

Catalyzing Institutional Change for Community Impact

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The Current Context for Institutional Change

The change narrative in higher education continues to spread, shift, and deepen. We can no longer ignore it. Where revenue shortfalls were once limited to some institutions, now nearly every college and university across America is facing a budget deficit. Some of these deficits are so severe that they lead to closures, as has happened to 10% of private nonprofit colleges since 2013-14, or mergers, such as has happened in Georgia, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and other states (Horn, 2024). Some are lucky enough to survive but are left with difficult decisions that are painful and dramatic, such as eliminating programs, closing or consolidating offices, reducing their workforce, including laying off tenured faculty -- just read *The Chronicle*! Tenure is also on the chopping block in some states (see for example, Oklahoma as captured in Armour, 2026; Whitford, 2026). In addition, diversity offices, programs, and positions are being eliminated across the country; research missions and the funding to support them have been decimated; and, as technology platforms and applications continue to advance, there is a need for digital transformation.

While some of these issues are not entirely new, some are made more urgent by external influences, such as new federal policy directions like the current focus on workforce development and salaries of graduates by the Department of Education (see for example, Department of Education, January 9, 2026), which may affect urban and metropolitan serving universities disproportionately given the focus on majors like social work, teaching, and others that may not pass these new tests. Others, though, are the result of internal pressures, some of which have been brewing since before the pandemic. While we all experienced a variety of challenges during the pandemic, including enrollment declines and associated revenue shortfalls, many of our institutions were perhaps lulled into a false sense of security during the pandemic with the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF). That funding has long dried up,

and the enrollment cliff is now upon us (Grawe, 2018), making enrollment challenges and revenue a continuing challenge, especially for smaller tuition-dependent institutions. This, in combination with the reductions in federal funding that affect all colleges and universities, as well as the shifts in state funding that affect public universities, is contributing to the ongoing narrative for change.

Among the most urgent challenges now facing urban and metropolitan campuses is the growing threat to already-vulnerable communities experiencing the withdrawal of federal services and the disruption caused by ICE enforcement actions. Supporting these communities is central to the anchor mission of urban and metropolitan universities — a mission rooted not only in providing access to education, but in extending our economic, intellectual, creative, human, civic, physical, and cultural assets into the communities we serve (Taylor & Luter, 2013; Harris & Holley, 2016). In response to these difficult times, colleges and universities have stepped up in meaningful ways (Steiner, 2026), adding new dimensions to their community engagement missions. Other articles recently published in this journal also speak to these issues and how universities are stepping up during these challenging times (Clifford et al., 2025; Everson et al., 2025).

Essentially, everything we have held as sacred within our hallowed halls is now being called into question or dismantled, even as we are being challenged to reinvent ourselves. For example, one recent article in *The Chronicle* by Steven Mintz (March 19, 2026) states that “The window for gradual, deliberate reform is closing” and provides descriptions of seven alternative models to consider. Another by Levine and Van Pelt (March 9, 2026) states that “transformation is no longer optional,” as they provide their perspective on why higher education is resisting change, along with examples of campuses that have made strides in new and promising directions. The calls for transformation are not limited to the United States: UNESCO has issued a recent report (2026), entitled “*Transforming higher education: Global collaboration on visioning and action*,” and other global higher education organizations, such as the University-Industry Innovation Network (uiin.org), provide programming focused on “transforming the higher education sector for socio-economic impact.” The calls for change are now a deafening cacophony, and they will not quiet down any time soon. It has never been clearer that we need leaders who can create the conditions for a reimagined, reinvented, and renewed higher education.

Leading Change

Most higher education institutions have been around for a long time, many for more than 100 years, and with longevity comes institutional inertia that makes it difficult to be agile. Our academic schools, colleges, and departmental structures are long-established with disciplinary cultures built around them. Policies and procedures associated with our structures are also well-established, and long-serving staff serve as gatekeepers to innovative practices, saying, “That’s

not how we do it here.” Brian Rosenberg, president emeritus of Macalester College, has written a book that exposes the entrenched structures, practices, and cultures that inhibit meaningful reform, including faculty resistance to change, called “*Whatever it is, I’m against it*” (2023). In addition, people do not like to change. Kegan and Lahey (2009) have documented people’s “immunity to change” and mapped out a step-by-step process that people and organizations can use to overcome their internal resistance to change. John Kotter, a famous change-management business expert, has also written two books he calls “adult parables” that help people grapple with change (Kotter and Rathgeber, 2006 and 2016), in addition to his seminal book, *Leading Change* (2012). Taken together, it is easy to see why change is so difficult.

But are inertia, long-standing structures, policies, and cultures, and personal resistance all we have to blame for our inability to truly change? Adrianna Kezar published *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading and Enacting Change* in 2018 with the goal of explaining change, providing a thorough framing of change models, and providing guidance for leaders to enact change. She opens the book with a quote from the movie, *Lincoln*, which I repeat here because it provides an important reminder about creating deep and durable change: it requires more than intention, it requires strategy (Kezar, 2018, p. x.).

A compass, I learnt when I was surveying, it'll – it'll point you True North from where you're standing, but it's got no advice about the swamps and deserts and chasms that you'll encounter along the way. If in pursuit of your destination you plunge ahead, heedless of obstacles, and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what's the use of knowing True North?

In higher education, we are good at pointing to our True North: coming up with goals and naming outcomes. For this, we can thank the strategic planning movement that began in the 80s with the publication of Keller’s seminal text on the topic (1983), buoyed by the assessment movement that began in earnest shortly thereafter (Ewell, 1991; 2002). By now, every institution of higher learning has a strategic plan because accreditors require them and boards mandate them. Strategic plans are the primary vehicle by which institutions set their vision and direction for the future and, in doing so, set up expectations for change. While we are good at coming up with the coordinates for our destination, we are not necessarily good at arriving there. For example, Daniel Seymour (2025) conducted an analysis of 250 college and university strategic plans to evaluate their effectiveness at creating change. What he found was alarming. He identified 17 critical mistakes that institutions make in their strategic planning processes, which he categorized into four areas: Thinking, Planning, Doing, and Learning. Specifically, he identified three high-level areas where strategic plans could be improved, and one of them was moving from “continuity to systemic change.” This involves challenging the status quo, not just in lip service to that challenge, but by developing the processes, approaches, collective engagement, and measures required to break down barriers and rebuild structures, policies, and

cultures. His analysis suggests that a major reason that nothing really ever changes as a result of strategic planning is that most plans do not create the necessary tension between the “desired state” and the “actual state.” He attributes this to an inability to be brutally honest about the real challenges facing the institution.

Being brutally honest requires letting go of assumptions, admitting that some parts of our institutions do not work well for everyone, listening to our critics and, most importantly, to our students and the communities we serve, and being willing to experiment with new approaches that may result in change. That sounds simple enough, but why is it so difficult? To answer this question, I would like to narrow in on two significant issues that I think are impeding our inability to truly change. The first issue is that the nature of change is still not widely understood by leaders in higher education. The second issue is that we lack leaders who both know what it takes to achieve change and are prepared to lead it.

First, let’s unpack the nature of change and what it takes to lead it. There is change, and then there is CHANGE. As a practical guide to help leaders better understand and enact change, my colleagues and I developed the *Change Leadership Toolkit* (Elrod *et al.*, 2025). The Toolkit builds on research but also practice. Its roots are in the research, but its trunk, branches, and leaves grew out of the experiences of leaders who had created change on their campuses (or had tried and failed). In the Toolkit, we define systemic change (e.g., CHANGE) as efforts that affect multiple courses, departments, programs, divisions, colleges (or beyond), and result in changes to policies, procedures, norms, cultures, and/or structures (organizational, curricular, fiscal). It is disruptive, crosses institutional boundaries, impacts infrastructure, engages governance, and challenges ways of knowing, doing, and being. It is uncomfortable, but that is the nature of change. This kind of change is in contrast to incremental change, which results in small shifts that are mainly just tinkering around the edges. This tinkering-type change generally does not result in systemic or transformational change within the institution. Think of it as trying to change a square into a parallelogram (incremental) or trying to change a square into a starburst (transformational).

Now, let’s unpack the kind of leadership required. Change leadership is different from the typical change management models that are primarily framed in the world of business and industry. These models favor leadership that is characterized by a tendency towards hierarchical, top-down decision-making as opposed to more horizontal, shared leadership models. These models do not work well for leading change in higher education because they do not account for distributed organizational cultures and shared governance systems (Buller, 2015, Chapter 4). As I have been thinking about and working with dozens of campus leaders and teams, I have created a definition of a change leader that reflects the distinctive characteristics of leading change on campus:

Change leaders are enthusiastic champions that inspire, empower, and mobilize people to achieve change goals aligned with a vision in a process that is strategic, inclusive, responsive, and transparent.

Buller further asserts that because higher education institutions are more likely to be learning organizations, a more flexible or journey-based approach is needed. In fact, we published a journey-based model for leading change in work we did that was focused on transforming undergraduate STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education (Figure 1; Elrod & Kezar, 2016). The figure illustrates the major phases of change in the context of a river where you could experience calm waters or rapids, eddy around rocks for a while as you contemplate different aspects of your change work, and have different people get in and out of the river of change at various points. It is also important to note that no two change processes start at the same place in this journey.

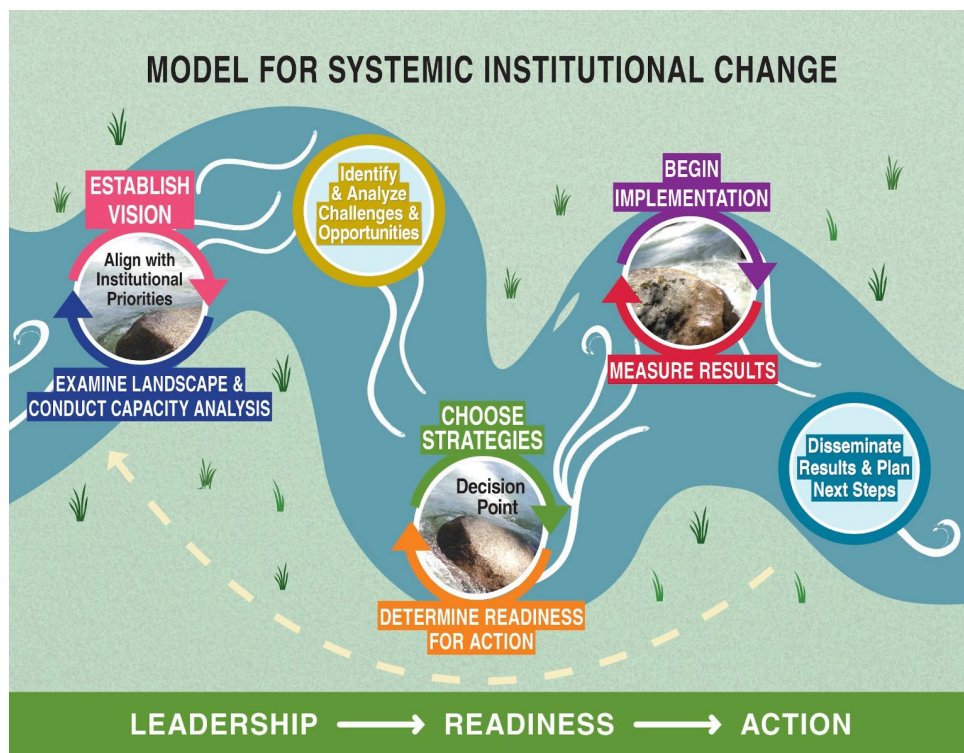


FIGURE 1. Model for systemic institutional change.

When we developed this model, we noted that leadership was required, but we did not specify anything more than that.

The Change Leadership Toolkit

We developed the Change Leadership Toolkit to provide change leaders in higher education with a set of resources to help them not only better understand the nature of change but also what it takes to lead and achieve it. In the Toolkit, we succinctly define systemic change as change that results in changes to structures, policies, processes, culture, and norms. In other words, a change that affects the “system.” Leaders wishing to create systemic change must understand and be able to affect the system they are trying to change. The Toolkit’s resources are a series of worksheets designed as a step-by-step guide that breaks down the phases of planning and implementing systemic change into manageable pieces and culminates in the creation of a change leadership plan that leaders can use with teams on their campuses.

The Model upon which the Toolkit is based is the Ecosystem Model of Systemic Change Leadership (Figure 2). This model illustrates the complex nature of systemic change and the key components required for leading with success: the strategic use of what we call change leader “moves” (actions carried out by leaders), the importance of taking advantage of levers that accelerate movement towards change goals (strategic imperatives, dedicated funding, change in Carnegie classification, a new leader), and the understanding that all of this rests upon the fulcrum of context (mission, leadership, governance, culture, politics, people, money and external influences). Everything a leader does happens in context, and the contexts at each institution are truly unique. Thus, a clear understanding of the context is critical for making the most effective leadership moves, not only which ones but also how they are made. The papers in this issue provide examples of how these elements can work together to frame and enact institutional change.

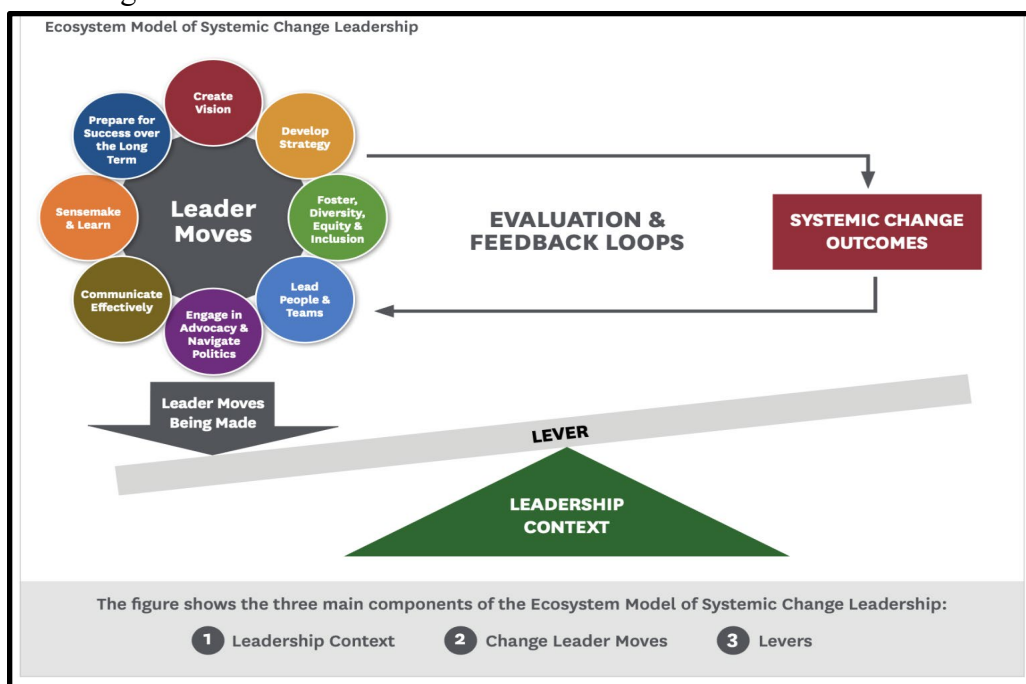


FIGURE 2. Ecosystem model of systemic change leadership.

How Community Engagement Can Be Used to Catalyze Institutional Change

I want to thank Patrick Green, Editor of this journal, for the engaging conversations we have had about systemic change and the opportunity to serve as guest editor of this issue. We were intrigued by the idea that the work of so many campuses in their communities was at the intersection of community engagement and systemic change. We wanted to provide an opportunity for campuses to highlight the work they were doing that might lead to significant and durable institutional transformation. We invited authors to:

Explore leadership aspects, organizational change, and institutional transformation amidst the changing landscape and permacrisis in higher education and their communities that describe their experiences with leading organizational restructuring or reorganization, realigning institutional priorities, policies and programs, managing people and programs amidst change processes, creating financial sustainability through significant transition that results in institutional change, in the context of urban and metropolitan campuses.

We received several exciting manuscripts that described various campus or community initiatives, research, or programs. However, at first pass, none of them identified how what they described led to transformational change, despite the specific language included in the call: they described what they did and documented the outcomes conceived by their goals. When specifically prompted, some authors could make the leap to translating their results into institutional impact and change, or the potential to do so, and those papers are included in this issue. We were not overwhelmed by submissions, which perhaps also speaks to the struggle for many to engage in change leadership and systemic change in higher education.

To help readers advance their understanding of the nature of systemic change, what it takes to achieve it, and how to lead it, I draw attention below to the elements of the Ecosystem Model presented above that I see in each paper. The purpose of doing so is to bring practical relevance to the reader through these articles.

In the paper by Hough *et al.*, they describe how an innovation **lever** (the X-labs model) can contribute to institutional transformation. They were working within three primary **contexts**: the challenges of preparing students for 21st-century careers, meeting societal and employer needs in a dynamically shifting landscape, and creating a new culture of transdisciplinarity amongst faculty. The **change leader's moves** were focused on *leading people and teams* by engaging faculty across the institution in X-lab design and on *strategy and resources*, as they asked faculty to set and achieve goals related to X-lab outcomes. Their documentation of institutional change is that the innovation spread beyond where it was originally intended. For example, X-labs were included in other academic programs, began to influence faculty hiring and subsequent

collaborations, and affected student recruitment oriented towards innovation and cross-disciplinary learning. Culture change was also noted as faculty shifted their views regarding new pedagogies. Ultimately, the X-lab model was included in the university's strategic plan. This paper provides an experientially informed and practical case study for institutional leaders looking to implement any kind of innovation with the hope of driving change.

Garcia *et al.* describe the development of a survey tool with deep community partner engagement and voices in order to improve institutional evaluation practices with the goal of creating “long-term institutional change, rather than just transactional engagement.” The **lever** in this case was the survey instrument under development. The **context** was a blend of both cultural and external factors in that they were seeking a more “bidirectional relationship” with community partners and, to do that, they had to navigate the cultural differences between institution and community partners. They employed several **change leader moves**, from *sensemaking and learning* by the iterative use of research and data to inform survey development, *leading people and teams* and *fostering diversity, equity and inclusion* by authentically engaging a variety of stakeholders. The result was a shift from an internally focused vision and use of higher education jargon to a broader shared vision and use of language that reflected both cultures and their partnership goals. This paper shows how a dedicated focus on traversing these different cultures can lay the foundation for transforming institutional programming and shifting financial investments to create a more inclusive and collective approach to community engagement.

In his invited commentary, Freeman describes his experience developing an ecosystem model that creates an environment where Black employees can thrive in a time when budgets, policies, and politics are working in the opposite direction. The primary **lever** in this example of systemic change was the murder of George Floyd, an external influence that opened up the space for Freeman and the Black Faculty and Staff Association to leverage. The **context** was primarily external with respect to the shifting political and policy landscape around diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and funding. That context, however, resulted in the development of internal contexts related to financial and physical resources, human capital and capacity, culture, and politics. To create this ecosystem, many of the **change-leader moves** described in the Toolkit were implemented. They started with *vision, expectations, and pacing* moves, outlining what this ecosystem would look like and what it could achieve. Of most significance were moves made in the *lead people & teams* category, by hiring staff for the reinstated Black/African American Cultural Center, establishing a Black faculty and staff association, and hosting social and educational events that brought people together across units and disciplines. Moves made in the *strategy & resources* and *fostering diversity, equity & inclusion* categories included creating a Black History Research Lab that elevated understanding of the impact that Black Americans had on the university. In addition, Freeman provides suggestions for leader moves others might make to create a similar initiative on their campuses. This paper demonstrates how a compelling vision

and subsequent actions can bring a community together to catalyze significant movement towards change.

In another invited commentary, Rios provides a cautionary tale of how an effective Office of Public Scholarship and Engagement (PSE) that was driving significant change could be easily dismantled when **contexts** such as *leadership and governance, fiscal resources, culture, politics, and externalities* are not appropriately acknowledged and attended to with respect to mission-critical units, even when those units are successful. While the Office was fully formed and led by a campus administrator, it was not fully integrated into the structure of the university, so it was vulnerable to the shifting tides of the contexts mentioned above. As the PSE leader (Rios) saw new executive leaders begin to focus on fiscal constraints and looming deficits, he turned to **change-leader moves** in the *political* category to align PSE with the new financial context. A **lever** used in this case with the university's Carnegie Reclassification process. While using this lever within the backdrop of purposefully trying to position PSE in a more institutionally powerful position initially worked, it was unable to overcome the new leader's influence and focus on other priorities. PSE had symbolic and emerging administrative power and was working to align itself with new institutional priorities (the Innovation District). However, when federal directives decreasing research funding (*externalities* context category) occurred, the institution faced too large a deficit to sustain PSE as well as other new initiatives. The appointment of new leaders represents an exciting time for an institution, but one lesson in this story is that new leaders, especially in these challenging times, need to exercise caution when launching new initiatives without thoughtful attention to existing mission-aligned programs that are working well. If these programs are in fact mission-aligned and success, prudence might suggest that a new leader focus on **change leader moves** in the category of *preparing for success over the long-term*, or in other words sustainability of such units, instead of redirecting precious resources to new initiatives. Attending to the contexts of culture and human capital and capacity early in a new leader's tenure may help them understand what gems they have to polish up before they go mining for new ones. In the end, that will create a more stable and sustainable pathway forward. This article serves as a useful case study for both new and seasoned leaders on how to navigate the complexities of contexts and focus on long-term success that will benefit the institution in the long run.

Taken together, I hope you can see how these leaders leveraged community engagement in their contexts to make strategic leader moves that catalyzed significant and substantive change, as well as how change can be thwarted if leaders do not pay thoughtful attention to contexts (both existing and emerging) and the change leader move category of *preparing for success over the long term*.

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