

WHAT WORKS - A PKAL ESSAY

LEADERS: LESSONS LEARNED

The new PKAL national steering committee, together with PKAL staff and other advisors, met in Philadelphia in late March, 2004 to explore the leadership dimension of revitalizing undergraduate STEM education. Lessons learned from the individual experiences of members of the steering committee were examined from the perspective of establishing a more comprehensive and intentional focus on leadership development within the portfolio of PKAL activities 2004 – 2006.

This is a challenging undertaking, one that will require the engagement of many beyond this small initial group, including presidents, deans, and other senior administrators, faculty with a wide range of scholarly interests, and other stakeholders.

A beginning point for shaping the new PKAL agenda is the “lessons learned” from this leadership group as reported to PKAL.

Leadership Skills

- ♦ *Asking questions.* One of the skills that is overlooked is the ability to ask questions that are probing and meaningful, but not threatening or accusatory. A person can lead by the questions they ask as they establish expectations of others. Questioning can also be a process that leads to involvement of others, becoming a form of communication that becomes more shared than a simple set of declarative sentences. With a reputation for asking probing questions, a leader can set expectations for meetings, and signal that he or she is interested in the work at hand.
- ♦ *Broadening the support base.* Step-by-step broadening of the support base for change can be accomplished by involving more and more people in the discussion as the various perspectives on the change are determined. Therefore, the pact of that broadening is critical. Too fast and people don't see their perspective as being part of the effort. Too slow and the momentum is lost. Each organization and issues has its proper pace; find it and change succeeds. Miss the pace and face more problems without any improvements.
- ♦ *Having the ability to secure resources.* Champions are necessary to get innovations off the ground. Cheerleaders and champions are not the same. Champions know where the resources are and how to secure and use them, know where and how to lend support. (Cheerleaders can be great motivators, but may not have access to resources.)

From the March 2004 PKAL Steering Committee Meeting at Bryn Mawr College/Villanova Conference Center



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- ♦ *Realizing the difference between the political and the personal.* When working through the enormously complicated challenges of specific institutional reforms, the political is not personal. Sometimes so-called political stances have deep roots in interest, commitments to existing programs, and principles different than one's own. To convert legitimate differences into personal differences erodes civility and collegiality. It is important to look for and acknowledge the specific agendas and concerns that people bring to the table in discussing potential new directions.
- ♦ *Understanding budgets.* Strategic planning must be aligned with budgetary planning. Planning to implement a vision requires attention to vision and budget at the same time.
- ♦ *Understanding one's role.* It is important to understand what role you would like to play, and could best play, in the process of change. Becoming a leader does not necessarily mean one has to be out in front banging the drum. Further, realizing the value of listening gives one the opportunity to step back and understand what is going on before proposing personal solutions to the task at hand.
- ♦ Revitalizing undergraduate STEM is a complex problem. To paraphrase H.L. Mencken: for every complex problem, there is a simple solution, and it is wrong. While institutions, both local and national play a role, changes that "stick" are carried out in reality by academic departments, energized by faculty leadership and collegiality, in a complex interplay that recognizes and understands local missions and local constraints while keeping an eye on high standards set by the national STEM community. ■



Alison Morrison-Shetlar with the Vision task force : Interdisciplinary



Robert Megginson reporting on the Vision task force: Science for all

- ♦ Change is not sustainable unless and until it is seen as advancing the work and goals of the vast majority of stakeholders. (Doing no harm is not sufficient.) Further, the future benefits of the new initiative must manifestly justify the reallocating of existing and future resources. Basically, the change has to be, or become, what everyone wanted to do anyway, even if they didn't know it at first.
- ♦ One of the most important lessons I've learned is the fragility of the enterprise of academic reform. To institutionalize change in a sustainable manner, there needs to be systemic change at many different levels. Change begins at the student-teacher interface, but has to be nurtured by leadership at the departmental and institutional level, and then encouraged by larger policy structures. If any of the linked components fail, the sustainability can be rapidly attenuated.



Ishrat Khan and the Vision task force: Technology-intensive



Elizabeth McCormack and the Vision task force: Research-rich

LEADERS: LESSONS LEARNED

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LEADERS: LESSONS LEARNED

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Legend

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