Souped-Up Colleges for the 21st Century

Building the Responsive Campus: Creating High Performance Colleges and Universities

By William Tierney
Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1999

Reviewed by Nancy Van Note Chism

William Tierney has compiled an extraordinary record of publication on higher education issues. His work, characterized by vision and informed by empirical data and a keen grasp of theory, covers many topics—curriculum reform, faculty workload, organizational theory, faculty socialization, and cultural inclusion, to name a few.

In this volume, he travels across much of the terrain he's traversed in the past, synthesizing pieces of his past work through the use of new metaphors and the application of a specific approach to organizational change.

Writing on how we can build institutions that are more responsive to their constituencies, Tierney itemizes major conditions currently impacting the work of colleges and universities: an unbearable shortfall of resources, developments in communications technologies, and the disintegration of the academic community. He then details five major principles for a socially responsive campus: commitments to community, academic freedom, access and equity, excellence and integrity, and inquiry.

Tierney suggests that three interrelated goals of academic institutions should focus on student learning, faculty productivity, and organizational performance.

The central approach to improvement Tierney puts forth in this book is "re-engineering," which he describes as transformational: systems analysis rather than isolated thinking, fluid boundaries, an accent on reflection and process, and shared vision.

Teirney argues that simultaneously maintaing a traditional line structure and soft project structure is important. He defines soft projects as those that engage groups of people from different areas to work together for a specific period of time to address a need or opportunity.

Tierney notes that the power to make decisions should rest with the people closest to the work—not a particularly new exhortation until one couples this with the soft project emphasis. Specifying that the typical task force be composed of those close to the work and given the power to implement change directly is a radical and empowering idea, one that would cause institutions to choose task-force membership more carefully and

inspire more energetic participation by the participants.

Turning to leadership, Tierney sees leadership as dispersed across the organization, rather than hierarchical and individual, and as facilitative of the work of teams, rather than directive. He stresses "leadership by design," where leaders provide the structure, incentives, and authority for others to progress.

Inherent in his approach is cultivation of teamwork and focus through mission and goal articulation, emphasis on core values, and effective planning.

Arguing that academia suffers from organizational attention deficit disorder, Tierney examines how high-performing organizations might internalize a system of formative evaluation to keep the focus on progress toward key goals.

He stresses systems that understand context, define goals clearly, gather cultural facts to make judgments, and compare performance against similar cases.

Tierney's notion of faculty productivity is developmental, resting on the premise that the goal is to inspire productivity across faculty rather than to weed out non-performers. He recommends performance contracts for setting work agendas, articulating the connection between individual and common goals, and assessing progress.

He recommends that organizations use communications, incentives, power and control, information, and strategy in new ways, stressing redesign over tinkering, arguing that "what most of us in academia have been doing is fixing a flawed process rather than rethinking the process itself" (162).

This book is certainly in the spirit of Tierney's previous work in its emphasis on focus, community, shared authority, and cultural context. But the ring of the familiar themes that have appealed to me in the past actually kept me from appreciating the new insights in this book.

Although Tierney uses metaphor beautifully and sprinkles the book with apt examples, it is hard for me to distinguish its uniqueness. It is nicely laid out and carefully argued, rather than inspirational and groundbreaking. The questions it poses might well help to frame the work of those involved in redesign—which, of course, should be all in the community—but it is unlikely that readers will differentiate the re-engineering approach from other transformational approaches found in recent organizational change literature. This possibility does not devalue the contribution that Tierney has made, but will likely prevent this book from reaching the wide audience that it should influence. ■

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