

# Changing It Up

*Three university leaders make transformative educational changes on their campuses*

**By Gayle Bennett**

Universities aren't generally known for being nimble organizations with cultures that encourage disruption and embrace change.

Google the academy is not.

But in public higher education, the status quo is getting stale. The steep increases in fees and tuition, a changing job market, and a sustained rise in nontraditional students are creating a different perception of the value of higher education—and the news isn't good so far.

Innovations in technology and the use of big data can help spur changes in pedagogy and curriculum that will better suit today's students and the working world they will enter. The tools and knowledge already exist; the trick is for higher education to use them.

"The track record for industries that try to pretend that innovation doesn't exist isn't very good," says Richard DeMillo, director of the Center for 21st Century Universities at Georgia Institute of Technology.

An academic himself, DeMillo knows that selling those in higher education on change is tough, but he also knows that it's possible. "One of the difficulties that you have with change in any organization, and this is particularly true in higher education, is that unless you describe it in concrete terms, the idea of change is abstract. People have a very difficult time contextualizing change, imagining what a changed world is going to be like,

imagining what good parts of their life they are going to have to give up because of change. It's too large an issue to address without some sort of concrete steps."

The leaders of the three institutions profiled here are taking those concrete steps and guiding their universities through changes that aim to provide better teaching and learning environments. They haven't made these changes overnight, and it hasn't always been easy, but through sustained communication and strong faculty and staff partnerships, they have seen success.

## **Competency-based Education**

When Northern Arizona University President John Haeger started thinking about competency-based education four

years ago, he knew two related pieces of information: NAU's retention rate hadn't budged in 10 years, and the state funds higher education based on performance. No improvement in retention rates would mean less money for a burgeoning student population.

"Out of the blue, I asked for the course grades in every freshman course we teach," Haeger says. "Of course, the scurrying in the academic division? I could hear it."

He found that failure rates in gateway courses, particularly those in math and the sciences, were between 30 and 40 percent. That shed some light on the retention rate stagnation. Students who can't pass gateway courses are likely to drop out.

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# Austin Peay created an innovative computer program, Degree Compass, that compares each student's individual academic record with every other student, and then using the science of collaborative filtering, predicts courses in which the students will be more and less successful to a high degree of accuracy.

So in March 2013, the university opened enrollment in a competency-based online bachelor's degree program—called Personalized Learning—within the large division of extended campuses, which offer online courses. Competency is measured with pre- and post-lesson assessments in which a grade of 86 percent is required to advance. The cost for students is \$5,000 per year.

The goal is eventually to move forward with this model on the main campus with face-to-face courses. But Haeger needs to have a lot more conversations with faculty before that can happen.

“In some ways, it challenges the ways universities have operated for 300 years,” Haeger says. “The cottage industry where everyone teaches their own course, and they determine their own outcomes—that’s eventually going to be under siege.”

He’s also realistic that he will never get 100 percent faculty buy-in. “When trying to make changes like this, you have to accept the fact that probably 25 percent of your faculty is going to ignore it. So you play with those who are willing to try something new. And then hopefully over time, the university itself begins to shift.”

This academic year, a group of technology and learning specialists are

going from department to department to talk about competency-based education, get buy-in, and begin to make some fundamental, preliminary changes.

Haeger’s advice for leaders looking to institute a big change is to talk about the problem for a long time before talking about solutions. “Keep talking about the problem and get people to buy into that we can do better than this. We spent a year working the campus to get people to understand that.”

And he doesn’t think leaders should announce big changes in their first or second year. A leader is better off getting to know people and build some political capital in those first couple years. Says Haeger, “If right out of the gate you start something like this, you’ll probably get run out of town.”

## Using Data to Increase Success

More than 50 percent of Austin Peay State University’s students are Pell-eligible, and most are nontraditional students. “These populations statistically are far less likely to graduate than traditional high school students,” says Tim Hall, president of the Tennessee university. He knew the university had to try something different to increase graduation rates.

In 2011, inspired by the book *Moneyball* and by what Netflix, Amazon and Pandora have done for movies, books and music, a mathematician and former provost at the university created Degree Compass. The computer program compares each student’s individual academic record with every other student, and then using the science of collaborative filtering, predicts courses in which the students will be more and less successful to a high degree of accuracy.

Degree Compass, which the university sold last January to a company that markets it to institutions across the country, started out suggesting courses for students based on the available data. Now, a feature of the program called My Future can predict which major a student will find the most success in.

The university identified “fingerprint” courses for each major. “The fingerprint courses bear the flavor of the major, and especially if they are courses in which success is crucial to and indicative of success in the overall major,” says Hall. Because Degree Compass can tell which courses students will do well in, predicting success or failure in a fingerprint course can potentially predict success or failure in a major. Austin Peay has received funding to test My Future on

a pilot group of 75 students this year. Hall says that some faculty are worried that the program displaces them as advisers. “We have to reassure them and say absolutely not. This is another tool you can use to help advise our students.”

Also, some faculty members are philosophically opposed to this use of data, Hall says. “There will be faculty members who say the ideal college experience is one in which students kind of roam around and sample this, that and the other. It is in that free-form exploration of themselves that the ideal college experience lives itself out.”

Hall has gotten as far as he has with Degree Compass by discarding the notion of top-down change. “If you want to affect what happens in the heart of the university, in teaching and advising and how we deal with students, you have to have partners. There’s not a thing you do top-down to create that.”

And forming true partnerships affects more than one initiative. “That means you stop spending time fighting little battles that disrupt that partnership.”

### **Online and Blended Learning**

In 1995, when the Internet was still nascent, the University of Central Florida started exploring web-based learning. In 1996, the university offered 30 online “distance learning” courses.

“But we discovered that three-quarters of the students who enrolled were living on campus,” says Joel Hartman, vice provost for information technologies and resources at UCF.

After further research, the university realized it had something bigger and developed blended classes in which on- and near-campus students attend one classroom meeting a week and take the rest of the class online.

Those classes have only grown since the late ’90s. In the 2012-13 academic year, 34.5 percent of total student credit hours were generated by online and blended modes of delivery. UCF’s enrollment is about 60,000, and the university offers about 1.5 million courses.

Is quality compromised? Exactly the opposite. Student success in UCF’s blended courses consistently outpaces that of its traditional face-to-face courses, and success in online courses equals or betters face-to-face courses, says John Hitt, president of UCF.

The recipe for this success is a little bit culture and a lot faculty support.

“We are lucky to have here a culture that is pretty darn cooperative,” says Hitt. “Part of our success was that we didn’t try to say, ‘We would like you to do this specific thing.’” Hitt and Hartman offered the vision, but faculty members have control of the class design.

Providing faculty with the tools to be successful online instructors is key, and UCF doesn’t fall down on that job. More than 1,600 faculty have gone through an 80-hour, eight-week blended learning course, which UCF offers three times a year. The university also has staff that will help faculty with the mechanics of getting a course online.

Online education at UCF has been growing 2 percent per year, and Hitt wonders what the right number of online courses is. “Should there even be a target number?” he asks. “Maybe you let it grow to wherever it grows. Most people would not be comfortable with that. Whatever we decide with that needs to involve a larger group than just Joel and me.”

But grow it will. All of UCF’s growth in terms of modality of instruction has been online. Face-to-face instruction is down over the last 10 years, Hitt says.

At the end of the day, student success is the impetus for online and blended learning at UCF. And research has shown that UCF faculty who complete the online teaching course become overall better instructors, whether teaching online or face-to-face. “That helps a president sleep at night, thinking about investments that have been made,” says Hitt.

For others contemplating a big change, Hitt suggests instituting a reward system. “When you really want

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# Change Agents

Three other AASCU presidents share the fundamental changes happening on their campuses.

Change has been a hot topic at AASCU this year. In fact, the theme of the 2013 Summer Council of Presidents meeting was “Harnessing the Winds of Change.”

In one panel—“Leading Change in the Academy”—three AASCU-member presidents shared the serious issues confronting their campuses and the ways they are dealing with them.

## Curriculum Reform for Retention

Mary Cullinan, president of Southern Oregon University, had a retention problem. The public liberal arts university was losing about a third of freshmen by the end of their sophomore year.

But Cullinan knew from the data that students who lived, worked or were involved with a group on campus were not leaving SOU at high rates.

So, in spring 2012, Cullinan put together a change leadership team to make the case to the campus community that something needed to be done about retention. And that led to a 70-person retreat in fall 2012 to brainstorm what could be done to keep students at SOU.

“A lot of good ideas came out of it,” Cullinan said. “But the most fundamental change was the idea of creating houses, rather than the smorgasbord of general education classes.” These 50-student houses are interdisciplinary, competency-based learning communities that last the entire undergraduate experience. The first two houses—one focused on environment and the other on social justice—started this fall. Four to five other houses are in the works for fall 2014.

Cullinan stresses that this wouldn’t have been possible without communication and campuswide involvement. “I ... pulled people out of crevices and shadows to come and hear about change and be involved in change.”

## Mission-driven Change

When Robert Nelsen became president of the University of Texas-Pan American, he knew that the poverty rates in the Rio Grande Valley, where the university resides, were 31 to 37 percent, depending on the county. “We needed to be involved with the community,” Nelsen said. “We needed to graduate our students.”

Nelsen and his cabinet rewrote the university’s mission statement—making it about the Valley, commercialization and entrepreneurship—and developed six goals.

“And then I made my fatal mistake,” he said. He followed the university’s handbook of operating procedures and handed over the crafting of a strategic plan—the university’s first ever—to a committee. The resulting document “didn’t have a single new idea in it,” he said. “It had everybody’s vested interest in it.”

So Nelsen found “champions of change” on the campus—“people who really wanted to see something new” and asked them to flesh out the six goals with “outrageous” ideas for change. He now has six initiatives with 25 action items.

For example, one goal is to create transformative leaders. Nelsen pushed for details: “What classes are you going to do that in? How are you going to be involved? What are they going to lead?”

Going forward, Nelsen has tasked two people with ensuring the strategic plan is a living document that is guiding change.

“If you provide the vision and then you ask for people to come with initiatives so that you can accomplish that vision, you will succeed.”

## Common Definition of Shared Governance

When George Ross took the job of president of Central Michigan University, he knew about the history of friction between the faculty and leadership. There has been previous no confidence votes, and after one year as president, he had one of his own.

In 2012, Ross decided it was time to redefine what the university meant by shared governance.

This wasn’t the university’s first time down this road: This was the fifth committee in the last 40 years. “What was different about this committee,” said Ross, “is that we included every major constituency in the university,” not just faculty and deans.

CMU now has its first agreed-upon definition of shared governance.

Ross stresses that transparent communication has been and will continue to be critical. “We’re beginning to see change—in attitudes and trust.”

something, and somebody produces it, it’s really nice if something good happens to them,” he says.

UCF has a faculty award program for teaching; research and scholarship; and teaching and learning efforts. Each award

comes with a \$5,000 adjustment to base salary. “That ability to get a better salary through doing a better job of teaching is not that common at research universities,” says Hitt, “and I think we suffer for it.” **P**

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Gayle Bennett is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.