

Lessons from Curricular Activism on How to Change Your Campus

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Administrators are often placed in a tricky position when considering questions of organizational change. On the one hand, administrators may be those best positioned to locate resources, build organizational capacity, and get a new initiative off the ground. They may also be seen—and see themselves—as the individuals with primary responsibility for making progress around a particular problem or issue. Yet on the other hand, administrators face many constraints on their ability to engage in progressive change campaigns. Unlike tenured or unionized faculty members and unlike students, administrators are often forced to consider the effects their activism might have on their employment. At the same time, faculty committed to shared governance and students interested in democratic decision-making may see administrators who try to change the campus as autocratic meddlers who insert their noses where they do not belong. These competing positions and interests put administrators with organizational change goals in a double bind, particularly when the upper administration is skeptical about the proposed changes. But administrators can and do make a difference in creating progressive social change on their campuses, and there are clear explanations for what makes it easier and what makes it more difficult for them to do so.

My discussion here is based on in-depth case studies of six colleges and universities around the United States that vary in terms of size, selectivity, prestige, public or private status, and location. In the period between 1970 and 2005, each campus experienced a campaign for at least one of the three progressive curricular programs I studied: women’s studies, Asian American studies, and queer/LGBT studies, for a total of thirteen curricular change campaigns. Of these, eleven resulted in the establishment of some sort of curricular program, whether a minor, a certificate program, or a major. However, these six campuses varied considerably in terms of how hospitable they were to curricular change efforts; in addition, even those curricular change campaigns that were able to achieve their goal and create a curricular program varied in terms of how long program creation took to achieve and how institutionalized the program ultimately became. I collected data from college and university archives and from interviews with key figures in the curricular change campaigns, including administrators, faculty members, and students. After analyzing the data, I was able to develop a theoretical model that explains how and when curricular change campaigns (and related social movement-like activity inside colleges, universities, and other organizations) are able to have an impact. This model provides administrators who are seeking to create progressive social change on their campuses with five key lessons on how to best organize, mobilize, and make an impact.

1. Create a match between your campus position and the change you want.

On two of the campuses I studied, efforts to create queer/LGBT studies programs never got off the ground, despite the fact that both of these large public research universities have a reputation as extremely hospitable places for queer/LGBT students. Campaigns for queer/LGBT studies on both campuses were initiated and spearheaded by non-academic staff. The women and men behind these

initiatives were dedicated and hardworking professionals, but they could not get the rest of their campuses to take them seriously.

One of these two universities was one of the first universities in the United States to open an LGBT student center, and the same student affairs professional whose curricular change initiative was stymied played a major role in the establishment of the center. The difference is that as an expert in student affairs, she was seen as an appropriate figure to develop a student center and co-curricular program, but despite her doctoral degree, her job in student affairs led other campus actors to see her as an inappropriate figure for curricular development. On many campuses, curricular issues are seen as the exclusive preserve of the faculty.

2. Be aware of your power to mobilize others.

Even when they are not seen as the appropriate leaders for particular change initiatives, administrators and staff members can play important roles that are vital to the ultimate impact these initiatives have on campus. Administrators and staff members are often unaware of the power they have to mobilize other segments of the campus. Faculty, particularly those off the tenure track and those who have not yet earned tenure, are often afraid of becoming involved in campus politics. They fear being on the wrong side of an issue and having their activism come back to haunt them at tenure or reappointment time. If you know through long experience that faculty activism on your campus will not harm their chances for tenure, you have the opportunity to mobilize faculty behind your cause who otherwise would not have played a role. In addition, reaching out to pre-tenure faculty members might find you an excellent ally a few years in the future, after that faculty member has gone through the tenure process. Staff at one of the campuses that failed to institute a queer/LGBT studies program hope that a new cohort of young faculty members will become just such allies in a few years.

Unlike faculty, students are often very willing to become part of change initiatives. However, many students are unaware of their own power within the organization. They relate to the college or university upper administration much as they related to their high school principal—as an out-of-touch and distant person that would never listen to their ideas. Administrators and staff members can play a vital role in mentoring students to help them become involved in change initiatives and showing them how to make their voices heard by institutions that are after all often dependant on their tuition dollars and enrollment statistics. In addition, it is important to remember that students come and go quickly. An entire “generation” of students enters and leaves campus within a period of two to six years. Administrators and staff members who are on campus for the long haul can serve as students’ institutional memory, helping to keep alive campaigns and avoid reinventing the wheel when it takes longer than a year or two for a new program or policy to emerge—as was the case in almost every one of the thirteen curricular change campaigns I studied.

3. Carefully consider your campus culture.

Scholars who study social movements that target the government have often argued that assertive and forceful tactics—such as building occupations and sit-ins—are necessary when the government is hostile to the movement’s goals, while less assertive tactics like petition campaigns are more appropriate in circumstances where the government is open to the movement’s goals. However, organizations like colleges and universities are different from states in many ways. On a campus which tends to be supportive of progressive social change, a petition campaign may not draw enough attention to bring your proposal serious consideration but a building occupation might make the campus community take notice. Similarly, a campus that is hostile to a particular proposal might

react to building occupations by firing staff and expelling students, making a petition campaign a more appropriate tactic.

Individuals interested in spearheading campaigns for campus change need to think hard about their campus's culture in order to determine what sorts of tactics will work best. One of the best ways to ensure that you are on track in your consideration of tactics is to look at the history of change initiatives on your campus. Find some time to visit the archives in your campus library and read old issues of the student newspaper or look through the files for documents on initiatives similar to the one you are involved in and see what might have worked and what backfired. Consider as well the message you create about why your initiative is needed and make sure this message is a good match for the mission and values of the campus. For instance, supporters of women's studies at one public research university emphasized the role that a women's studies program could play in reducing the load of advising and enrollments on another overburdened academic department, thus attracting a lot of support for their proposal. This message worked much better than a prior set of messages in which supporters argued for a feminist studies program that would have created single-sex courses within a co-ed university and which would have been founded on a logic that directly opposed the disciplinary standards underlying the rest of the university—emphasizing, for instance, emotional and intuitive knowledge rather than rational empiricism.

4. Build alliances and share information across campuses.

In most cases, the type of change you want to implement on your campus (or something related) has been implemented somewhere else already. Get to know the people who made it happen elsewhere and learn what they did. This is useful because it provides tips and techniques that you can import to your own campus. It is also useful because it will allow you to turn to the decision-makers in the upper administration and point out that others have already made the change and that it worked out fine for them. In particular, if you find that some of your peer institutions, such as those you compete with for students or other members of your state public higher education system have implemented the change you are interested in, this can prove to be a persuasive point in discussions with campus decision makers. Many of the curricular change campaigns I studied conducted surveys of their peer institutions in order to show administrators how far behind their own campus was; individuals from these campuses also went to regional or local conferences to build alliances with others who could share successful strategies and ideas.

5. Don't give up.

Campus change can take a long time—even decades. Several of the campaigns I studied took over twenty years from when people first sat around a table to discuss the idea to when a major was finally implemented. Those twenty years encompassed massive transformations in the student body, the faculty and staff employed on campus, and the political and social environment beyond the campus borders. Sometimes, just those transformations are what are needed to make a change come to fruition. At a small elite women's college I studied, a new president who was less hostile to women's studies than was her predecessor was willing to approve a women's studies program that had been brewing for fifteen years shortly after her arrival. In other cases, a transformation is not needed, but it takes time for the campus community to come around to the idea. That does not mean it's impossible. An extremely conservative and traditional Catholic college I studied even initiated a women's studies program and a lesbian and gay student group after over a decade of effort. The campus climate did not change, but opposition softened over time. Stranger things have happened—and maybe your campaign will be next.