Developing a Game-Changer: A Lehigh University Case Study, Part 1

Patrick Farrell ▪ November 6, 2023

In an academic setting, a game-changer is something that truly changes the way a significant portion of the campus works and, more importantly, how the external world sees your institution and its contributions to society. The idea is exciting, yet it can invite a clash with the status quo and may require some rethinking and restatement of institutional mission and how to best achieve it.

This is the first of a two-part series on academic game-changers from the perspective of my 11-year experience as provost at Lehigh University. In this installment I'll write about one example, perhaps our biggest example at Lehigh, and what were some of the important steps we took to get our game-changer off the ground.

In part two, I'll share some of the things we did to make our game-changer possible. Without these prior projects, I doubt we would have been able to make a big game-changer happen.

Background

Lehigh University is a medium-sized private university in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In 2009, the then-new president, Dr. Alice Gast, led a strategic planning effort that included a wide range of faculty, staff, and students. In the ensuing several years, a number of initiatives from the strategic plan were undertaken, most at a moderate scale. About six years after the publication of the plan seemed like a good time to see whether the campus was ready to make a larger effort based on one of the primary pillars of the plan.

Environment for big changes

Anticipating that Lehigh might be ready for a big change effort called for a careful look by the campus to understand the likely environment into which any big idea might fall and to test our appetite for a big change effort. Lehigh was financially sound, and while there were always important issues to attend to, there were no clear threats or "burning platforms" (Kotter, 2008) to motivate a large change. Thus, to many faculty, staff, students, and trustees, a large-scale change was optional. This was a nontrivial point and would need to be part of any "Why should we do this?" discussion.

Given this environment, key elements of a big change effort would need to include the following:

1. Early and persistent efforts at broad engagement of faculty and staff

2. Given local history, anticipation of a few of the likely major objections faculty might have to a specific large initiative

3. A focus on communication, transparency, and shared decision making

Appetite for big ideas

A first step in thinking about implementing a big idea was to assess the campus appetite for change and for what scale of change. A real possibility was that the campus appetite wasn't large enough to move forward. Either way, we were starting the engagement and shared decision-making effort before we had even decided what we might do. At this point, we downplayed the game-changer language as it suggested a scale and impact that might seem overwhelming and might diffuse the discussion into separate arguments. To focus on what we might choose to do, we shifted to the language of "a big idea for Lehigh."

At the time, the faculty governance structure at Lehigh consisted of an elected faculty chair, elected major committees, and a committee-of-the-whole style of faculty meeting. The then faculty chair was

also interested in surfacing a big idea for Lehigh, so we thought we might work together to hold a number of World Café–type meetings for faculty, staff, and students to see how much interest there was in big ideas for Lehigh and what big ideas might emerge. These were mostly held at noon (free lunch!) with a few in the late afternoon, and all were led by the faculty chair. The prompts were to progressively brainstorm ideas that might dramatically improve a department or unit, then a college, then Lehigh. All ideas were recorded and later posted on a World Café website for comment and further suggestions. Our hope was that with these minimal prompts, we could learn what scale and scope of big ideas folks were willing to envision. While we suggested that participants look at the 2009 strategic plan for ideas, we did not restrict the outcomes to ideas in that plan.

This big idea gathering may sound straightforward, but it did require prompts and some encouragement to suspend the usual filtering of big ideas due to resource constraints, political divisions, uncertain trustee support, and other factors. Those are real constraints, but for a really exciting big idea, we might be able to change the constraints.

A key part of the work was the assurance that we intended to do something with the results. We would not take on every good idea, and eventually would consider practical constraints, but the group work would help guide a next generation of projects, and hopefully produce a genuine game-changer for Lehigh.

Among the elements of the strategic plan was one that recognized that despite being an enthusiastically interdisciplinary institution, there seemed to be fragmented organization or focus among those doing research or teaching on issues related to human health. The strategic plan had suggested an "increased footprint in health" but didn't recommend what form that might take or how we might get there. While there was no specific prompt in the World Café's for ideas related to health, a common theme that emerged was that Lehigh should do "something big in health," whether that was to establish a new institute or create endowed chairs or start a medical school.

An idea development plan

The next step was to try to think through how we might get from a rather vague big idea (something big in health) to a more specific one we could begin to work to implement. Key elements of this implementation plan included clarifying roles for campus leaders, faculty, staff, students, and trustees; a focus on communication; and developing a clear forecast of how the implementation process could unfold. Each of these topics is substantial, and I will try to highlight what we found to be most important in developing this big idea.

Role clarification

The idea of role clarification is not to limit types of engagement but rather, with so much to think about and work on, to try to develop a common understanding of who can best contribute what. Campus leaders may be best positioned to help frame what might be possible, make resources available, and think about system impacts. For example, it was clear that World Café participants wanted me, the provost, to propose a specific realization for the big idea in health. I proposed a new college—a College of Health. Faculty and staff might disagree with that proposal, but it allowed for a more specific conversation and provided some clarity on how big I was willing to go.

A second major role for me as provost was to suggest what it would look like when we were ready. This was actually a much more complex question than it might appear to have been on the surface, as we needed to consider what a new college would look like when it officially started, how it might continue to grow, and what we must have for a successful start and subsequent growth. We envisioned a starting faculty size of perhaps 10, with an eventual full complement of 50 faculty in seven or eight years. So as this new college began, about 20 percent of the faculty who would guide research and teaching direction would be on hand, while the rest, with their own teaching and research interests, were unknown to us. From an external perspective, we might expect the opportunities and challenges for our graduates in health could shift substantially over the next five to 10 years as the field changed. Research interests and funding would likely also change significantly over that same period as new faculty were added. All this combined to suggest that "starting" the college meant putting together an initial academic focus, a near-term research agenda, and a budget model that would get it started well. Then we would expect that the college would make short-cycle evaluation and refocusing a norm. If every two or three years the new College of Health revisited where it intended to work, what it hoped graduates would be able to do, and where it could best contribute in research, then mid-course corrections would be normal and expected and a natural part of growth.

Faculty want to and need to lead on many elements. For example, soon after the World Cafés, I formed a committee of faculty from across the campus who were already active in teaching and research on aspects of human health to recommend areas of focus for the new college. Part of this committee's charge was to consult widely with faculty and staff on campus and with any off-campus experts they thought would be helpful. Their report would be shared within Lehigh so we could consider it a recommendation to the entire campus, not just to the provost.

Shared, delegated decision making was key to the overall project. In our case, this was coupled with an understanding that some decisions that might not be universally popular might be better made by the provost, with advice from faculty and staff.

Communication

Frequent communication was essential. This included all aspects of the project, ranging from any decisions that had been made, to which campus groups were working on which aspects of the project. We found that a graphical timeline indicating where we had been, where we were, and what we forecast would need to happen in the future was a useful way to remind everyone of progress and work to be done. We organized open meetings, about one per semester, and after using our timeline for an overview, we typically invited one of the committees or groups working on an aspect of the project to talk about their work.

We also asked for time during trustee, faculty, staff, and student senate meetings (among others) to provide updates, forecasts, and time for discussion to emphasize the developmental nature of the project. This approach of trying to be as open as possible about what was happening and what uncertainties might lie ahead helped encourage suggestions and comments, as it was clear that we were still quite flexible about next steps.

History and forecasting

We found that one important role for campus leaders was to establish and maintain a timeline and schedule. While this may seem to be highly transactional work, in our academic environment, particularly for projects that take a long time, it has turned out to be extremely important. Practically, a timeline that includes history, present work, and forecasts can remind folks what we have accomplished, what is underway, and what lies ahead. Symbolically, it can help reassure folks that we intend to make something happen in the near future. In an environment that sometimes moves slowly, if at all, and can suffer from endless analysis and critique, the visibility of getting to a result in a reasonable time can be a huge boon. One subtext for this approach is that our initial development of a College of Health would not be perfect in all respects. We expected that our initial result would be positive and that we would modify it as we learned how to do it better, more faculty joined, and the external environment changed.

Both history and forecasts are easy to forget, so repetition was essential. Even if the precise timeline changed, forecasting what needed to happen and approximately when it would, helped prepare folks for those pivotal moments. Creating a new college was not a usual activity for Lehigh, and it deserved its own (two-way) communication channels to let folks know what was happening and invite feedback and suggestions.

Summary

Let me add one overarching consideration. A truly large-scale game-changer will probably take longer to fully implement than anyone expects—and likely longer than the tenure of most provosts and presidents. If we wanted our project to be sustained well beyond our tenure, we needed to figure out how to step away from our roles as key players as the project developed. Being visibly supportive as others took the lead was critical. While doing so can be difficult for some leaders because memory of their critical contributions would fade as the campus took ownership of the project, isn't that is exactly what we wanted to happen?

As of this writing, the College of Health at Lehigh is up and running. As expected, it started small and has grown steadily in faculty and students over the past three years. We expect that growth to continue for the next seven or eight years.

This type of storytelling usually stops here. I have left out many of the details but tried to include some of the major issues. It might appear as if this game-changer was possible only because of the actions I described above. The real work actually started years before. We had started implementing smaller elements of the strategic plan six years earlier in a transparent style that would evolve into the approach we used for this game-changer effort. The smaller projects allowed us to grow our capacity for change and, in some cases, learn new skills we could also use for subsequent projects. I'll discus some of these prior projects and what we learned from them in part two.

Reference

Kotter, J. P. (2008). *A sense of urgency*. Harvard Business Press.

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