

Is This Any Way to Run a Railroad?

Management Fads in Higher Education: Where They Come From, What They Do, Why They Fail

by Robert Birnbaum, Jossey-Bass, 2000

Reviewed by Michael Ryan

Robert Birnbaum has written a fascinating and informative review for all those who have experienced the roller coaster ride of administrative quick fixes, or as he calls it, “management fads.”

College and university presidents, trustees, as well as faculty will find this book enlightening with respect to their past and future interrelationships.

Birnbaum, who began his higher education career in 1961 as a rising administrator, has served the academy as a teacher for the last 22 years. In this book, he relies on this extensive background as he details, in a clear and precise manner, 40 years of management fads in higher education as to origin, institutional effects and inherent basis of failure.

As for changes in higher education management, Birnbaum concludes, “Where you stand depends on where you sit!”

In the first of the book’s three parts, Birnbaum depicts the origin and histories of the seven major management fads in higher education for the last 40 years: Program Planning Budgeting System, Management by Objectives, Zero-based Budgeting, Strategic Planning, Benchmarking, Total Quality Management, and Business Process Re-engineering.

In Part Two, he discusses the the life cycle of fads, the basis of higher education’s institutional susceptibility to managerial fads, and the characteristics of higher education administrators that makes them likely to be influenced by fads.

Part Three focuses on the eventual failure of management fads and the impact on higher education of the continual search for the managerial elixir that will maximize institutional effectiveness and competitive advantage.

Birnbaum reminds us that despite the transient nature of management fads, the institutional effects can remain after each fad comes to its inevitable demise. He also observes that fads are not value neutral and the residual effects can be beneficial or harmful.

In some cases, fads have taught higher education institutions traditional business notions of cost, efficiency and financial stability as well as the need for customer service, constituent accountability, and awareness of competing ideas and institutions.

But, even though higher education may have some characteristics in common with business and government—another primary source of management fads—the academy remains essentially a different type

of organization with different values, culture and goals. Models successful in one area do not easily transfer.

Finally, Birnbaum cautions us to have a greater awareness of the societal pressures that give rise to management fads than the fads themselves.

The parade of management fads will continue to attempt to redefine the societal role of higher education.

Birnbaum has exposed the cycle of managerial reviews and the instrumentation being used to institute change. That change may

be an unwanted redefinition or a vibrant renewal.

It is the role of aware faculty and administrators to provide the necessary guidance in this evolution of higher education, to protect against the distortion of core values of the academy, and to defend higher education from societal influences that could damage the fragile tapestry that is American higher education. ■

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