THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
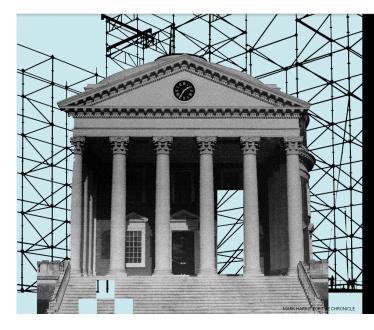

Colleges Need to Change. But Can They?
Inertia rules the day. New thinking could upend that.

MARK HARRIS FOR THE CHRONICLE

THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *James Shulman*

MAY 9, 2024

Twenty years ago, William Bowen and I wrote a book aimed at decelerating the arms race in college sports. We brought data to bear on questions about how many spots highly selective institutions like Swarthmore, Emory, and Penn should set aside on the basis of applicants' athletic talent. We weren't naïve enough to try to change big-time football or March Madness, but we were hopeful in the ensuing years that some colleges might re-examine the extent of the admissions advantage they provide to recruited athletes in niche sports like swimming, lacrosse, and wrestling.

But nothing about athletics changed because of our book. We failed utterly in our effort to provoke institutional change. In doing so, we joined in a great 100-year parade — throngs of faculty, administrators, grant-makers, policymakers, students, and families who have banged their heads on the wall of change in higher education. Athletics may represent a particularly change-resistant corner of higher education, but almost any kind of change in academe seems difficult, if not impossible.

In *[Administratively Adrift: Overcoming Institutional Barriers for College Student Success](#)*, the former American University provost Scott Bass describes "how university structure, culture, and system functions lag behind the needs and expectation of the students the university seeks to serve." In *[Whatever It Is, I'm Against It: Resistance to Change in Higher Education](#)*, the former Macalester College president Brian Rosenberg recounts with bemused amazement how deeply change-resistant colleges remain despite facing rising societal mistrust of the enterprise. "If maintenance of the status quo is the goal, higher education has managed to create the ideal system," Rosenberg [wrote](#).

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I work with dedicated deans, department chairs, faculty members, and staff members every day, and exceedingly few of them have their heads in the sand about the challenges facing higher education. Almost everyone is willing to help colleges adapt; but something, someone, or some process sits like a boulder blocking the path forward. A theory of change can help us map out what seems like a hard-to-find and narrow path through the mountains.

The first thing to keep in mind is that everyone who works for a college has both material needs and symbolic needs — a need to find meaning in their work. Efforts at change must deal with both of these needs simultaneously and continuously. Mission-driven people are proud of their values and commitments and often work tirelessly to pursue their vision. But they also may be anxious about keeping their jobs and increasing their salaries and power. In a sector where everyone's passion is celebrated but their material needs and desires are rarely openly discussed, it is easy

to look past the various combinations of motivations that drive each person who needs to be enlisted in the work of change.

A second aspect is that while colleges are structured as autonomous hierarchies, they operate in an unusual horizontal and trans-institutional marketplace in which an enormous array of institutions compete. They compete for students, faculty, grants, attention, and everything else. As the sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell have noted, that competitive landscape leads to a high degree of isomorphism: Even though institutions prize their autonomy above all else, competition forces them to mimic one another with uncanny precision so that they won't be judged to be acting outside of prevailing norms. Academic leaders fixate on institutional rankings. Faculty and staff care about what their peers think and value. They want to be invited to give talks and they want to win the grants and awards that are bestowed upon them by communities of peers. In such a horizontal culture, many changes cannot progress too far in a vacuum, at a single institution. Change efforts need to include the broader communities that serve both as networks and setters of norms.

Finally, colleges need to reconsider who their peers are and how to measure success. While *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are the measures most likely to define colleges' behaviors, institutional membership in prestigious categories based on measures derived 50 or 100 years ago forms a strong bulwark against any change. For example, until 2019, one element of the algorithm for membership in the Association of American Universities was an institution's number of graduate students. Think about that: Universities were incentivized to increase the number of Ph.D. students irrespective of the job-market prospects for those students. And so they did.

On the other hand, institutions like Georgia State University defined their own measures of success, focusing, for instance, on undergraduate-degree completion even though no one was rewarding or punishing them for doing so. They and others formed the University Innovation Alliance with different rules of the game and norms of what constitutes good institutional performance.

F inding the path to change is crucial for all aspects of the enterprise. But to put this theory of change to the test, how do we do it to make headway in a central problem facing higher education — declining enrollments in the humanities?

Those fields, which many of us believe are the heart of a liberal education, subsequently face declines in new tenure-track faculty positions as a consequence of declines in majors. How can colleges spur additional student and societal support for the humanities? To answer those questions, it is helpful to list some basic truths about these disciplines and their place in higher education:

- Universities with Ph.D. programs in the humanities largely select and prepare graduate students to replicate approaches that are more relevant to past generations than they are in sync with the diversity of work that today's graduate students will pursue (in or out of the academy).
- At many institutions, the measures by which faculty in the humanities are rewarded focus disproportionately on specialized scholarship at the expense of generally accessible, trans-disciplinary, collaborative, or community-engaged scholarship.
- The decline in the number of humanities majors might actually not reflect widespread distaste for the humanities: New interdisciplinary approaches and majors show promise of sparking student interest.

While there is significant alignment among faculty, students, and society around these directions, institutional changes that are aligned with these directions have been both rare and slow. How can faculty members, administrators, and staff working within their institutions use this theory to carry forward the changes that can help humanistic fields to thrive? Here are some real-world examples.

At the American Council of Learned Societies, we meet regularly with the deans of humanities from 44 Ph.D.-granting universities, and we work with the leaders of 80

academic societies. Colliding these networks brings various horizontal communities into dialogue with those who work in vertically organized universities. Several of those societies, such as the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, and the American Sociological Association, have worked with their members to write guidelines for evolving existing reward structures. The American Historical Association, for example, last year broadened its definition of historical scholarship to "acknowledge both longstanding and increasingly diverse genres of historical scholarship that go beyond traditionally valued models of single-authored and peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and other essays."

How can colleges spur additional student and societal support for the humanities?

In 2021, teams from six universities came together to wrestle with challenges facing the humanities in an extended redesign workshop supported by the Henry Luce Foundation. Coming out of that, Washington University in St. Louis has moved to change its rules so that humanities scholars can seek tenure with digital or community-engaged projects rather than a second book. Having a set of like-minded colleagues at admired institutions and the blessing of a major foundation can embolden teams to shake even the longest-standing institutional structures.

Arizona State University has made the humanities more interdisciplinary by creating popular majors in culture, technology, and the environment; global citizenship; and sport, society, and the human experience. Dickinson College has created programs in food studies, justice studies, and health studies that all have significant humanities components. The college makes this possible by not punishing departments for supporting these programs. (If institutions allocate funds for new faculty hires based on the number of majors, other programs naturally oppose new departments.)

I used to think academic leaders could bring about change in any aspect of higher education by formulating a compelling argument and working really hard. But the system is too ingeniously complex. Without an overarching framework for change, we would have to rely on miraculous alignments, hoping that the perfect people with just the right temperaments in the right position to make a change would spring up to work on the perfect problem at the perfect moment. Reliance on that sort of fortunate alignment has brought higher education the inertia that grips it today. Embracing a theory of change will help those of us who want higher education to evolve to do more than keep our eyes open for heroes.

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