

JEFFREY L. BULLER

# Change Leadership in HIGHER EDUCATION

A Practical Guide to  
Academic Transformation



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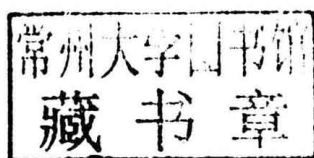


# CHANGE LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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*A Practical Guide to Academic Transformation*

Jeffrey L. Buller



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my wise mentors, role models, and friends*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey L. Buller has served in administrative positions ranging from department chair to vice president for academic affairs at a diverse group of institutions: Loras College, Georgia Southern University, Mary Baldwin College, and Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of *The Essential Department Chair: A Comprehensive Desk Reference*; *Academic Leadership Day by Day: Small Steps That Lead to Great Success*; *The Essential College Professor: A Practical Guide to an Academic Career*; *The Essential Academic Dean: A Practical Guide to College Leadership*; *Best Practices in Faculty Evaluation: A Practical Guide for Academic Leaders*; and *Positive Academic Leadership: How to Stop Putting Out Fires and Start Making a Difference*. He has also written more than two hundred articles on Greek and Latin literature, nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera, and college administration. From 2003 to 2005, he served as the principal English-language lecturer at the International Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, Germany. More recently, he has been active as a consultant to the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, where he is assisting with the creation of a kingdom-wide Academic Leadership Center. Along with Robert E. Cipriano, Buller is a senior partner in ATLAS: Academic Training, Leadership, and Assessment Services, through which he has presented numerous training workshops on change leadership in higher education.



## INTRODUCTION

WHENEVER YOU TALK ABOUT change in higher education, someone will inevitably express one or both of two common sentiments. The first is that it's a little bit odd to regard change in higher education as a topic in and of itself because higher education by its very nature is constantly changing. With new technologies, increased competition for students and resources, shifting social attitudes about the very purpose of higher education, the continual emergence of new disciplines or fields of inquiry, changing demographic patterns that alter who goes to college and when, and similar developments throughout society, no one actually needs to initiate change in higher education. It's already there. The second cliché someone will invariably introduce at some point in the conversation is that despite all the changes it's going through, higher education doesn't handle change particularly well.

In many ways, even though I hear this second remark all the time, it's far more surprising than the first: Why should the very institutions that exist to develop innovative ideas and question traditional ways of doing things be so resistant to change that they often stifle it? As every academic leader knows only too well, many strategic planning processes either collapse entirely or fail to produce even a small fraction of what they promised. The result of these two commonly cited truisms is that (1) colleges and universities are perennially in a process that (2) they don't handle well and that produce few tangible results. Change processes in higher education usually mean missed opportunities and a resulting waste of resources.

In that context, what can yet another book about change in higher education bring to the discussion that is new and helpful? Certainly the very topic of change in higher education today has become almost a cottage industry. As we'll see in chapter 1, there's no shortage of books arguing that higher education is undergoing, should undergo, or must undergo radical change. Many of these books are also rather prescriptive about the type of change colleges need. "More distance learning is the answer!" "No, emphasizing job skills is the answer!" "Wait. That's not right. Active learning is the answer!" "To the contrary, cutting costs is the answer!"

“Seriously now, a focus on the STEM disciplines is the answer!” “Abolishing tenure is the answer!” “Greater competition is the answer!” Every six months a new “answer” appears, and yet the question is never really answered, and the problem is never really solved. The contribution that I’d like to make to this ongoing conversation is that *effective change leadership in higher education is rarely if ever about imposing specific answers; it’s about asking the right questions*. For this reason, the change leaders we’ll meet in this book (particularly in chapters 7 through 9) who have brought about sustained and meaningful change at their institutions—as opposed to change that is merely trendy or designed to look as though the school is moving in a new direction while it basically continues along its current path—are those who devote their energy to changing the culture, not mandating a new vision. As we’ll see, genuine change leaders are almost never voices crying in the wilderness that this idea or that idea is the wave of the future. They’re the ones who become catalysts for change.

Despite what we read in newspapers and see on television, lasting change in higher education usually isn’t the product of a billionaire who pours resources into academic models that initially seem impressive but ultimately prove to be unsustainable. It’s surprising how often today’s “next big thing” quickly becomes yesterday’s fad of questionable value. I’ve witnessed that pattern often enough to conclude that the last thing the world needs is yet another book designed to tell you what to change at your college or university. Instead what I think we need is a guide to leading the change process, an exploration of what works best within the very distinctive organizational culture of higher education. And that’s what *Change Leadership in Higher Education* is all about. It’s not about the next big thing. It’s about how we as presidents, provosts, deans, chairs, and faculty members can work together constructively to produce an academic culture that responds well to each new challenge or opportunity, capitalize on evolving possibilities when times are good, and demonstrate resilience when times are bad.

I don’t want to leave anyone with the impression that there has never been a useful guide to change leadership in higher education before. In fact, you will find the most informative of these earlier works—Peter Eckel, Barbara Hill, Madeleine Green, and Bill Mallon’s American Council on Education report *On Change* (1999)—cited a number of times in the pages that follow. The American Council on Education report provided a framework that has effectively guided many institutions through their own change processes for well over a decade. But the landscape that produced *On Change* is very different from the landscape we find today. It’s different largely because the recommendations it

provided were so beneficial. But it dates from a time before massive open online courses (MOOCs) had appeared on the scene and at a time when the competition between for-profit and nonprofit institutions was just getting under way. In 1999, distance education was still largely done by broadcast or closed video networks; it was only a few years later that online courses replaced broadcast courses almost entirely. The year 1999 was also when the tragedy at Columbine occurred and long before similar shootings at Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook raised fundamental questions about campus safety and whether physical campuses, where large numbers of people are necessarily gathered within a confined space, are truly desirable or even necessary. Although there were a few activist legislatures and governing boards before the twenty-first century began, there wasn't as strong a sense among legislatures and governing boards that they knew more about what higher education should be doing than did the educators themselves. In brief, change itself has changed quite a bit over the past decade and a half, and it's high time to look at this process with fresh eyes.

One unavoidable factor that colors current discussions about change in higher education is the widening gulf between legislatures, governing boards, and upper administrators on the one hand and faculty, deans, and chairs on the other about why we have colleges and universities in the first place and how we can best and most affordably achieve that purpose. A recent study by the Chronicle of Higher Education, *Attitudes on Innovation* (2013), suggests that while university presidents tend to be highly positive about the current direction of higher education, the view of faculty members is far bleaker. Only 32 percent of the faculty members surveyed felt that higher education is moving in the right direction, as opposed to 64 percent of presidents. While 35 percent of presidents described the American system of higher education as the best in the world, only 17 percent of their faculty members concurred, and only 7 percent of the faculty believed that it would remain so over the next ten years. Nevertheless, these two groups generally agreed about the need for change in higher education. Only 1 percent of university presidents and 3 percent of their faculty thought that higher education in the United States was doing just fine and didn't really need to change very much. In a similar way, only 11 percent of presidents and 10 percent of faculty members thought that the current pace of change in higher education was too slow. So if all this change is already occurring at our colleges and universities anyway, how can we best lead it so that it can be as positive as possible, not merely as disruptive and costly as possible? This question guides the discussion that appears in this book, with the hope that

readers will come away from it with some concrete ideas about what they can do in order to lead positive change at whatever level of the institution or system they happen to be.

Many people were extremely generous in contributing thoughts and ideas to this book as it developed. In particular, I thank:

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I hope you'll find the argument I present provocative and interesting no matter whether you see change as beneficial in and of itself since it shakes things up and causes us to challenge our common assumptions, a threat that all too often ends up throwing out some very attractive babies with some not particularly dirty bathwater, a tool that can be harnessed for productive growth, or something else entirely. The one thing that we never seem to avoid about change is talking about it. So if we're going to discuss change anyway, let's at least have a stimulating and constructive conversation.

September, 2014  
Jupiter, Florida

JEFFREY L. BULLER  
Atlantic University



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