

## **Resistance to Change at Colleges**

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and education.

Today's topic is Resistance to Change at Colleges.

Our speaker today is Brian Rosenberg who was President of Macalester College for 17 years and is now a visiting professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

Brian has a new book entitled "*Whatever It Is, I'm Against It*": *Resistance to Change in Higher Education*.

I want to learn from Brian about why colleges cannot adapt. Why schools have been so slow to move resources away from the humanities to STEM programs where students' interests are increasing. Does doing research improve teaching? Should tenured professors who are poor teachers be put out to pasture? And can colleges change their governance to be more like the private sector where the buck stops with its president and board of trustees instead of the faculty?

Buckle up!

Brian can you please begin with your opening six-minute remarks with a discussion about your new book I'm Against it.

Brian Rosenberg:

Every college mission statement includes a word like transformation or transformative. Why is an industry that is populated by so many people who would describe themselves as progressive so averse to changing itself? Why is higher education probably the industry in the United States that has changed the least in the last century? It seems like a paradox.

It could not simply be attributed to bad actors. People who went into higher education wanted to serve their students, but they could not change the way things were done.

If someone who went to college a century ago walked into a classroom today, the technology would be different, but the fundamental activities would not be. The resistance to change cannot lie in individuals but in deeply embedded cultures. What I tried to look at in the book are the cultures and structures within higher education that have prevented it from changing.

A few key factors, one is reputation in higher education that will motivate organizations to improve their reputation. Reputations in higher education are incredibly sticky. The same schools that were at the top of the US News Rankings when they began in the 1980s are still at the top. And that is true in virtually no other industry. If you are going to stay at the top, regardless of what you do, and if you cannot get to the top regardless of what you do, you lose a fundamental motivation to change.

The actors within higher education who have the power to change things do not have the incentive. And the people who have the incentive to change things do not have the power. And what you end up with stasis.

I looked at the division into various departments, shared governance as a way of making decisions and tenure. I was grabbing a third rail in higher education, but that was part of my intention in the book. The division of colleges and universities into departments creates institutions that are more like all-star teams than teams. And the way the best teams' function when people act for the good of the whole team. All-star teams do not tend to be particularly good teams. Colleges and universities are collections of individuals and departments that tend not to think institutionally.

Shared governance is another third rail. Consensus and innovation are in fundamental tension. Colleges and universities largely make decisions on a consensus model. They have lots of constituencies with different opinions. You make decisions that are the least objectionable to the largest number of people, which means things that are generally watered down and not significant. And it's why most college strategic plans are not very good.

Tenure may be the ultimate third rail. If people have a guarantee of employment for the rest of their career, a major incentive to change goes away.

Larry Bernstein:

In chapter one of your book, you reference a paper by David Figlio and Morty Shapiro. These scholars evaluated teaching quality for professors of Intro classes by comparing student grades in the second semester classes. Figlio and Shapiro found that the tenured faculty performance was the same as adjuncts. Some tenured faculty were terrible teachers.

Brian Rosenberg:

Faculty members are not trained in graduate school to be a good teacher. You are trained in graduate school to be a researcher. There are a lot of good teachers, and it is miraculous because they become good teachers without training or incentives.

Larry Bernstein:

Does the administration have a duty to prevent tenured faculty members from teaching who do a poor job?

Brian Rosenberg:

You have to keep paying them—they have a guaranteed job for life.

There have been instances in my career where the situation has gotten so dire where we have paid people to do nothing. If the harm to students was clear enough, we paid people to do nothing by giving them a very, very generous early retirement package, or in some cases paying them for three or four years not to teach.

Larry Bernstein:

Universities prefer that the faculty do research and teach because supposedly doing research improves teaching quality. But if that is inaccurate, why not split the tasks where the best teachers teach, and the best researchers do research?

Brian Rosenberg:

I wrote the book because these institutions are incapable of making changes on that scale. How would you even begin to work a change like that? Here is what would happen. Let's say Morty Shapiro tried to make that change and say, we've got all these tenured faculty members who on the basis of evidence is incompetent in the classroom. We are pulling you guys out and we're going to hire a whole bunch of adjuncts who are full-time teachers to take your place in the classroom. There would be a vote of no confidence in Morty Shapiro.

A president who tried to do that would never survive. Northwestern is a very wealthy school. Maybe they could afford it, but most schools cannot. You must pay these people. Anybody that you bring in to take their place in the classroom is an add-on. It's just going to add to your budget, and most schools simply can't afford to do that.

Larry Bernstein:

College governance is complicated. There are so many interested parties. There are the tenured and adjunct faculty, staff, students (current, future, and past.) They are the donors, the community, the trustees, and the president. How do you thread the needle to get change?

Brian Rosenberg:

The best way to understand the way colleges and universities make decisions is to think about your city government, which most people would complain about and say nothing ever gets done. And the reasons are not dissimilar. You have a president, you have a mayor, you have faculty, you have a city council, you have employees, you have zoning boards. And in both cases, you

have unions. When you have so many different groups, which do not agree with one another, it's almost impossible to get to decision making that is either timely or good. And you get either stasis or incremental change.

I have been at two different institutions that wrestled with eliminating a department on the basis of lack of student interest and economic pressure. In one case, we made a recommendation to the provost that the faculty had to be reduced by 10 positions.

The provost then made the decision. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth as you'd expect from students, from faculty. But the reality is within a couple of years it was done, and it was beneficial to the health of the institution. In the second case at Macalester, the elimination of any department required a vote of the full faculty, and we never eliminated anything. In my 17 years at the college, we tried several times and were unsuccessful. The first process had faculty input, but more centralized decision-making. The second process decentralized. So, we have to distinguish between input and where the power ultimately to make the decisions lies. If we give everybody around a college campus a vote, we are not going to get good decisions.

Larry Bernstein:

In the business world, there is a hierarchy, and someone is responsible. If the firm loses money, that guy gets fired. Businesses go bust. There are costs and consequences to decisions, and if you make bad decisions, you got to go. But, in any hierarchy to get the team to do what you want requires persuasion.

The point of your book is that they are against it. The governance structure at American colleges cannot get past the inertia frictions embedded in the institution. Should colleges adopt governance structures like the private sector to make change happen?

Brian Rosenberg:

The governance system should be closer to the private sector. For a long time in higher education, there have not been direct consequences to bad decisions. Unlike in business where you can make decisions about who you hire, who you do not hire, you have no levers to pull when you are talking about tenured faculty. There are not consequences for bad decisions other than a salary freeze for a year.

If tenure exists, you could never have a system that mirrors a private sector system because there is no private sector that has a comparable guarantee of employment.

It does not give people much incentive to respond to powerful pressures from outside. I cannot tell you the number of presidents that I speak to who are at struggling institutions, and some of them I've coached who say, our enrollment has gone from 5,000 to 2,800. We are running a

structural deficit that's 15% of our budget. Demographics in our area are terrible unless we make a change in the programs we offer and the cost of our programs, we are not going to be around in a decade, and they cannot get support from their faculty. What happens? The school goes bust. It is death by a thousand cuts. Colleges are like zombies. They are hard to kill, so they do not die quickly.

You are beginning to see more colleges close, particularly in New England and the Midwest where the demographics are the worst. It is inevitable. The market is going to have to right size itself. We have more colleges than the demographics of the United States suggests we need right now unless we start serving different populations of students. More colleges could survive and thrive if they were willing to make changes that would bend their cost curve and would serve different and broader populations.

Larry Bernstein:

How did the University of West Virginia eliminate some of its departments?

Brian Rosenberg:

West Virginia was able to make the cuts because they are a public university that had strong support from their board and their legislature and in Gordon Ghee, an unusually powerful president.

The University of West Virginia, they are losing money and the demographics in their state are awful. They cannot continue to spend as much money; that is indisputable. Cutting the president's salary is not an answer because it is not going to address the scale of the deficit.

Larry Bernstein:

There has been an enormous shift away from the humanities to STEM and computer science. Can colleges adapt?

Brian Rosenberg:

There was a piece in the New Yorker in which a Harvard student was quoted as saying the language of Harvard is statistics. What has happened in the social sciences over the last couple of decades is that they have become increasingly quantitative and data-driven, more aligned with the sciences than the humanities.

Stanford is a branch of Silicon Valley. But they do have a responsibility even for those students who are going into tech and computing to introduce them to other things. I am on the board of the Teagle Foundation, and we give grants to schools that are interested in creating humanities core courses for students, and Stanford is piloting a humanities core course right now. The goal is to make this required for all incoming Stanford students, and it is basically a great books course.

Larry Bernstein:

Jesse Jackson led a march at Stanford. "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go," That ended Stanford's Western Civilization requirement, and now you want to reintroduce it?

Brian Rosenberg:

The reading lists in core courses are not going to look like the reading lists 30 or 40 years ago. That is completely appropriate. On the one hand, do not want to just focus on what people would call dead white males. On the other hand, you do not want to not read them because they are dead white males. It is totally appropriate in the same course to read Plato and Tony Morrison. There is a good book by a faculty member at Columbia named Roosevelt Montes called Rescuing Socrates. He is a first-generation immigrant student who ended up on a scholarship, went to Columbia and reading the classics changed his life.

You cannot change a system unless you understand its roots. And by not reading those texts, you are making it harder for those students to succeed and to accomplish the things they want to accomplish.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book you mentioned that when you were studying at Columbia for a PhD in English that you could not take a class in your area of study. I attended Penn, and I just looked at the current English course offerings and it seems like they offer a hodgepodge of topics that would not be of interest to me.

Brian Rosenberg:

You tend to see more of what you describe at places like Penn and Columbia than you would at-

Larry Bernstein:

Northern Illinois.

Brian Rosenberg:

Yeah. There is a particular tendency toward those kinds of courses at elite institutions. The curricula, particularly in the humanities, tend to be driven by the interests of the faculty more than by the perceived needs of the students. It is a mistake, but you find courses that are less interesting to students. It is undeniable that the shift in the humanities what is taught has been one of the factors that has driven students away. When I was a graduate student at Columbia, I was interested in reading romantic poets. I was not interested in reading Derrida and Foucault. I did not go to graduate school in English to read incomprehensible critical theory. I took a course on Shelley and Byron, and we barely read any Shelley and Byron. I never was able to take

a course on Dickens, who I wrote my dissertation on. It was driven by that is what the faculty were interested in.

Larry Bernstein:

Students want to take courses in STEM and computer science, but the tenured faculty are trained in other subjects like the humanities. How can colleges change the composition of its faculty to meet the demand?

Brian Rosenberg:

It is very, very difficult. Colleges are relying increasingly on non-tenure track, part-time adjunct faculty who they bring in to teach the courses where the students are enrolling because they cannot afford to have the tenured faculty in under-enrolled departments. If you are a dean, a non-tenure track position is infinitely more attractive to you than a tenure track position because it gives you that flexibility. If you do not need that position in two years, then you can eliminate that position. But it's the only way to eliminate tenured positions and not find yourself embroiled in years of litigation is if you eliminate a whole department, a whole program. If you decide you want fewer professors in German, the only way to eliminate tenured professors is to eliminate the German department or declare a financial exigency, which no school wants to do because that is basically saying to the public, we are about to go out of business. That is one of the reasons why you see places like West Virginia eliminating whole programs because you cannot prune tenured positions. I can tell you from experience to eliminate a tenured faculty member will end up costing you hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal expenses and take years, and the outcome will be highly uncertain.

Larry Bernstein:

Previously on this podcast, Zvi Galil spoke. He is the former Dean of Computing at Georgia Tech which is ranked in the top 8. Zvi started an online master's program that costs less than \$10,000 with over 10,000 active students. The master's degree and course work are the same as that is offered on campus. Is this the future of education?

Brian Rosenberg:

The outcome of online education right now depends on the population that it's serving. There is a lot of evidence that people who already have a college degree and are looking for another degree that are already experienced learners do well in online programs. Their persistence rate is good. Younger students in the more traditional 18 to 22-year-old range, particularly students who do not come from highly competitive high schools, tend to struggle a lot more with online education because they're not as experienced at being self-directed learners.

Places like Southern New Hampshire and Arizona State, the number of students who complete the degree is much lower than it needs to be. And the economic benefits of a degree only accrue

if you graduate. The trick in designing these programs is to design online programs for the less experienced learner that overcome some of these challenges.

I spent my entire career in traditional education. I believe in it. I love it. It is too expensive for most people. I would love for every student to be able to get a Macalester education. Macalester's comprehensive fee is over \$70,000 a year. Lots of students get financial aid. But even with financial aid, people in the middle class find it unobtainable. I would like every student to have that, it is simply not feasible. If your choice is the perfect or nothing, then I would rather have something as good as we can so that we can reach more people with higher education.

Technology is a key to doing that. Higher education has for too long viewed technology from a defensive position.

Larry Bernstein:

Why are colleges trying to get so many foreign students?

Brian Rosenberg:

While U.S. higher education should be primarily for U.S. students, U.S. students also need to have some familiarity with the rest of the world. Bringing in international students in general is a good thing.

A lot of schools are using international students as revenue generators, particularly students from China and India. What choice do they have? These schools would not survive without that revenue. The University of Washington was roundly criticized in the state because they had more students from outside the U.S. than from Washington State. And people would say, wait a second, you are our flagship state university. And their response was, the legislature is only contributing like 10% of our budget. We are the flagship state university, but you are not giving us any money, so we must get the money from somewhere and this is the place we can get it.

Larry Bernstein:

Why has there been a declining enrollment of men in college?

Brian Rosenberg:

That is a good and complicated question. At Macalester, we were pleased if we reached 40% men and 60% women. There are people who speculate that it begins in our early educational system where boys are by their nature tend to be more rambunctious and out of control. Boys seem to be acculturated early on into thinking that I am not good at this. The system is not for me. And to be good at this is to be a nerd. And somehow that seems to carry on all the way through high school into this perception of who college is for.



It may be the case that there are some professions that do not require college that pay well, like being a plumber or an electrician that skew much more toward men. Men see more options outside of college in professions that would require apprentice training.

Larry Bernstein:

The true all-in cost of education is confusing as are job opportunities and compensation for graduates with various majors and programs. The government requires transparency in pricing for auto lending and other financial decisions. Should colleges provide students sufficient information to help kids make major life decisions?

Brian Rosenberg:

We need better and clearer information for consumers that we have right now. An article by Ron Lieber in the Times in which I was quoted, “why is figuring out the cost of college so impossibly difficult?” Colleges don't really want you to see the reality because it's not very attractive. The government has begun to try to make the economic deal of college clearer to the consumer. The instruments are still crude. It is challenging because the economic payoff of a college degree begins to pay off in your mid-thirties. But we do not have that longitudinal data. Income one year out does not tell you a lot.

Larry Bernstein:

Brian, I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to higher education?

Brian Rosenberg:

Fixing it is hard. This is a quote from the founder of the African Leadership University, “that we have a responsibility to do hard things.” Higher education is not going anywhere. It is an essential social service. The demands of the market will force it to change in ways that are more aligned with what people need. It will change. We will get to see new and different ways of educating students. It is just going to take a while and probably take some disruption. I do not believe change is impossible. I just think it is hard.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Brian for joining us today.

If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Should Ukraine Sabotage Russian Infrastructure?

Our speaker was Hal Brands who is the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

Hal is the author of the book entitled *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*.

Hal discussed whether Ukraine's war effort success can push Putin to negotiate. Should Ukraine use sabotage to destroy Russian infrastructure like the critical Trans-Siberian Railroad and other soft targets to bring the war to Putin's home turf?

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Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.