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An Interview with Barbara Hill

How can data be used as an effective tool for institutional change? This was the guiding question in our recent interview with Dr. Barbara Hill, Senior Associate at the American Council on Education. Having engaged, as participant, facilitator, and observer in a number of institutional transformation efforts nation-wide, Dr. Hill provides us with valuable insights on the ways in which institutions can initiate organizational change that is both meaningful and transformative.

What do you see as the role of faculty in institutional change?

I believe that for any institutional change to occur, an appropriate organizational structure must be in place to tackle difficult issues. For example, a faculty member might chair or co-chair the task force addressing the issue. For any change to be embedded in an institution, it needs to be embedded in the culture of the faculty. And so I think faculty's role in any kind of organizational change is critical. I also encourage administrators to be aware that some assignments are more weighty than others and that institutional resources, such as release time, should be available for these types of efforts.

What about the role of the Chief Executive Officer?

Well, I think that the role of the Chief Executive Officer is a really interesting one. I think a Chief Executive Officer has to understand the nature of the institution. However, I think that good change leaders at the top level have to have certain kinds of attitudes and habits. For example, I think they need to be principle-driven. By that, I mean to say that they have to have some sense of public good that is going to derive from the changes that they want to engender. I also think faculty members are very responsive to change that is principle-driven, rather than something the faculty might consider the trend de jour. So it is important for the CEO to articulate and advocate for why change is important and what principles support it.

I think that Chief Executive Officers needs to also take a long-term perspective, that is, they should be doing something that will make the institution a better place twenty years down the road as well as three years down the road. Now, I realize the culture in which education operates is changing frequently, so this becomes rather difficult to do. But when I was president, I always kept

thinking that the students I have today are the alums I will be dealing with twenty years from now. What does this say about the relationship we ought to have now?

To what extent should students also be involved in the process of implementing institutional transformation? How can their voices be most effectively heard?

Well certainly, if the changes are going to impact upon the undergraduate students, they ought to be involved. But here I refer back to my own undergraduate experience. I was at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign during the period when the doctrine of in loco parentis was under great attack. Consequently, institutional cultures were changing in some basic ways. I was very active in student government, and I sat on a number of university-wide committees. I, of course, thought that my voice was absolutely critical. One of the difficult things, however, is that students have the responsibility to be students first and then to work with the institution. And most of the committees that I was on required that one make a multi-year commitment--even for something such as an ad hoc committee. So, frequently there was student turn-over in the committees that were dealing with large-scale issues at the university. This works against getting the right kind of input from students. So, I'm not certain that students necessarily need to be on the committees, but the committees ought to find ways to get feedback from students—whether that is an electronic survey, a series of focus groups—the student voice just has to be in there.

Are there some other key players on campus?

Frequently, when institutions are thinking about curricular changes, they don't include support staff, such as the student affairs officers, who I think are very critical, because students' experiences in the classroom is only about fifteen hours a week and there is a heck of a lot more to a week than just those fifteen hours. So, if you're trying to have a kind of holistic experience for the students, you have to be thinking about the environment outside the classroom as well. Now that varies from one campus to another. Obviously, on a residential campus this is very important. Even on a commuter campus one needs to consider how the various staff officers make the student experience easy or difficult. I think one has to be much more broad-based in construction of committees than most institutions are.

What are some of the key elements in curricular transformation?

Faculty members tend to want to create curricula that will last for all-time. I remember when I was responsible for constructing a core-curriculum at an institution where I was a young faculty member and I thought I had solved it all—it was going to be a mainstay for generations to come! What I didn't realize at the time was, of course, that the world around the university changes considerably

and that even my well-meaning, beautiful, platonic design was going to have to undergo some changes eventually. I think if one thinks about what one wants the learning outcomes to be for students that can be more important than thinking about various inputs that are created to presumably lead to that outcome. I would be much more flexible about the content pieces of a curriculum than I would be about the ways in which the content pieces connect with the learning outcomes that have been identified. That way, one doesn't get one's ego involved so much in the business of design, because one knows full well that the design is going to have to shift as the experiences of students change and as the world changes and as the sources of knowledge change.

What about the role of data in change efforts?

Well, right now I'm doing a lot of work in internationalization, which means creating programs so that students get an international experience. But it also deals with curricular issues that would lead to global learning outcomes. And I think that evaluating students definitely gets one into data for the sake of improving how one is exposing students to different types programs in an effort to achieve some level of learning. I think that an improvement feedback loop from data is absolutely critical. Now, data can be numbers—how many students are studying abroad?—but data can also include a series of essays that a student selects to put into an electronic portfolio. So, I think of data as being more than simply quantitative.

In looking at the big picture, even though we deliver education to individual students, I think it's important for senior officers at institutions to have a sense of what the overall trends are at their institution. You get that by aggregating individual data into larger sets of information.

What advice would you offer institutions that might be contemplating curricular changes to facilitate students' spiritual quest or development?

I don't use the word "spiritual" myself. I think about students wanting experiences that will allow them to craft a meaningful relationship between themselves and the world. I know that many people use the word "spiritual" to cover that, but I don't for idiosyncratic reasons. But if we think about meaning-making as one of the desirable outcomes of a higher level education, the curricular changes ought to be about not just developing a knowledge base or a set of skills, but also giving students experiences—along with opportunities for reflecting on those opportunities—so that they can see and understand their own development. I think that institutions that simply assume that students are empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge are making inappropriate assumptions. Students craft ways to be in the world by making meaning and seeing also about the world and creating pathways for themselves to become a part of that world. That is why I'm very intrigued with internationalization of curricula right now because that's probably the most important set of issues facing students these

days: namely, how am I going to find my place in a world that is changing so rapidly?

Even if a curriculum offers many opportunities for guided reflection, under the tutelage of a faculty member, certainly, students can get a lot of meaning-making from carefully crafted co-curricular enterprises. I think service learning, again with a reflective piece, is very important—whether that’s done in a domestic or international environment.

Could you share some of your personal reflections on the connections between education, spirituality, and transformation (individually and institutionally)?

This is a big question. I think in my own education, which was at a publicly funded institution, there was a great deal of backing away from the notion of meaning-making. This is why I try to steer clear of the word “spirituality” because I think a good portion of the higher education in this country is provided by public institutions and there are some real difficulties around the separation of publicly funded institutions from spiritually grounded education, which we tend to think as being connected with religion. On the other hand, I do think there are what I call “secular virtues” or “democratic virtues” with a small “d,” which are definitely a part of the social capital of the United States. We believe that students ought to have some sense of individual responsibility for their actions. We believe that students ought to have the ability to collaborate with their fellow students on appropriate projects, as well as to negotiate differences, to come out with a good product. So, I think that for me, education has to involve those aspects of both individual responsibility and engagement with the world around them, along with the ability for collaborating despite difference in order to further an objective. This is, I suppose, “transformational” education that can occur at any time that students work with a group of people; hopefully students come out a bit different than they were when they started that particular project. Again, reflection is an essential component of this process.

This is an issue not just for students. I think that we frequently don’t ask faculty to reflect on these issues. I also think that even in the world of Associations that I now inhabit we don’t have reflective time with our co-workers. I’m fortunate enough to have a supervisor who has a large and diverse staff, and we’ve had a number of retreats that have allowed us to do just that. These events have made us a stronger working group and certainly a more comfortable working group than if we were all to think we were just cogs in a machine doing our job. So, this reflective process should really be considered a lifetime thing.

We know that over the past few years you have been very much involved in studying the process of institutional change and transformation. You have visited institutions to see these efforts first-hand as well as written on this topic. As part of our work with the Spirituality in Higher Education project, we seek to

uncover through assessment the ways in which institutional curricular and co-curricular efforts can enhance students' search for meaning and purpose as well as develop pathways for spiritual quest. Based upon your knowledge and wisdom, what light can you shed on how institutions can begin to work towards this important goal?

I guess I responded to this question in part by talking about the importance of reflection to individual and institutional transformation. One of the great contributions that higher education can give to anyone is the ability to be self-reflective. That means meaning-making in the largest sense, and it should be part of every educational effort.

Yesterday, I was having a conversation with someone who said, "You know, it's so difficult because students seem to want to have that tangible thing—a degree that will get them a job—and yet it is the intangible things, that sense of personal growth—that is really very important". This particular person was regretting that he had made a choice to go to a large institution, which was rather mechanical about things, rather than having taken the opportunity to be at a smaller institution where he felt his "self" would have been paid more attention to. I encouraged him to find alternative ways to open up those parts of himself now, which is why I believe strongly in this lifelong reflective process as the core of meaning making.

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