Increasing the Capacity for Change at CU

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As institutions, universities have a tendency to change slowly and reactively, even when the need for change is significant. Within its administrative structures, a university's capacity for change can be increased using models adapted from the private sector. However, within its academic structures, there is no effective model for creating capacity for proactive change. Through the [Departmental Action Team (DAT) project](#), we have taken an important step towards such a model by developing a method for increasing the capacity for proactive change within departments. We advocate that CU fund the continued implementation and development of this model on campus. We also propose that the university invest in a process to develop and implement a comprehensive framework for change that accounts for the differing needs of units operating with academic and administrative structures.

There are numerous cultural, economic, and political factors that shape higher education, including advances in technology, increasingly diverse student bodies, greater knowledge of research-based instructional strategies, the corporatization of campuses, and the rise of for-profit education (Kezar, 2013). These factors have driven much of the changes that higher education has experienced in the last several decades, by applying external pressures that are unlikely to cease. Unfortunately, too much of this change has been *reactive*, through passive adaptation to external factors. Instead, **we argue that it is imperative for universities to enact change through *proactive* processes that can help them achieve their desired outcomes** while accounting for external factors.

How can a university increase its capacity for making positive change? First, it is critical to recognize that a university is a complex system consisting of many interacting units at multiple scales: departments and colleges; research groups and student groups; offices of deans, provosts, and chancellors; administrative units handling human resources, information technology, athletics, and much more. To make sense of this complexity from the perspective of change management, we conceptualize these units as being organized using either an *administrative structure* or an *academic structure* (Birnbaum & Edelson, 1989). *Administrative structures* are characterized by authority that derives from one's position in an organizational hierarchy; thus, they include features like well-defined management and reporting chains, top-down decision-making, and a focus on formal policies and procedures to guide behavior. On the other hand, *academic structures* are characterized by authority that derives from one's specialized knowledge, skills, or judgement in a professional area; thus, they emphasize autonomy, distributed decision-making, and behavior guided by professional norms (thus deemphasizing formal hierarchy).

While in reality the organization of most campus units includes features of both structures, this simplification is helpful for understanding why certain change strategies work well for some units but tend to fail in others. The organizational change literature describes how the success of a change effort is dependent on the cultural context in which the change takes place (Schein, 2010). Each campus unit has its own "subculture" with specific values, constraints, and norms (e.g., respecting authority vs. valuing conflict). Change efforts that are tailored to these cultural differences will be more likely to succeed.

At CU, there are many units that operate primarily within an *administrative structure*, such as Human Resources, Infrastructure and Safety, the Office of the Registrar, the Office of Information Technology, and Strategic Relations. The structures of these units are similar to those associated with the private sector, which has a rich history of research around change and a number of models and services that have been developed to support change (Todnem, 2007; Hiatt & Creasey, 2013). Thus, it is reasonable to use these models for change in CU's administrative structures. In particular, the [Prosci/ADKAR framework](#) of change management is being implemented in various units on campus as a way to support successful *prescribed* changes, for example, in the rollout of new software systems.

Individual departments, on the other hand, operate using *academic structures*. Successful change within academic structures is more often *emergent* than prescribed. Prescribed changes initiated by administrators often fail within departments because of their diverse cultural features. Departments are silos, each containing a unique subculture and context. The success of a prescribed change therefore varies from department to department, because such top-down changes have difficulty taking cultural and contextual diversity into account (Schein, 2010). Siloing also prevents the spread of grassroots change driven by individuals or small groups between or within departments (the [LA program](#) being one notable exception). Additionally, incentive structures within departments often reward conservatism and discourage innovation (e.g., by rewarding research "productivity" over service or investment in new research or teaching methods), and leadership and power is fairly diffuse. Thus, there are few mechanisms for *prescribed* changes to be enforced at the departmental level. In contrast, *emergent* change depends on a number of influential individuals working together. In essence, prescriptive changes fail in departments because they have difficulty aligning with department cultures and contexts, and do not address the limited power any one individual has within their department.

Currently there is no comprehensive framework for change at CU that takes into account the cultural and operational differences between academic and administrative structures. While units with administrative structures have models from the private sector to draw on, research on change in units with academic structures lags far behind.

An effective change model within departments must take a *collective* approach due to the distributed leadership within departments and allow for *emergent* changes that are tailored to

an individual department's culture (Henderson, Beach, and Finkelstein, 2011). Additionally, capacity to sustain change must be built within each department, so that positive changes last.

We have begun to address the need for such a change model at CU through the [Department Action Team project](#). A Departmental Action Team (DAT) is an externally-facilitated working group consisting of about 4 to 8 faculty members, staff, and/or students that is created by a department to achieve two goals:

1. To create *sustainable change* around a broad-scale issue related to undergraduate education in the department by shifting departmental structures and culture, and
2. To help DAT participants become *change agents* through developing facilitation and leadership skills.

To meet these goals, the DAT is supported by external facilitators from our project team who have expertise in educational research, facilitation, and organizational change. DATs collectively set a vision to guide their work and select a project that will generate *emergent* change. These projects are innovative, aligned with their department's culture and context, and have the potential to make a lasting impact on undergraduate education. As DAT participants carry out a project, facilitators model effective group leadership techniques, introduce norms of high functioning groups, help the DAT interface strategically with their department, and disrupt counterproductive behaviors that may be accepted as a part of the departmental culture (e.g., interrupting or shutting down minority views).

By creating *emergent* change that their department accepts, DAT members gain confidence and motivation to initiate additional changes in the future. Some of the outcomes of recent DATs have been: increasing inclusion of women and underrepresented minorities, developing learning outcomes and aligning courses to outcomes, and developing a curricular sequence for a new major. The DAT project will be working with 3-6 departments through 2020, funded by a grant from NSF. Spreading this new model of change across the campus, however, will require ongoing support from CU.

The DAT project targets the most important unit for change in undergraduate education: the department. Other initiatives, such as CU's [Teaching Quality Framework (TQF) project](#) ([white paper](#)), also embrace the idea of focusing on department-level change. Department-level services are an integral part of the [framework for a new Teaching and Learning Center](#) at CU. Thus, this is a good time to examine the benefits to CU of working toward a comprehensive framework for change.

We urge Academic Futures to adopt these steps toward constructing a framework for increasing the capacity for change at CU:

1) **Preserve support for the DAT model by providing it with an institutional home, with:**
   a. A team of professional facilitators with the capacity to support every academic unit with a Departmental Action Team by 2023
   b. Support for scholarship and innovation for departmental transformation.

2) **Develop a comprehensive, university-wide framework for change.** This could start with several facilitated working groups composed of students, faculty, staff, and change managers across the university. These diverse groups would be charged with:
   a. Summarizing existing change models in the research literature, and in the administrative and academic structures of the university
   b. Evaluating the degree to which any such models are effective in practice
   c. Learning and practicing effective facilitation and change management skills, thereby becoming change agents
   d. Recommending a comprehensive framework for increasing the capacity for change at CU which describes differences and synergies in change approaches for administrative and academic structures, by 2020.

3) **Implement a comprehensive, university-wide framework for change.** This may take many forms, but is likely to involve:
   a. Establishing positions for individuals with change management training
   b. Providing opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to receive training as change agents
   c. Creating incentives for academic units and individuals to initiate and sustain change-making projects.

These actions will elevate CU, because an organization that effectively nurtures change is one that is more efficient and successful and has community members that are more empowered and satisfied.

References

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