THE CAMPAIGN APPROACH TO CHANGE
Targeting the University's Scarcest Resources

BY LARRY HIRSCHHORN AND LINDA MAY
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The scarcest resources in today's overloaded institutions of higher education are time and attention.

For change to happen, leaders need to get people's attention and active help. In this article we explore a "campaign" approach to organizational change that cuts through the clutter and mobilizes people around a strategic theme that has resonance and staying power. Campaigns work particularly well in colleges and universities, where authority is diffuse and windows for change are limited.

When is it the right time to organize a campaign? Some leaders may be looking for a functional alternative to strategic planning, while others have a specific problem or an idea—sometimes just an inkling—of a direction in which they want to take the college or university.

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Table 1.

**The Planning Process—Qualities and Traps**

- Define goals

Goals are definite and explicit and are drawn up before people know enough to know what they want

Energy tends to go into the document

Often hard to implement

Formal task forces

Inclusion based on representation

Reports, memos

Easy to block or debate it to death

“Think your way into new acting”

**The Campaign**

- Develop a strategic theme that mobilizes people

Theme invites interpretation and discovery

Energy goes into actions—pilots, probes, projects, events

Implementing is the only way to embody the strategy

Coalitions, grass-roots groups, new blood

Inclusion based on passion and interest

Press releases

Can move forward without agreement of all

“Act your way into new thinking”

**ROOT METAPHORS**

This approach draws on campaign metaphors from several walks of life:

- **Political**—Stay on message. Build coalitions. Capture events and venues. Set up a “war room” to plan strategy and direct volunteers. Define the opponent.

- **Advertising**—Dramatize the benefit. Hook the target emotionally. Simplify and focus.

- **Military**—Seek advantageous terrain. Pick beachheads carefully. Tend supply lines. Consolidate gains.

- **Public Health**—Target those around the real target. Encourage early adopters to spread the word.

- **Fund-raising**—Build a campaign chest before you go public. Develop a case for support. Manage momentum.

Admittedly, each metaphor has a dark side, and some will resonate more than others for particular projects or particular people. As with any metaphor, the value lies in using it as a window on fresh thinking.

**PLANNING VS. THE CAMPAIGN**

A campaign is more flexible and open-ended than traditional planning. It is opportunistic in its details, but strategic in its force. Campaigns require substantial and sustained planning; what they avoid is a focus on the plan as a document. While traditional planning may be right for many efforts, it is particularly susceptible to stalemate. The campaign approach, in contrast, can move forward without the agreement of all involved.

**HOW TO TELL IF A CAMPAIGN IS SUCCESSFUL**

A campaign is successful only if practices begin to change. An organization changes when people do things differently on the front line. All other changes—to systems, to incentives, to stated mission—are simply means to an end. Without changes in practice, these other initiatives lack substance.

**MINI-CASE STUDY:**

**“STUDENTS ACHIEVING”—A CAMPAIGN TO CHANGE THE WAY STUDENTS LEARN**

John Strassburger, president of Ursinus College, used the idea of a “campaign” to change the way the college’s faculty teach and students learn. The newly appointed president and his team framed a theme of “Students Achieving,” which focused attention on new ways students can show their mastery of a subject.

Higher education professionals have inherited a method of teaching based on lectures, exams, papers, and grades. To demonstrate competence, students must pass exams and write term papers. However, if we reframe mastery as the capacity to perform, to do something, then we need to develop a richer array of methods and venues for students to display their competence.

As many educators have suggested, such performances can take the form, for example, of publishing, participating
in research conferences, consulting to a social agency, exhibiting art, staging a play, designing a Web page, or developing a database. With these forms of achievement, people other than the professor—for example, journal editors or community leaders—evaluate the students’ performance.

Faced with the need to perform for a wider audience and thus experience greater risks and stakes, students master more skills. Similarly, faculty, who also feel accountable to these wider audiences, change their practices to ensure good student performance. With this focus on achievement, students will increasingly evaluate one another’s work, faculty will coach them on a broader range of skills (such as presentation and project management), and the classroom will take on the quality of a charette or studio where students and faculty together evaluate works in progress. Employers will consider evidence of such performances much more seriously than they would reported grades. Thus, the performances begin to speak for themselves.

Having settled on the theme of “Students Achieving,” Ursinus College deliberately chose not to use the conventional machinery of strategic planning—task forces with balanced representation and formal reports—to advance the concept. Those tools, Ursinus’s leaders felt, were limited because they require the development of comprehensive plans before people fully understand what it is they hope to accomplish.

Moreover, strategic planning draws its legitimacy from traditional participants, often precluding unsuspecting faculty and students who are actually changing their practice and could take up leadership roles in an effort to change teaching and learning. The “Students Achieving” campaign became influential not through exhortation but through activity. The president and his team launched a number of initiatives. They—

• Eliminated the summer school and compensated faculty for lost income by increasing their salaries. The goal was to create time for faculty to display their own mastery through publication, research, and other venues in the belief that you cannot increase student achievement unless you increase faculty achievement.

• Hosted a student research conference with sister colleges.

• Gave departments money to start student journals.

• Created summer fellowships for students to work on—on—one with faculty, who are paid to supervise the work. About 15 percent of the rising senior class currently receive these stipends to do scholarly work full-time for eight weeks in the summer before their senior year. The fellowships have created higher expectations among students and faculty about what is possible for undergraduates to achieve. They have been enormously attractive to prospective students and to donors.

• Launched an occasional-paper series to explore the new approaches to teaching and learning. These papers have been immensely popular with alumni and create a context in which the college can seek funds from alumni to support the learning initiatives.

In thinking about these initiatives as part of a “campaign,” the president and the people who work with him now view all events as opportunities to underline the key theme. Instead of creating new forums or venues, they piggyback on current ones. For example, the college now features student presentations on Homecoming and Parents’ Day. The college turned the customary “state of the university” convocation into a summer conference to showcase teaching innovations.

After two years of the campaign, the faculty voted overwhelmingly to institute a requirement that all students successfully complete some form of independent learning. The college made student achievement the focus of its reaccreditation, and the visiting team reported that what they found academically was “inspired” and “inspiring.”

FOUR ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN

An effective campaign has four overlapping elements:

1. “Listen In” to the Institution—to discover the emergent future.

2. Develop a Strategic Theme—to give direction to the campaign.

3. Sweep People In—to mobilize energies.

4. Build the Infrastructure—to make change possible.

In this article, we discuss each of the four elements. Sidebar examples show how universities have used campaigns in a range of ways.

“LISTEN IN” TO THE INSTITUTION

We call the first element of a campaign “listening in” to the institution because we believe that leaders need to step back at this point and actively open themselves to the future. A campaign is organized around a strategic theme—one that is as much discovered as invented. One theory of change says that the future is already here in bits and pieces—at the fringe, in the cracks, parasitic on old practices. You can shape the future by picking up on certain elements, channeling and directing them—but the raw material has to be there to shape. The important leadership skill is seeing the emergent in the present.

The first element of a campaign is the search for those pieces of the future that are already here. Your aim is to look for vivid, specific ways that external forces and trends are taking hold in your own institution.

Three ways to listen to your institution, outlined below, are particularly revealing, especially when triangulated as a check on each other.

• Found Pilots—Search out “found pilots,” projects and practices in which the future is showing up, perhaps among just a few leaders or even marginal people in out-of-the-way offices or labs. (For example, Arpanet, the cumbersome early network that connected a few of the nation’s research scientists, was a “found pilot” for the Internet.) Look for pockets of innovation. Ask yourself, What are the three or four most interesting things that have happened in the last year? Your initial ideas about what you want to accomplish will help you know where to look—but make a determined effort to widen your search and build in some randomness.

• Comings and Goings and Comings—Ask yourself who has recently joined the institution, how they are different from people who are already there, and what attracted them to the institution. Think also about people who have left or been marginalized: What about them seems incompatible with the institution? Think about new leaders: What is the message in their being selected, what new ideas are they trying out?

• Institutional Tensions—Often a context for innovation is established because an institution needs an answer to a ten-
sion or conflict that is blocking its development. Look for those tensions. Seek out newer, more dynamic tensions, not the institutionalized ones (such as “research vs. teaching”) that have already developed routines, rituals, and decision-making processes. Look particularly for those tensions that seem to cut across customary fault lines, creating strange bedfellows and unlikely alliances.

**MINI-CASE STUDY:**

**THE MATH EMPORIUM: THE FUTURE IS NOW**

Using a campaign to transform an institution, we come to appreciate that the future is now. We can learn to use the future’s appearances—in start-ups, initiatives, pilots, and informal associations—both as foretelling and as steppingstones into the future.

Consider the evolution of the Math Emporium at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). The emporium is a cavernous hall in a shopping center equipped with scores of pods, each with six work stations. The emporium is open 24 hours a day. When students come in they boot up a computer and turn to the section of calculus (or eleven other courses) they are studying. Faculty tutors, graduate students, and undergraduate peer experts are on the floor to help. Students signal that they need help by putting a large plastic cup upside down on their work station. Students can take an exam whenever they want, up to three times. Exams are generated from a large collection of problems drawn from each section of the curriculum.

While it is possible to imagine that the math department might some day create a “virtual emporium” where students sit in their dorms and call a help line, the faculty believe that face-to-face encounters in the physical emporium aid learning, especially for first-year undergraduates. Students profit from listening to other students asking questions, and students help one another. The question of the value of community in facilitating learning will no doubt continue to be debated and assessed.

The roots of the Math Emporium lie not in a purposeful decision to build it, but rather in incremental steps and decisions, all of which were in response to emergent forces in the environment. The story of the Math Emporium begins with the university’s information systems division. Eager to help faculty make the shift from mainframes to personal computers, administrators began the Faculty Development Institute (FDI) to introduce faculty to computer uses such as e-mail.

The institute focused first on liberal arts faculty who did not have computers. Each faculty member was required to try something new, such as creating a Web page or writing a tutorial. At the end of the institute session, each participant was given a personal computer. In retrospect, the most important part of the program seems to have been less the formal instruction and more the brainstorming on how to use computers in the classroom.

As a result of the institute sessions, several faculty members started a grass-roots group called the Cyberschool to support one another’s efforts in using computers in teaching. Math professors in the Cyberschool wrote a course management program they could wrap around commercially available software for teaching pre-calculus. This ap-

pealed to math faculty because they did not enjoy teaching this elementary material using traditional repetitive exercises. They were reinforced in their experiments by a national reform movement for teaching pre-calculus. Some faculty members also began to write software for teaching linear algebra, a course essential to the engineering curriculum.

At the same time, enrollment was projected to expand by some 1,600 students and the university would be hard pressed to find more classroom space or teachers. State funding was limited and state legislators were reluctant to spend money on buildings that might no longer be necessary after the baby boomlet made its way through the university.

By now, key sponsors of the Faculty Development Institute were convinced that the math department could deliver pre-calculus and linear algebra using computers, without building new classrooms. The squeeze on space intensified, and FDI sponsors suggested that the university lease an empty store in a shopping center. The Math Emporium was fitted with computers and the faculty began teaching calculus in this new setting. The math faculty evaluated the new method of instruction revealing perhaps the most important result—a significant drop in the number of failing grades.

The Math Emporium thus emerged from at least seven interacting forces, listed below. Its development highlights the law of networks or what complexity theorists call the process of “co-evolution.”

- The shift from mainframe to personal computers.
- An institute designed to introduce liberal arts faculty to computers.
- The birth of a grass-roots faculty group to help its members develop computer uses for the classroom.
- Math faculty members’ distaste for teaching pre-calculus math.
- Commercially available math software.
- An expansion in university enrollment.
- State legislators’ reluctance to fund new classrooms in a time of fiscal restraint.

The Math Emporium represented the work of many people taking risks and making commitments over a period of several years. The Faculty Development Institute and the Cyberschool were steps along the way to creating the Math Emporium.

**DEVELOP A STRATEGIC THEME**

Framing a strategic theme—based on what you have learned and where you want to go—is the second element of a successful campaign. The theme focuses the campaign and gives it direction. A good theme energizes and mobilizes people. Developing the theme involves careful listening to what is already in play. Listening helps you develop a theme that has resonance, one in which people see themselves. The “listening” element of a campaign and the theme-building element are iterative—something like a preacher giving a sermon and being particularly alive to what the congregation reflects back.

The initial framing of the campaign theme is likely to change after working with it for a while. In one university campaign, for example, the president started with the theme “Student Retention.” As he began to think from the point of view of the students, he changed it to “The Serious Student.” Eventually he honed the theme to the more active and inclusive “Taking Learning Seriously.” Similarly, the case de-
In advertising terms, the campaign theme is a dramatization of the benefit to the customer. It is the emotional hook that connects people to the benefit.

scribed in the first sidebar shows how Ursinus College was able to use the theme “Students Achieving” to rethink what mastery actually meant.

In advertising terms, the campaign theme is a dramatization of the benefit to the customer. It is the emotional hook that connects people to the benefit. In political terms, the campaign theme is simple but big: it generates all kinds of actions. “It’s the economy, stupid” was the unofficial version of the theme of Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign. People who were interested in children’s welfare, for example, could find a place for themselves in such a campaign, but so could people who were interested in tax incentives for small businesses. A theme, moreover, is not a “vision,” since you are still discovering, still exploring. A good theme is open-ended and inviting; it does not try to specify the end state.

Some of the best themes explode assumptions and resolve contradictions. You might think of them as “productive ignorance.” Examples are René Dubos’s “Think globally, act locally,” Marshall McLuhan’s “global village,” or a public TV station’s goal to produce shows for the “highest common denominator.” These themes derive their power from a promised breakthrough—from opening avenues you thought were blocked or suggesting resources you did not realize you had. They do this by exploding assumptions.

**Sweep People In**

With a strategic theme as a guiding framework, you are ready to begin sweeping people into your campaign. In this third element of a successful campaign, your goal is to capture and amplify energy: it is time to build coalitions and create an environment of inclusion. When people step forward to take up roles in the campaign, find places for them. Discover the natural leaders and give them venues.

As the sidebar case of the Math Emporium shows, for example, university leaders were able to sweep in a vital grass-roots faculty group interested in advancing the use of computers in teaching and learning. A campaign can capture the passion and energy of people who would never be involved in more formal planning processes—people on the front line who are already beginning to change practices.

Since the scarcest resources in today’s organizations are time and attention, for your campaign to succeed you will need to reorient people’s attention rather than always asking for more. To that end, two strategies are especially effective:

- **Piggyback on Existing Venues**—Like the advance person in a political campaign, you can be on the lookout for existing events that can be turned to your purposes. Are there ways to borrow parts of meetings, conferences, training workshops, or alumni events to make progress on your initiative?
- **Look for Found Pilots**—Look for projects, programs, events, or other activities that are already heading in the direction you want to go and figure out how to sweep them into the campaign. The reciprocity principle kicks in: you capture energy and momentum; the leader of the found pilot gains like-minded colleagues and a supporting infrastructure.

**MINI-CASE STUDY:**

**“FOUND PILOTS” ADVANCE CAMPAIGN**

The University of Pennsylvania applied the playful, can-do energy of pilots to a major change effort. A group of Penn faculty and administrators, aided by the Center for Applied Research, banded together to rethink the way computing support was delivered across the university. The result was a new division of labor between the schools and the central computing group, a rough model that is still emerging. Penn pushed, as part of the new model, for on-site computing support as close as possible to the people who need it. “A computing home for everyone” was the way the reformers put it.

The reformers turned people loose on pilot projects, each aimed at figuring out how to make a specific part of the new computing model work. Some of the pilots were specifically designed to test an aspect of the new model. For example, the group set a deadline to shut down the central help desk—directed the man who ran it to create a new “business” selling on-site support to schools and departments.

Other pilots could be called “found pilots,” since they swept in people already moving in the direction the reformers wanted to go. A relentlessly determined English professor, for example, was looking for ways to integrate residential life and academic life—living and learning—for undergraduates. He jumped at the chance to hitch to the new computing model his project that would have student “paramedics” do computer support in the dormitories.

“Found pilots” are enormously valuable for two reasons. First, they capture passion and energy that are already out there; you do not have to be the only one pumping energy into the system. Second, they “create” time, the scarcest resource in today’s overloaded organizations. By sweeping into your initiative a project that someone is already committed to doing, you keep from overloading the system and have a better chance of moving your initiative forward.

At Penn, the reformers did not sit around, however, and wait for the perfect found pilot to show up. They discovered ways to improve on nature. The zealot professor, for example, was an ideal person to sweep into the campaign because he would move heaven and earth to make things happen. Zealots, however, may lack organizational connections and may, in fact, be scornful of them. The reformers paired him, therefore, with a co-leader whose division would eventually have to run the program. The program became so successful that two years later it made the front page of the metropolitan Philadelphia newspaper.
Your job, throughout, is to mobilize allies, champions, stakeholders, and "skeptical friends." As public health campaigns have learned, these people should not be forced to make an all-or-nothing commitment (of time, energy, money, political capital). By accommodating a range of possible commitments, you can sweep far more people into the campaign. Once they get a taste, they are likely to want more.

**BUILD THE INFRASTRUCTURE**

The fourth element of a successful campaign is infrastructure. For all its grass-roots energy, a campaign does not just happen. It takes lots of planning and a substantial infrastructure to be able to jump on opportunities and accept people’s efforts and commitments. As with any major initiative, you will need support systems, incentives, and an architecture of participation. You also will need a communication plan, a life-cycle strategy, and sometimes, new revenue models. A skilled and experienced project manager is needed to look ahead and keep things moving and connected.

**MINI-CASE STUDY:**

**BEING PROJECT MANAGER WHEN NO ONE REPORTS TO YOU**

A campaign needs a strong project manager who can look ahead and keep things moving. In a campaign, however, efforts spring up all over the institution and almost no one is formally responsible to the project manager. How, then, can the project manager make things happen and get people to do what needs to be done?

The University of Pennsylvania campaign described in the earlier sidebar made good use, for example, of the four incentives below: credit, competition, reciprocity, and fear of embarrassment. In the Penn campaign, a group of reformers set out to create a new model of computing support across the university.

- **Credit as Coin of the Realm**—The project manager bent over backward to give credit and to do it publicly. Regular e-mail updates to a growing set of participants and fellow travelers, for example, were loaded with news about specific individuals and groups. The project manager made sure the faculty co-chair of the project gave credit where credit was due, supplying him with “cheat sheets” for public occasions. And a well-publicized Web site showcased people’s efforts. These quick, public, interweaving strokes of credit helped make people be willing to put in the effort.

- **Competition**—By setting up friendly competition, the project was able to use groups’ efforts to goad each other. Early in the process of developing a new model of computing support, “rival” work groups each explored a particular model for presenting to colleagues, with pros and cons. No one wanted to be the group that did a sloppy job.

- **Reciprocity**—Other work groups were structured to deliver “products” to each other—analysis or reconnaissance, for example. Later, heads of pilot projects, each meant to test and further develop a particular part of the new model, found they were counting on each other to make their own pieces work. The project manager fanned the obligations of reciprocity by publicizing handoffs and exchanges.

**MINI-CASE STUDY:**

**AN INITIATIVES MAP—MAKING PROJECT STRUCTURE VISIBLE**

Some campaigns are more structured than others, but every campaign has an underlying framework, a strategic armature. Literally drawing a picture of that...
### Chart 1.

**It Takes All Four Elements ...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Strategic Theme</th>
<th>Sweeping People In</th>
<th>Infrastructure</th>
<th>Failure Modes</th>
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<td>Social engineering</td>
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<td>Opportunism, diffusion of effort</td>
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<td>(if missing)</td>
<td>Loss of momentum, encapsulated innovation</td>
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**... to Make an Effective Campaign**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Strategic Theme</th>
<th>Sweeping People In</th>
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<th>Success</th>
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<td>“An offer you can’t refuse”</td>
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A campaign requires an explicit, yet opportunistic, communication strategy. You will need to capture people’s attention; weave together the pilots, probes, and events of the campaign and communicate their force and intent. With thoughtful and insistent framing, a collection of activities can become an initiative. Advertising and public health campaigns suggest ideas for a communication infrastructure:

- **Issue Press Releases**—Instead of memos and reports, consider a strategy of quick and continuous “press releases,” with emphasis on news and stories from the field.
- **Segment the Market**—Define the target audiences and design messages that make sense to each.
- **Make the Personal More Obvious**—In public health campaigns, the individual’s benefit and “society’s” benefit sometimes clash. (Family planning campaigns falter in some countries because parents see children as their support in old age.) In word and deed, therefore, find ways to demonstrate the value to the individual.
- **Create Incentives**—Incentives, because they redirect people’s attention, are one of the most powerful communication strategies at your disposal. Financial incentives might include seed money and matching funds. Think like a venture capitalist so you put your money on events and pilots that will give a good return on investment.

Finally, but also from the very beginning, you will need to think about consolidating gains and moving from campaign to mainstream. How can you help pilots and probes think beyond proof of concept to a steady state? What is the handoff strategy for moving various parts of the campaign into the authority structure? What new revenue models, staffing, or information sources will be needed?

**All Four Elements**

As Chart 1 suggests, each of the four elements of a campaign is necessary—“listening in” to the institution, developing a strategic theme, sweeping people in, and building the infrastructure. When all four are present, a campaign—at its best—is an “offer you can’t refuse.”