

AAC&U 2009 Annual Meeting

Communicating Institutional Learning: The View from 30,000 Feet

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Common Institutional Pitfalls (and some simple “solutions”—or how to avoid becoming a statistic):

1. Rube Goldberg Syndrome: As educators, we focus on developing complex, laborious processes with too many moving parts, leading to unsustainability. Process becomes an end in itself--to the detriment of outcomes.

→ Create intentional, sustainable processes with a focus on the use of outcomes.
2. William Faulkner Syndrome: A tale told by an idiot signifying nothing. We create lots of sound and fury and beat our breasts in response to extrinsic pressures. A flurry of activity in answer to an external mandate generally usurps precious resources and framed solely as such holds no interest for internal institutional constituents.

→ Design your own adventure, based on institutional needs with expected outcomes.
3. Every Program is an Island—and the IR Director is Marooned Syndrome. Efforts are siloed and quarantined. Instead of using evidence to communicate and cross-pollinate, information is locked away and becomes buried treasure.

→ The IR Director should be a cross pollinator. But s/he needs to work within a context that expects and values that communication. Using data across offices/programs, reading trends and patterns, is part of the work of middle administration, but it's also key to unlocking communication among faculty groups.
4. Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood Syndrome: Every institution is special. The focus is on inputs --our unique student body and institutional mission--not on the impact we're having.

→ Benchmarking and learning from other institutions practices will help to avoid insularity.
5. The Sand Castle Syndrome: After the team goes home, amassed evidence is washed by the next tide (or buried in a box somewhere; see #3). Efforts are not based on meaningful inquiry or research questions important to the institution. Data are gathered but not effectively employed.

→ Articulating clearly what you want to study and why: expected outcomes.
→ Perform a data audit (what's being captured, what's being used and how?)

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Questions:

- What are the right questions to be asking? (What do we need to learn about the way we do things in a college/university?)
- How can we develop a common language of organizational learning in higher education?
- Good practices on campus? What good practices can be identified to foster continuous organizational learning within the campus community?
- How can we look across institutions to better share organizational knowledge?
- How can we share our learning with our publics?

Constituents who need to be part of the conversation about organizational learning: (1) the campus community, (2) the higher education profession, and (3) our multiple external publics.
