Finding Proof in the Pudding: The Viability of Reform in Higher Education

Much of the folklore about the pace and scope of reform in higher education remains suspended between two equally dismissive poles: between “it isn’t necessary” and “it can’t be done.” But in reality, sustained reform on college and university campuses is becoming prevalent and purposeful. Change is everywhere—in the classroom, across the curriculum, and in the ways that faculty define their roles and approach their tasks.

The proof lies in a competition initiated in 1996 by The Pew Charitable Trusts: the Pew Leadership Award for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education. The tenor of reform is reflected both in the achievements of the three winners—Alverno College, Portland State University, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI)—and in the efforts of the 45 nominated baccalaureate institutions that submitted portfolios to the competition.

This issue of The Landscape focuses on the characteristics and achievements of the nominated colleges and universities, as well as on the changes implemented by the three award-winning institutions. More than simply changing curricula and administrative structures, what the winners shared most was success in changing their campus cultures—transforming both the way faculty work and the ways in which teaching and learning are valued—all without distorting their missions or purposes.

Portrait

The Pew Leadership Award recognizes baccalaureate institutions that have taken substantial steps to revitalize their operations and to improve the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning. Winning institutions qualify for a direct grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to expand their reform efforts and to mentor other colleges and universities seeking their own renewal.

During the first round of competition last year, The Pew Charitable Trusts received nominations for 60 institutions, 45 of which submitted the required portfolio of documents (existing plans and accomplishments) on which the competition was based. Chart 1 depicts the geographic distribution of these 45 institutions by type. The number as well as the range of nominated institutions—public and private, sectarian and non-sectarian, small and large, liberal arts and specialized, coed and single-sex, research and comprehensive universities from every region of the country—is one indication that higher education has in fact gotten the message: institutional success in the future requires institutional renewal in the present.

The portfolios of evidence documented accomplishments in three key areas:

• **Curriculum Redesign.** Candidate institutions were asked to demonstrate progress in redesigning the undergraduate curriculum to reflect the needs of today’s students and society. Frequently cited examples included the introduction of new curricula whose outcomes stress the importance of student learning and acquired competencies.

• **Faculty Roles and Responsibilities.** Candidate institutions were asked to demonstrate efforts to support faculty in the full range of their roles, including expect-
tions of increased accountability for the quality of their performance. Frequently cited examples included new systems for evaluating and rewarding faculty performance; support for the integration of teaching, research, and service; and incentives to promote faculty collaboration across the institution.

- **Resource Reallocation.** Candidate institutions were asked to demonstrate their capacity to invest savings derived from organizational streamlining in the strengthening of undergraduate programs and services. Frequently cited examples included budgetary reallocations and targeted investments in institutional priorities, including learning technologies.

In order to select 12 semifinalists and then six finalists, the portfolios were reviewed by a jury chaired by Frank Doyle, former executive vice president of General Electric, that included Warren Bennis, professor at the University of Southern California; Colby Chandler, retired chairman and CEO of Eastman Kodak; Wilhelmina R. Delco, former state representative in the Texas legislature; Patricia Schroeder, former U.S. congresswoman from Colorado; and Thomas Sobol, professor at Columbia University.

The six finalist institutions received site visits, after which the jury nominated three winners, which were affirmed by the board of The Pew Charitable Trusts in late September. The winners were introduced to the public at an October 10th luncheon held in Washington, DC.

**Focus**

The specific achievements of the nominated institutions reflect the broad reach of educational renewal now evident across American higher education (Chart 2). A majority of the institutions had developed new teaching and learning paradigms. Among the most frequently cited pedagogical innovations were collaborative learning, computer-enhanced instruction, competency-based evaluation, and service learning.

In addition, nearly one institution in six cited the implementation of a writing-across-the-curriculum program. A large proportion of the candidates had begun to rethink the purpose and content of general education. Nearly one-quarter of the schools had introduced new, interdisciplinary majors. Finally, a variety of institutions had explored service learning, having consulted with business and industry as they reshaped their academic programs.

A majority of the institutions specifically cited their faculties’ active engagement in restructuring. A large proportion
of the institutions had created new faculty development opportunities, and many cited the creation of a teaching laboratory to help faculty improve their teaching skills and master new instructional technologies. At a number of the institutions, tenure policies have been modified to include language about the importance of teaching excellence.

Innovation in fiscal management for a large number of institutions included making changes in organizational structure to solve budgetary problems or to free up funds for academic initiatives. These institutions frequently employed new technologies to improve administrative functions and reduced middle-management positions. Several institutions also have introduced variations on Total Quality Management.

**Perspective**

Given the breadth and depth of reform efforts at all 45 candidate institutions, what made a winner? On the surface, the three winning institutions—Alverno, Portland State, and RPI—could not have been more different. One is located on the East Coast, one on the West Coast, and one in the Midwest; one is small, one is medium-sized, and one is fairly large; one is a women’s college, the other two are coeducational; one serves a primarily residential, traditional-aged student body, the others have sizable, non-traditional commuter populations; one is a comprehensive public university, one is a major private research institution with a strong reputation for engineering and technical education, and one is a Catholic liberal arts college.

For all these differences, the three winners are also characterized by striking similarities—similarities that contributed to their strong showing in the competition for the Pew Leadership Award. Each institution could cite a well-conceived and well-articulated vision that drives its renewal process and a clear sense of who its students are, what they expect from a postsecondary education, and what their future employers expect of the educational process. (See Chart 3 for a brief overview of their reform programs.)

Each of the winners was able to adopt a holistic approach to educational renewal. Emerging from a series of experiments and pilots, their renewal efforts were comprehensive, addressing the general education needs of their students as well as investing in more advanced and integrative activities. Each in its own way was committed to refreshing and revising what, when, and how students learn. They understood as well the need to document what their students had learned.

Each institution is characterized by extraordinary leadership. Although differing in style, the presidents and chief academic officers of the three award-winning schools practice a philosophy of leadership that is at once collegial and decisive. By directing modest resources toward promising activities and major resources toward those that prove workable, they encouraged their faculties and staffs to engage in purposeful experimentation. The presidents, in particular, have forged strong relationships with their boards, with their communities, and with the businesses and organizations that hire their students and benefit from their research.

In each of these institutions, leaders...
freed up through internal reallocations.

Finally, faculty energy and commitment to the renewal process had become a hallmark of all three institutions. It was the faculty who shifted attention away from a faculty/teaching culture toward one that stresses students/learning. There was a parallel willingness on the part of faculty to assess their own effectiveness, to embrace new technologies, and to value research about teaching in the same way they value research within their disciplines. Increasingly, across each of these campuses, cross-disciplinary conversations have fostered an understanding of the connections that can knit a campus together.

It was the award presentation itself that marked just how far the process of reform has come. The keynote speaker, Colorado’s Governor Roy Romer, spiced his mix of congratulations with wonderment at how long it had taken higher education to understand the urgency of reform. He was especially skeptical of the perspicuity of faculty, who too often dismiss reform as a fad to be endured.

Governor Romer’s speech was followed by remarks by the presidents of the three winning institutions, each with the same message for the former chair of the Education Commission of the States: “There is no reform without faculty.”

Indeed, in their institutions, the faculty “owned” the reform process. Though these presidents each employed different styles to accomplish their ends, they each found ways to empower their faculties—to make reform itself a commitment to faculty autonomy and scholarly excellence.

There is an important footnote to this competition. In considering each candidate, the jury was never informed of the number of times each institution had been nominated. It subsequently learned that the three “winners” were in fact the three most nominated institutions in the competition. In retrospect, what is clear is just how well the enterprise as a whole understands which institutions are leaders in renewal efforts—that the proof was already in the pudding.

### Chart 3
**The Winners: An Overview**

**Alverno College**
Alverno College principally serves first-generation college students from the working-class neighborhoods of Milwaukee. Its goal is to produce skilled and poised graduates who are effective employees and good citizens. Alverno College’s pioneering and much-admired assessment-based learning approach—which requires students to move through a series of mastery levels in areas such as written communication, public speaking, and critical thinking—continues to be reviewed and revised by the faculty to ensure its currency.

**Portland State University**
Portland State University, whose largely adult and part-time student body struggles to stay in school, is having success with its newly implemented “University Studies” program, which is interdisciplinary in nature and team-taught. As an urban university, Portland State is launching service-learning opportunities for all of its students as part of a capstone experience that benefits both the students and the community.

**Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI)**
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) has responded to the need to provide a better, but less costly, basic science and engineering education to its students. In RPI’s studio course approach, computer technology allows students both to collaborate and to take greater responsibility for their own learning. At the same time, the faculty member’s role shifts from that of lecturer to that of lecturer/tutor/guide. This reexamining of modes of teaching is combined with a fresh look at content across the curriculum and is intended to prepare students to be flexible in a rapidly changing work environment.