadership literature and the internet; involvement in both formal and informal mentoring and coaching programs; study of real-life workplace problems, including site visits to other institutions; and participating in formal leadership programs including seminars and conferences.

Who Can Benefit from *Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education*

Effective leadership is always critical for institutions of higher education and particularly so now as institutions face major challenges that may drastically influence their ability to provide high quality education. Fullan and Scott provide a number of interesting perspectives on and useful directions for institutional changes to meet the current challenges. These include their proposals to put teaching and learning at the center of the higher education enterprise and to integrate students’ learning experiences across the curriculum through interdisciplinary programs and problem-based learning. To produce these changes they advocate that colleges and universities act as learning organizations, conducting on-going reviews of their programs and procedures and using resulting data to design and implement improvements. They provide a model of the capabilities and competencies for effective leadership that can be used by institutions in leadership selection, and they outline components for leadership development programs. Fullan and Scott’s vision for institutional change is essentially aspirational in nature, and as such holds potential benefit for institutional leaders seeking new insights and perspectives for use in their own leadership practice. The models of critical leadership capabilities and leadership development lend themselves for use in educational leadership courses and programs.

Overall this work is primarily theoretical, which is somewhat ironic because one of the authors’ key recommendations is to make practical reasoning a central integrator of the change agenda. All of the authors’ proposals for change remain generic. As I previously indicated, Fullan and Scott do not differentiate institutions by mission, size, range of programs, or public or private status. Further, much of the research on which this work is premised was conducted in Australia and several other English-speaking countries. For this reason, some of the conclusions do not necessarily correspond with the particular issues faced by American colleges and universities. The general lack of specific case examples diminishes the usefulness of the work for institutional leaders. This deficit contradicts one of the tenets of effective leadership development for which Fullan and Scott advocate, the study of real-life workplace problems. And, while the authors make references to the range of leaders at different levels of the institutional enterprise and suggest that the leadership models apply to all university functions, there is little recognition that the functions and concerns of leaders within one unit or division of a university may differ from those in another unit.

Leadership for change is essential for effective institutional practice, and Fullan and Scott’s work can offer some intriguing ideas for consideration by leaders across different types of

colleges and universities and with different institutional functions. Institutional leaders ultimately must engage in the hard work of making change happen to address their own specific issues and concerns. As Fullan and Scott indicate, “leading is a complex, constantly changing, relatively uncertain, and highly human endeavor” (p. 106). And the highest ranked method of learning identified by university leaders participating in the Leadership Learning study was learning on the job, learning through doing.

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