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Why would you want to change the way universities and colleges work, and how would you go about it? While there is plenty of literature about change in higher education, and even more about the need for it, this book stands out both for its uncompromising vision, bold views and the wide sweep of its suggestions. It has been written by William Tierney, director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, an elite private university.

Tierney contends that in the majority of universities structures and processes have not much changed since the beginning of the (last) century, and that such change was, where it occurred, unsystematic and insufficient. He argues that universities must embrace systematic

organizational change and reinvent how to structure academic work so that they become more responsive to the needs of society.

Tierney cites four reasons why universities must change, and why change must be substantial. Rising costs and diminishing or stagnating public budgets for higher education have resulted in a dramatic funding shortfall which have forced universities to aggressively seek revenues from other sources and to do more with less. Also, he argues that the profound changes in the economy and the world of work, as well as the transformation to a knowledge-based economy, have a considerable bearing on how universities create and impart knowledge. Observing that more individuals than before will require some type of postsecondary education in order to be employable, He argues that universities must become more responsive with regard to the developments and needs of the economy and labour markets.

The impact of the rapid progress and widespread use of information and communication technologies for academic work in general and in particular for the decision-making process and administration also challenge the traditional way higher education institutions are used to conduct their business and require them to adapt and change. Tierney points out that the present structures with their emphasis on narrowly defined disciplinary boundaries and resulting fragmentation of the academic community, exacerbate, rather than stimulate, the ability to communicate across the borders of different academic units, and deplores the “competitive ethic (which) has taken hold in the academy where our structures reward individual effort, and group efforts appear problematic” (p. 11).

Tierney argues that tinkering with stopgap measures and changes in the margin will not suffice and that more radical change is required to make universities and colleges responsive to society’s needs and high performance organizations. In order to initiate and follow through with such radical change, he advocates the principal ideas of “reengineering,” a management tool borrowed from the world of business.

Originally conceived by consultants in the U.S. as an antidote to the economic problems of corporate America, Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) has been taken up by organizations the world over, becoming an important part of everyday managerial guides and business

literature. However, this concept, which was marketed as a radical program of thought for corporations in crisis, in many cases has not lived up to the expectations associated with it, but has been used by many companies as an instrument for streamlining their operations and down-sizing the workforce. Even where this has not been the case, it has been found that “in contrast to the marketing hype, empirical studies indicate that the claims made on BPR’s behalf have been considerably overstated” (Case, 1999, p. 412).

Is it possible that Tierney should have overlooked this lackluster or, at least uneven, record and checkered image of the re-engineering concept when he argues that organizational re-engineering is “no warmed-over Taylorism, (but instead)...a way for broader participation and decision-making on the part of multiple groups and constituencies?” (p. 169) That seems unlikely. He does however allow that the principles of BPR might not be directly applicable since he stresses that universities and colleges are, in some important respects, not like business corporations. He contends that “unlike previous management gimmicks (such as) TQM, strategic planning, and the like [which] sought to improve on present day practices, [re-engineering] seeks to change fundamentally such practices” (p. 170). He thus sees re-engineering as an instrument of rethinking the academic organization, allowing individuals and groups “to challenge the status quo and its concomitant assumptions, practices and structures,...making implicit values explicit and challenging cherished notions of ‘how we do things around here’ “ (p. 26).

In spite of his advocacy for radical change, Tierney postulates five basic values that he sees as the foundation of higher education and which cannot be put into question:

A commitment to an educational community and to academic freedom suggests that we will be accorded the protection and responsibility for a search for truth. A commitment to equity and excellence stresses that all individuals are welcome and that we expect high standards...By highlighting the need for a commitment to inquiry, I am suggesting that postsecondary organizations and their participants are involved in a dynamic enterprise in which the status quo cannot be tolerated. (p. 16)

Tierney suggests that for universities and colleges to become high performing, they must focus on three objectives: student learning, faculty performance and overall organizational performance. He sees neither of these as uniform across all institutions, but rather as depending on the individual institution's culture and mission. Thus universities may base student achievement indicators on simple measures such as grade point averages or examination results, or on student portfolios, or on the kind of employment students find upon graduation. Likewise, with respect to faculty productivity (or efficiency), evaluation criteria vary, depending on the mission and profile of the individual institution, and can therefore be gauged in different ways ranging from publications in peer-reviewed journals, teaching evaluations of the students, and service to the community. For Tierney, what is important in the process is not which criteria for performance assessment are chosen, but that such criteria are established, widely understood and accepted, and consistently applied. He makes clear that such performance criteria are not meant to serve external purposes or audiences, but rather that they are important in order to help the members of the institution — administrators, faculty, staff and students — to understand how they are doing and how they might improve.

The author admits that to apply the re-engineering concept in universities and colleges is much easier said than done and “organizational life cannot be governed by cookbook solutions or recipes for decision-making” (p. 100). Yet, drawing from his experience as a consultant and a researcher (the book is based on case studies and interviews he has conducted over the last decade and a half), Tierney provides a host of examples and directions of how the process can be implemented and how criteria for assessing the institution's responsiveness to its “customers” and its performance can be put in place and used.

All of his proposals for radical change in the academy are provocative and challenging and well worth thinking about. Whether or not they appear realistic to the reader, probably depends on their experience with change processes in their institution and, if these have been disappointing, on their willingness to give change another try. Clearly, the prescription that “a high performance organization has a staffing chart that is in

constant flux and reorganization (and) boundaries across departments and units become blurred, and colleagues move about in relation to issues, opportunities, and controversies that arise" (p. 39) sounds both very ambitious — and highly difficult to put into practice. Even if change is deemed necessary and seen as non-threatening by all the participants concerned — a somewhat unrealistic assumption — evidence suggests that there will always be some regret and resistance to sweeping change.

The book is an exemplification of the approaches of organizational theory as they apply to higher education, but is for the most part written in the style that we know from the literature on Organizational Development. Tierney's style of mixing theoretical knowledge, normative ideas about what a modern university should be like, and his experience as a field researcher and consultant is both an asset and a liability. On the positive side, the book is written with much insight and in a style that is unpretentious, rather unacademic, and simple to understand, apparently addressed primarily to practitioners in the field. On the other hand, it does not become clear, at least not to this reader, why Tierney thinks that re-engineering is different from all the other management fads, and why it should apply to universities and colleges. A number of quizzes and summary questions at the end of some sections of the book seem to suggest that, in spite of his claims to the contrary, there are indeed simplistic cookbook solutions to the complex problems of institutional change in highly de-centralized organizations. A brief final section entitled, "Frequently Asked Questions" points in the same direction, namely that this is more of a user handbook written by a management consultant than an arm's length analysis written by an academic. The prescriptive style and normative argumentation smack sometimes a bit moralistic and reinforce that impression. This does not make the book less valuable — on the contrary it might be exactly the kind of book practitioners might want to read and pass on to colleagues.

The fact that the volume has been in the making for a number of years rather than written in one stretch makes for some inconsistencies and quite a number of repetitions which take away somewhat from the clarity and stringency of the author's arguments. These stylistic flaws,

even if relatively minor, have an impact on the readability of this volume. This is a shame because the main theses of the book are as interesting to a student of organizational theory and of leadership and change processes in higher education, as they may be to the practitioner. And certainly, the topic is of as much interest in Canada as it is in the U.S. since the major factors that would require radical change are as virulent here as they are south of the border. Although all the case study examples have been taken from the U.S., much rings true in the Canadian context as well, even if some of them are coming from private universities and colleges where the room and the need for radical re-thinking and reform might be greater than in public institutions.

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