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Resistance: Not Always the Enemy

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I caught up with Lee Knefelkamp recently to hear her thoughts on resistance to change. She outlined six forms and urged campus leaders to “turn resistance into opportunity.”

1. Fear of the unknown. Colleagues may think the status quo is better because it is familiar—even if it's not working.

2. Loss of role or identity. Change may cause colleagues to wonder if their past performance is being questioned or wonder what the consequences will be for them in the future.

3. General philosophical disagreement. Colleagues' disagreement can be genuine and legitimate (e.g., “I don't think Gen Ed should be menu choices”), and these individuals can often be engaged at later points in the process.

4. Burn-out. These colleagues may have been involved in previously underfunded or otherwise 'sabotaged' initiatives. These folks are not necessarily against your initiative.

5. Things work now. These colleagues can argue, “We may not be perfect, but students seem to be doing pretty well.”

6. Curmudgeons. These colleagues will be forever against change, and we often spend too much time focusing on them.

Resistance can be a “source of incredibly important dialogue” that can result in change moving forward in many cases, Knefelkamp said. She noted that each of the six forms of resistance will require “very different conversations” to get at the source. With regard to action a team could undertake to dismantle resistance, Knefelkamp discussed “standing aside,” a tenet of Quaker meetings where individuals set their opinions aside on behalf of the group. With this option, people who are not 100% “for” the project do not automatically become “against”. She stressed that such resisters need to be understood by everyone, be included in processes, and have their concerns further discussed rather than played down. “After 32 years in this work, I'd say 90% of all resisters fit into categories 1-5 and have potential for movement,” she said. “A lot of resistance is asking to be engaged.”