

# Preface

Serious and fundamental questions are being posed about the quality of learning and teaching in universities. These questions relate to rapid change in the way learning and teaching is delivered, the cost and quality of courseware, responsiveness to learner heterogeneity, and faculty professionalization (Bokor 2012; Bradley et al. 2008; Norton et al. 2013). The direction universities take in answering these questions has consequences for their design, their staffing, the way they create and deliver their learning and teaching programs, and the way they compete with each other. According to the proponents of transformational change in higher education, the future services offered by universities will exist in a national and global marketplace instead of a state and regional one, and more often in a virtual as opposed to bricks and mortar delivery model (Harden 2012). While the drivers for change in the university sector and associated debates have existed for some time, there is an undoubted increasing cadence in the discussion and a demonstrable sense of fear driving a call for action within and among universities. Increasingly, cost, competitiveness, effectiveness, and viability are linked to responsiveness to student needs, the quality of the curriculum, the learning experience, and student outcomes (Kuh et al. 2015). The result is a heightened focus on how universities are organized to deliver those outcomes.

One of the ironies of change initiatives in universities is they frequently lack a coherent theory and research to practice framework for such important work, which is ironical, given that universities are the places where theories are created and applied in so many domains. There is also a concern that the scale of change is underwhelming, often limited to projects focused directly on improving aspects of learning and teaching without undertaking the institution-wide structural reform (i.e., an integrated approach to the technology, the governance, and personnel reforms) necessary to support those initiatives and increase the likelihood that they are both sustainable and scalable. Such projects are frequently positioned as transformational although their scope and depth rarely line up with the requirements of transformational change.

The purpose of this brief is to share an approach to change that extends beyond traditional strategic planning or scope-limited, project-based approaches and includes examples of the ways in which theory and research can guide practice in transformational organizational change in higher education.

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