

A Pre-Transition Agenda

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Business as Usual but Transition on Our Mind.

REPORT: Our first order of business this year is our WASC re-accreditation visit in October. Beyond that we have a packed agenda: syllabus guidelines, adapting cross-listed courses to new assessment technologies, thinking strategically about retirement exposure, working to unfreeze hiring and salaries, expanding academic support services, streamlining student academic procedures, enhancing faculty development, revising credit hours and course schedules, expanding multi-year planning and budgeting, updating academic integrity procedures for the 21st century, reconciling discrepancies between practice and policy in faculty handbook, moving toward electronic evaluations, thinking about how the cost of higher education should inform how we do things, working toward a bold plan for re-invigorating study of foreign languages in a liberal arts curriculum with diversity and multiculturalism at its core, and designing an new, innovative “sophomore experience.”

That is a full agenda, but it is more or less business as usual. This year is different, though: we have transition and change on our minds.

The occasion of the appointment of a new President is often an opportunity for positive institutional change. In fact, most position announcements explicitly say that candidates will be expected to “lead change.” But change is never a one person job.

If we want the next president to be the successful leader of positive change for Mills, it will be necessary for us, to borrow from Gandhi, to be the change we want to see at Mills. In this essay, I want to explore some “pre-changes” that we might want to con-temple, and even initiate, this year so as to become an institution that is poised for collaboration with new leadership next year.

I will frame these in terms of analogs to the traits we articulated last spring as desirable characteristics in a new president. Our list was long and we do not, of course, expect that we will hire a super-heroine with magical powers; but even if we did, the simple truth is, even super-heroines cannot make change alone. To exploit the opportunity for positive change that a leadership transition occasions, we need to prepare ourselves as an institution. It will not

do to expect a new president to arrive and suddenly “move us.” We need to start moving us now.

Below I describe six areas of change we might explore. Each corresponds to an item in our list of desired characteristics: managing change, strategic thinking, financial acumen, vision, new ideas, and transparency. Cultivating these community traits, I submit, is an important way to prepare for both a successful transition and a transition to success.

1. Refute the “Resistant to Change” Rap

“They” say that colleges, alumnae/i, boards, and especially faculties, are averse to change. Someone once even said “there’s nothing quite so conservative as a liberal arts college.” To which a knowing wit quipped, “Except, perhaps, an innovative liberal arts college.” In the face of this irony, we look to new leaders to be good at “managing change.”

Sometimes, the very idea of “managing change” in higher education really means “accomplish-

ing change while minimizing (faculty) resistance,” but it not need be so.

To be entirely candid, the sentiment expressed above is not without merit. But it is not a description of the character or psychology of individuals – it is, rather, a reflection of the structural reality of a college. Alumnae want the college they knew preserved. Boards are tasked with maintaining stability. Faculty struggle to produce consistent outcomes in the face of constantly varying inputs.

In anticipation of new leadership, then, perhaps the most common tendency is to brace oneself. Batten down. Think “protection!” Be nervous. Will the new person want to change everything? Will s/he understand us? Will s/he have an agenda? We are, after all, always more comfortable with the way things are, even if we are not happy about them, than we are with the idea of change. What is to be done?

First, we all need to recognize the structural sources of our “conservatism.” It is, in part, written into all of our job descriptions. Second, we need to engage critically and become conversant with issues beyond our own bailiwicks, in particular, contemporary issues in higher education writ large. These are, as they say, too important to leave to the experts. We need to be knowledgeable collaborators in conversations about change, prepared to put Mills in the forefront of American higher education.

Following on this, we need to proactively assess which issues it makes sense for Mills to tackle and why. A reactive stance is naturally conservative; a pro-active one permits more flexible and nuanced stands. Finally, we need to cultivate a collective discourse style that helps one another resist “knee-jerkism.”

These things will allow us to be co-managers of change rather than expecting someone else to manage our change.

2. Stop Thinking One Year at a Time

A second trait we seek in our leaders is “strategic vision” – which means, put simply, the ability to think ahead and see connections among opportunities.

Few would disagree that strategic ability is desirable in a leader, but, again, leaders do not lead alone. For a strategic vision to operate at the top, we need to move the entire institution toward a culture of longer term vision.

College life is dominated by its “years”: a senior class departs, a freshmen class arrives; fund raising and accounting years run from June to June; recruitment and committee work start anew each September and the budget cycle shortly after. These one year cycles dominate the way we frame problems and solutions. We wait for this year’s numbers to tell us what we can do next year. If we are all “annual thinkers,” it is not by character or personality. Almost nothing in our structure facilitates or rewards long term thinking. Every year we employ a lot of smart people to figure out how to make next year look like this year.

Our annualized structures and processes, the way we temporally structure resource allocation, largely precludes real strategic thinking across the institution. Many worthwhile innovations that are of longer (or shorter) time scale than a single year simply do not get onto the radar screen.

To be sure, there have been a few efforts to create multi-year plans that linked enrollment, staffing, revenue, and such, but these are relatively rare. Admittedly, there is sometimes too much contingency to make firm projections, but even preliminary sketches allow us to see what the future may look like, and to think creatively and entrepreneurially about how else it could look. Such plans also make it possible to articulate decision making principles – if enrollments get to this level we will do this, otherwise that.

Multiple year plans at the division, department, and program level could be collated and com-

pared to create a coherent long term picture of actual activity that could be tied to milestones. These need not be technocratically deterministic, but would allow us to identify cross-departmental synergies, economies of scale, investment and fund raising opportunities, targets of opportunity and so on.

Our near term challenge is to dare ourselves to do some longer term thinking at different levels of the institution. This does not mean another round of wish-list input for a global planning process; rather, we should challenge units all across the institution to put a few years of plans and aspirations, benchmarks and decision criteria on paper, and we need to develop a culture in which we collectively pay attention to these. Even imperfect plans will prime us for engaging with the strategic thinker we want to hire.

3. Take Back Efficiency and Productivity

New leaders (especially those chosen to lead institutions at this moment in economic history) are expected to have “financial acumen,” which, to oversimplify, translates as two imperatives: Raise more money. Spend less money.

Everyone is a big fan of the former; the latter, though, engenders reactions that range from nervous to defensive and even adversarial.

The imperative to control spending grows directly out of the most dominant theme in contemporary conversations about higher education: the unsustainability of the current business model. Given the resources that students have available and what the state is willing to provide to subsidize higher education, it simply costs too much to do what we do.

Negativity around “efficiency” and “productivity” is understandable. Far too many leaders lack the imagination to implement cost savings as anything beyond “cut, cut, cut” or the old fashioned dream of replacing people with machines. The truly cynical employ the rhetoric of “employee as welfare cheat,” claiming, for example, that faculty are pampered, selfish, and uninterested in student learning.

Even a new president with good intentions will find the baggage these concepts carry challenging.

This is unfortunate because our aspiration IS to do more of what we do. We like making a difference in young people’s lives, preparing them for successful entry into the job market, and helping them become responsible citizens. We like giving opportunity to those who might not otherwise have it. We do aspire to do more, and we recognize that this is not going to happen by marketing or fundraising alone.

And so, what we need to do, is to reclaim the concepts of efficiency and productivity for our own, and actively seek better ways to structure and support what we do. Increased efficiency and productivity would allow us to:

- Produce more learning and transformation in the students with whom we work with same effort.
- Be able to provide access to more young people to what we offer with the same expenditure of resources.
- Produce what we do more efficiently for better work/life balance.
- Provide the more student learning and have more time for other professional work.

As teachers and scholars we can design and demand the kinds of support and infrastructure that allow us to practice our vocation with the maximum effect. We should look at new practices, technologies, forms of organization to determine which ones can be used by us, as teachers and researchers, to be more productive – produce more output for the same level of effort (or the same with less). We need persuasively to argue, for example, that scrimping on support staff transfers relatively low-skill tasks to an organization’s more expensive staff. We need to make sure technology is not the tail

that wags the dog, but rather use it to solve real organizational problems.

A faculty and staff that can creatively shift how they think about productivity and efficiency can collaborate with a president who is charged with “controlling costs” with smart, mission-driven, carefully reasoned innovations invented by the people who do the work.

4. Majoring in the 21st Century

A new president should be entrepreneurial and promote innovation.

It is a commonplace to note that the problems of the contemporary world and the future do not respect disciplinary boundaries. We know that if we are educating women to solve real world problems, we need to figure out how to reconfigure the toolkits we send them out into that world with. But how do we position ourselves to get beyond just saying so?

The defining structures of a college tend to be its departments and its majors. Both are based on traditional disciplinary boundaries rooted in the past. Their inertial power is immense. We sometimes create new programs, but real changes in the lineup are rare.

The successful college of 2025 will not have the same lineup of departments, positions, majors, disciplines as we have today. An institution like Mills can be better positioned for creative realignment than are larger institutions if we lay the right groundwork now.

We can think about how to create administrative infrastructure for shared and fractional appointments. We need to figure out how to facilitate cross-departmental position proposals and ask whether departments even make sense as the molecular level of academic organization. When we design new programs we should do so in a manner that maximizes nimble-ness. As we think about foreign languages we should think outside the boxes of departments and course credits and standard classroom delivery methods. We could deploy the “college major”

program as curricular R&D, involving faculty actively in the design of experimental majors rather than leaving the task to entrepreneurial sophomores. We can consider modular demonstrations of excellence and competence rather than only majors and reconceptualize team teaching in a manner that transcends the simple objection “it’s too expensive.”

An institutional culture that is comfortable with a mix of strategies and structures rather than one that sees total, all-at-once, institutional re-organization as the only path to change will be ready for creative conversations about building nimble structures that can adapt to the unfolding future for which we are preparing students.

5. Let’s Get Our Bold On!

A president should be a good listener ... have bold new ideas.

Faced with a good listener the easiest thing will be to recite the past, to outdo one another socializing the new president to *how things are done* at Mills. We want to impress the newcomer with how long we have been here and how much we remember. We will trip over ourselves explaining where all the landmines are. Our lists of sacred truths will be pages and pages long.

While all that is important – and a good leader will want to learn it – the point, to paraphrase Marx, is not to recite history but to make history. We should prepare for conversations not by focusing on how Mills *has* been but rather on how Mills has never been but might one day be. We should practice having bold, audacious ideas. In preparation for conversations with a new president we need to practice thinking in terms of “what if there were...,” to love the subjunctive, and only grudgingly respect the indicative, to make “why not?” our mantra. This will mean indulging and encouraging one another’s audacity, a willingness to think through “what if” scenarios and avoid our favorite phrase “we tried that once....”

We will, to be sure, be called on to rapidly socialize the new president in our traditions, but we should remember that tradition is a foundation upon which to build, not a monument to be admired.

6. Practice Transparency

...commitment to a transparent decision-making style.

Transparency – or at least a promise of transparency – is all the rage these days. It typically means that citizens or organizational members have access to information and can understand how decisions get made. In other words, treating people, as much as possible, as informational equals. As such, it is easy to think of transparency simply as something that the led can demand of the leader, and that can be fulfilled by putting information on a website and having open meetings.

But there is more to transparency than that. Transparency is an informational relationship among the various constituents that comprise the community; it is a characteristic of its “information ecology.”

If that is the case, we cannot just demand that leaders be transparent. We have to develop a culture that expects, practices, and thrives on openness. Its members must know the institution beyond their own perspectival parochialism. We want to take diversity of perspectives seriously – groups really do make better decisions than individuals because of their capacity to pool information from different sources. We should strive to create a community where we acknowledge authorship of our own ideas and where we offer thoughtful, informed responses to one another’s ideas. We should practice contributing to the communal stock of knowledge, correct rumors and errors before passing them on. We should think in terms of

web 2.0 rather than web 1.0. We should think creative commons instead of copyright. We should crowd source when we can, soliciting comments broadly before we formulate final versions of proposal or policies. We should use technology to enhance participation, collective memory, and collective self-awareness.

A focus on transparency can help us become a community that embraces new forms of distributed knowledge and social knowledge production, a community that knows how to talk with itself, to learn from energetic disagreements among friends, a community that takes diversity seriously even when it is inconvenient for our own political or material interests. In short, we should put the principles of transparency to work throughout the community, have sharing information be our default. THAT would be an environment in which a leader dedicated to transparency could thrive.

Conclusion: We Make Change

In the summer of 1983 I was in Washington, D.C. for the 20th anniversary of the March on Washington. On that hot August day we stopped at a small convenience store for a drink. On the cash register was taped a somewhat-worse-for-wear handwritten sign: “We Do Not Make Change.” One immediately understood the literal message, given the parking meters and newspaper machines right outside the store’s entrance. But if one thought playfully for a second, one could read in this sign a statement of political theory: change happens to us, we don’t create it. Having just come off the national mall in front of the Lincoln Memorial, I couldn’t help but think, “Oh, yes we do.” As we think about transitions and change, it is important, I think, to remember that *leaders* do not make change; they just shepherd us as *we* make change. And there is no reason not to get started.