

THE RISE OF THE CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING CHANGE ON CAMPUSES

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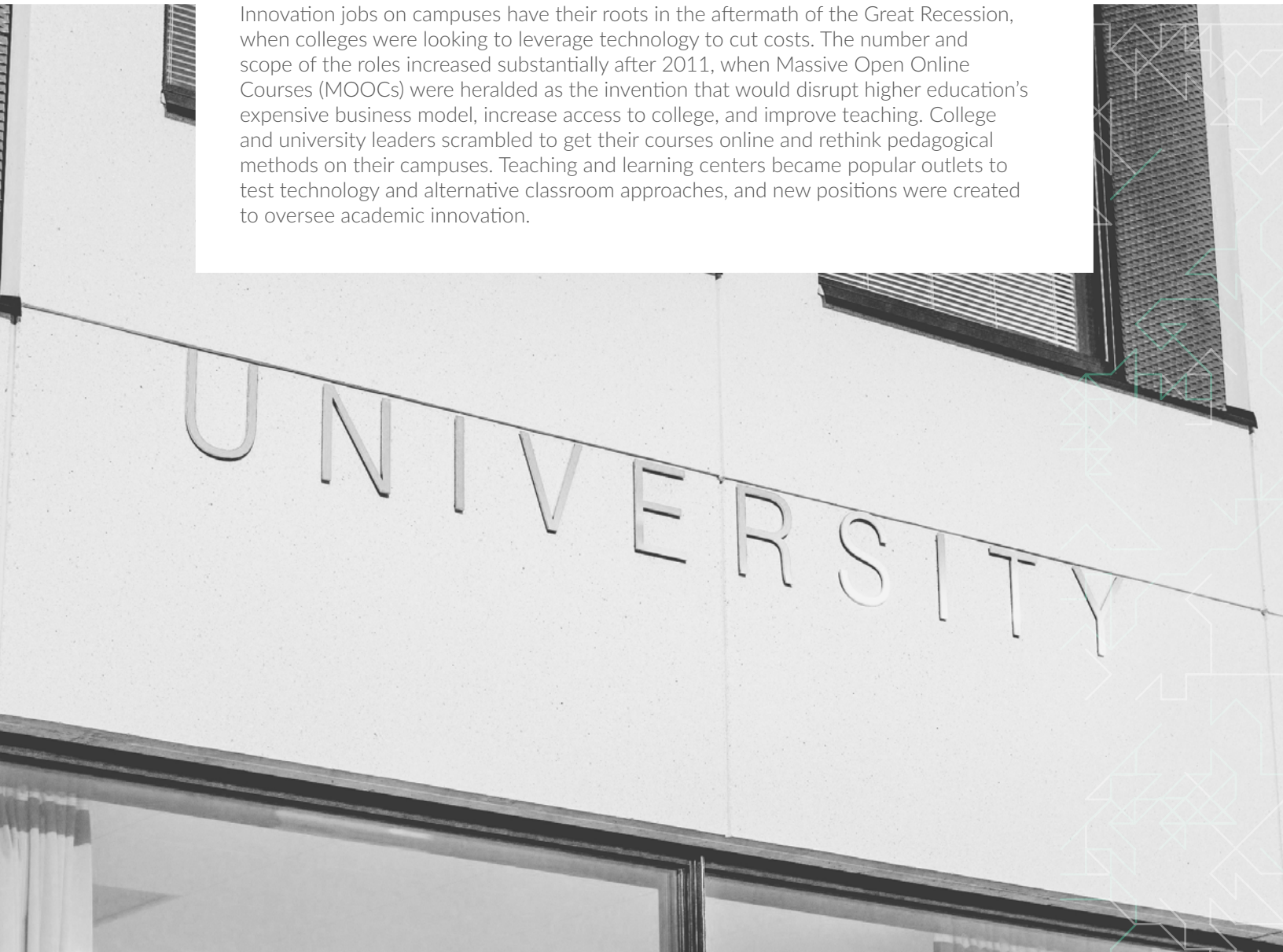
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Look at the titles of any of the annual association meetings or their individual sessions these days and it's likely you'll see the word "innovation" featured prominently. That's because innovation is everywhere across higher education.

Colleges and universities are increasingly reflecting the trend by creating formal innovation roles—under the provost's office, within information technology departments, or as free-standing C-suite positions. More than 200 institutions now have senior roles with words such as "innovation" or "digital" in their title, and another 200 schools have online learning roles that are often connected to broader academic innovation efforts, according to our research. At one point in the fall of 2017, a search of online job advertisements showed that more than two dozen institutions were looking to fill top innovation roles.

Innovation jobs on campuses have their roots in the aftermath of the Great Recession, when colleges were looking to leverage technology to cut costs. The number and scope of the roles increased substantially after 2011, when Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were heralded as the invention that would disrupt higher education's expensive business model, increase access to college, and improve teaching. College and university leaders scrambled to get their courses online and rethink pedagogical methods on their campuses. Teaching and learning centers became popular outlets to test technology and alternative classroom approaches, and new positions were created to oversee academic innovation.



INSTITUTIONS ARE MOBILIZING LIKE NEVER BEFORE TO SHAPE WHAT THE FUTURE LOOKS LIKE FOR BOTH LEARNERS AND THEIR CAMPUSES

With MOOCs no longer grabbing the breathless headlines they once did, perhaps their greatest legacy is that they changed the conversation on campuses about how colleges could become more agile yet remain committed to their mission and shared governance. “The discussions elevated teaching innovation in ways they didn’t before, and that is allowing new ideas to blossom,” said Chris Dellarocas, associate provost for digital learning and innovation at Boston University.

Interviews with more than a dozen innovation officers in higher education, from all types and sizes of institutions, illustrate that colleges and universities are still in the early days of defining these new jobs on campuses. The roles and responsibilities of innovation jobs are as diverse as the institutions and the people who hold the positions.

These individuals “really need to have their fingers in a lot of pots” said MJ Bishop, the inaugural director of the University System of Maryland’s Center for Academic Innovation. “They need to be collaborating with student and academic affairs about student success, with CFOs [chief financial officers] about the ROI [return on investment] for innovation, and with technology around the data analytics piece.” What’s more, Bishop added, “it’s about change management and empowering folks on campuses to help their institutions.”



Given the speed and depth of changes swirling around higher education—including demographic, technological, financial, and political—institutions are mobilizing like never before to shape what the future looks like for both learners and their campuses. They are looking for strategies where new educational approaches are encouraged and where pathways exist to pilot those ideas. This paper attempts to inform those discussions. It is focused on *why* campuses need to consider fashioning a role that oversees innovation and *how* such a role can be integrated into the legacy governance structures of higher education.

WHY A CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER? WHY NOW?

It's not that higher-education institutions are not sites of innovation. Too often the problem is that innovative ideas take hold in a corner of campus—within a specific school or department—and rarely spread to the rest of the institution or beyond. Innovation happens from the bottom up, at the edges of the organization, and usually in ad-hoc ways. As a result, innovative ideas turn into boutique programs that are typically identified and mostly owned by specific individuals.

This is why colleges need a chief innovation officer, someone who can coordinate disparate projects from across campus and build a systems approach to change management. This is not to say that innovation must only happen from the top down, but rather having someone tasked with overseeing innovation is designed to improve on current models. And in a day and age when college leaders are concerned about administrative bloat, the actual title doesn't matter as much as the duties of the person holding the job. Among those key responsibilities:



1.

Help faculty, administrators, and staff look up and out. The diverse and complex challenges facing higher education today require leaders to look outside of their institutions for new solutions and innovations, yet most are “heads down” in their jobs, just trying to keep up with daily demands. When they do look up and search for solutions elsewhere, they are likely to call their counterparts at other institutions for advice or hunt for ideas at conferences. Someone tasked with leading innovation on campuses can curate and make sense of the deluge of information showering down on campuses, as well as analyze market trends, create an inventory of innovative practices from inside and outside of academia, and look ahead for potential disruptions to higher education's model.

2.

Generate and build momentum for ideas and develop an innovative mindset within the campus community.

Enabling change on campus requires both time for acceptance and buy-in from different constituencies. If innovation is one of many duties of a senior leader, it will usually fall to the bottom as daily operations take precedence. A chief innovation officer has the bandwidth to sort through ideas and surface the best ones, but also needs the stature to bring together various players on campus to gather support, make needed changes, and develop a mechanism to bring the projects to fruition.

3.

Develop processes for innovation.

Most institutions follow a traditional playbook to solving problems by appointing committees that might take months, or even years, to find solutions to problems. Someone charged with innovation can help facilitate a different process that allows for speed and constant iteration of new ideas and where the entire campus community is invited to contribute to an open and collaborative design process. Not everyone on campus must be trained as a “design thinker,” but a chief innovation officer can help shift the mindset and build a more innovative culture.

4.

Connect with partners and funders outside of the institution. Most institutions are not big enough or wealthy enough to pursue broad-based innovation on their own. Think of this role in higher education as akin to the business development job in the corporate sector—someone who makes connections between people and organizations and then shepherds formal agreements through the university bureaucracy. This person can also partner with the development office on campus to help shape the stories of innovation to outside funders in order to garner financial support for individual projects.



5.

Administer seed funding and “release time” for promising projects. Ideas often need money or people to move forward. A separate budget for innovation allows for funding inventive projects outside of the normal funding structures. This is especially helpful on the growing number of campuses with decentralized budget models, where some individual schools within a university have outsized power given their ability to generate revenue. A centralized innovation function with a separate seed fund levels the playing field across the institution and provides a mechanism to distribute money or provide “release time” for faculty to pursue their ideas.

6.

Give “air cover” for innovation. Although risk taking is often encouraged in academic research, professors typically play it safe in their teaching and pedagogical practices. Academics are sometimes uncomfortable navigating the ambiguity of institutional decision-making and prefer to stay with known approaches rather than move the organization forward without guarantees of success. Innovators need safe spaces to practice their ideas and to pivot when necessary without fear of being belittled by colleagues or punished professionally within the institution. A formal innovation office can provide such a safe space and infrastructure to support new activities without getting derailed by faculty and administrators who want to maintain the status quo.

7.

Act as the external spokesperson for innovation. Universities can be leaders in the innovation space by sharing their processes and projects more widely among colleagues at conferences and by telling their stories to donors, alumni, the media, and other outside stakeholders. This requires someone who has the time to interact with external audiences and who is well versed in the innovative practices of the university.

INNOVATORS NEED SAFE SPACES TO PRACTICE THEIR IDEAS



BUILDING AN INNOVATIVE CULTURE

Beyond the specific functions of the chief innovation officer, the structure of the role and how it fits into the hierarchy of the institution is critical, according to interviews with current innovation officers. My research has surfaced three approaches for integrating this role into a college's leadership to ensure maximum benefit:

- The **skunkworks/autonomous-entity strategy**, which houses innovations in a separate unit, often off campus.
- The **internal consultancy**, which sees itself as both a service unit and a thought partner.
- The **integrated strategy**, which builds an innovative structure within an academic unit, typically the provost's office.

THE SKUNKWORKS/AUTONOMOUS-ENTITY STRATEGY

A common thread in my interviews with innovation officers was the immense challenges that change efforts face in navigating faculty resistance and the lack of well-established pathways for testing programs. Without an internal culture that promotes educational innovation, it is likely such efforts will fail.

Developing ideas in separate units, typically housed off campus in academic incubators, allows the innovation process to occur without the interference or pressures of the traditional institutional culture. It also means pilot projects can start outside of the normal governance structure of the university and get going more quickly by avoiding the normal delays associated with committees and faculty senates.

When universities adopt this approach to innovation they typically assign campus-based faculty and staff to the external units on a temporary, per-project basis. The result is an agile workforce, willing to take risks, knowing that if an experiment fails they have the safety of their old job waiting for them.

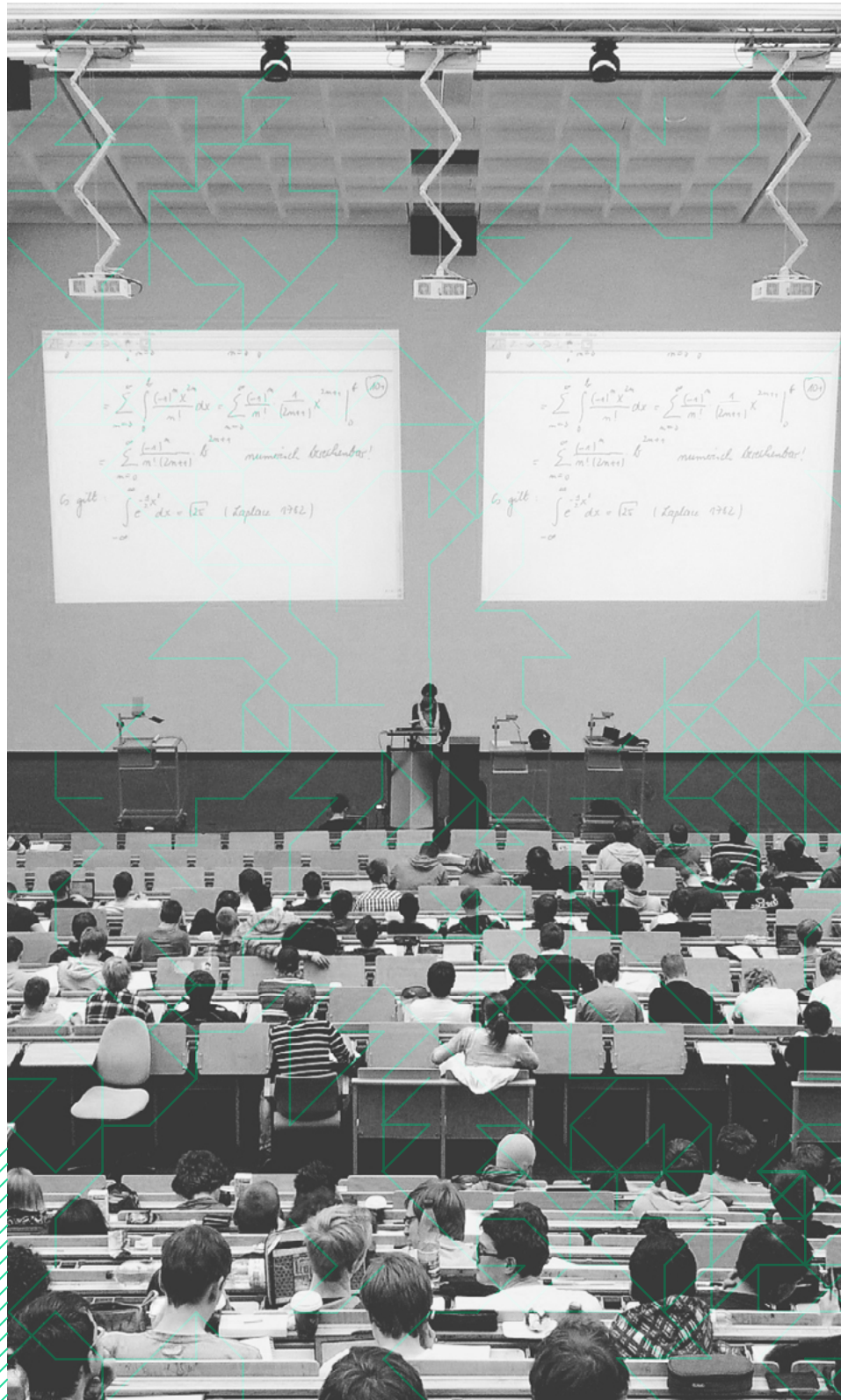
This Skunkworks/Autonomous-Entity Strategy is the model followed by some of the most best-known innovative universities, including Southern New Hampshire University and Arizona State University. When Southern New Hampshire started building its competency-based program, College for America, it did so not within the confines of its traditional residential campus on the banks of the Merrimack River, but a few miles away in an office building in downtown Manchester.

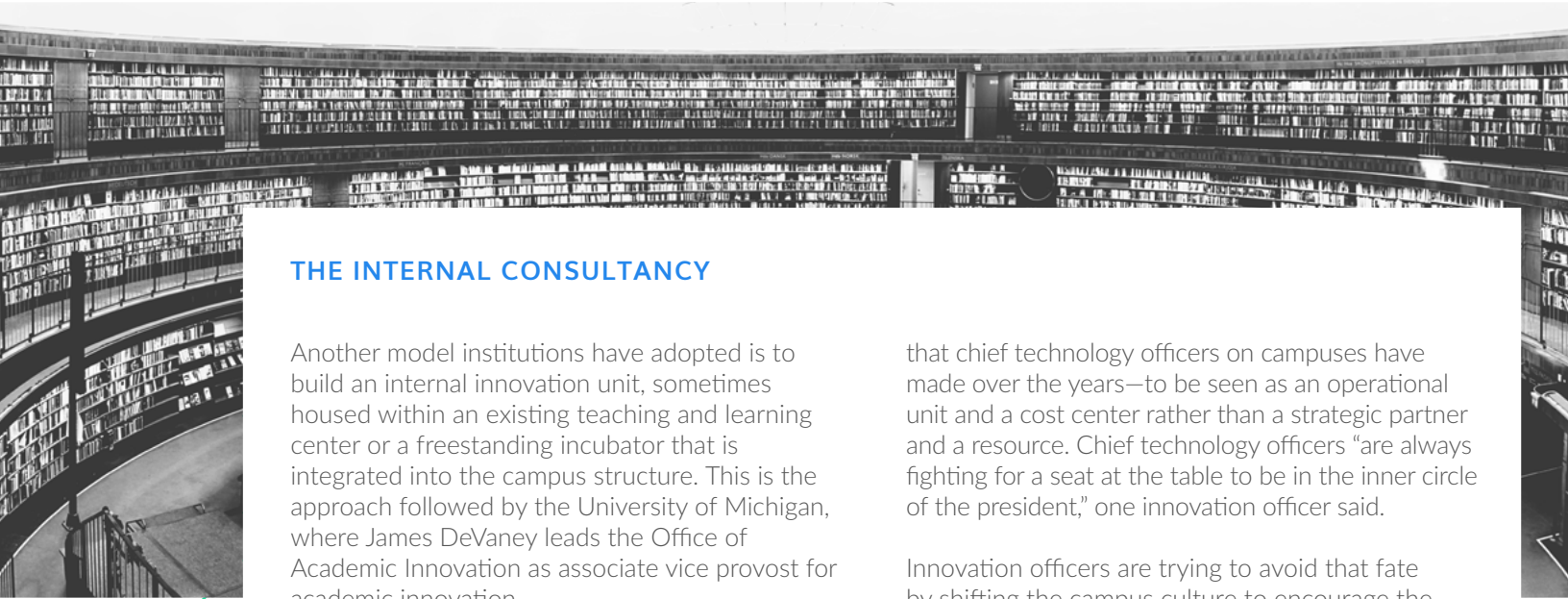


Ditto for Arizona State University when it developed a partnership with Starbucks to offer employees the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree for free. It designed the program and now runs it through a separate innovation unit, known as EdPlus and housed in SkySong, a business park off campus. (One of the most interesting examples of this model is at one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious institutions, Georgetown University, which calls its incubator the "red house," for its headquarters in a tiny clapboard home located just steps from the campus quad.)

Often these external innovation structures are seen as an end-run around campus governance. But many experiments developed inside incubator units do eventually go through centralized governance if they have plans to scale across the institution. A few innovation officers told me that the problem with shared governance as it is practiced in most of higher education is that decision-making is not well outlined with clear roles and rights. "Faculty choose to participate in some decisions, and ignore others," one university innovation officer told me. "It's completely ad hoc and depends on how much they care."

Academic incubators are only effective, said Maryland's MJ Bishop, when there is someone back on campus to integrate the project into the daily life of campus and expand it across the institution. "Ideas fail when no one is on the other end to receive that ball," she said. So it is critical for universities to develop processes to receive the handoff and make it clear to campus leaders about the importance of building on the innovations developed in the incubators.





THE INTERNAL CONSULTANCY

Another model institutions have adopted is to build an internal innovation unit, sometimes housed within an existing teaching and learning center or a freestanding incubator that is integrated into the campus structure. This is the approach followed by the University of Michigan, where James DeVaney leads the Office of Academic Innovation as associate vice provost for academic innovation.

DeVaney came to Michigan in 2014 from Huron Consulting Group, where he spent nine years as a consultant and co-founded the firm's global education and digital education practices. In that way, DeVaney's background is unusual among the group of innovation officers I interviewed. Most came up through the academic ranks and told me that their academic chops are critical in getting buy-in from faculty at their institutions. DeVaney told me that hasn't been a problem for him in Ann Arbor, in part because faculty and deans don't necessarily need to go through his unit to develop their projects and because his group is seen as a partner rather than a supervisor (it also helps that DeVaney earned his three degrees in Ann Arbor).

"There is a question that I got early on—are you a thought partner or a service unit?" DeVaney said. "That's a false tradeoff. We are thought partners earned through exemplary service."

This is also the model followed by Boston University, which like Michigan is vast and decentralized with 17 schools and colleges. BU has created a Digital Education Incubator as one of the units within its innovation office to be a catalyst, sponsor, and a co-developer of experiments and pilots. "We now have more than 40 projects either completed or ongoing," said Dellarocas, the university's associate provost (for a complete list, go to <https://digital.bu.edu/projects>).

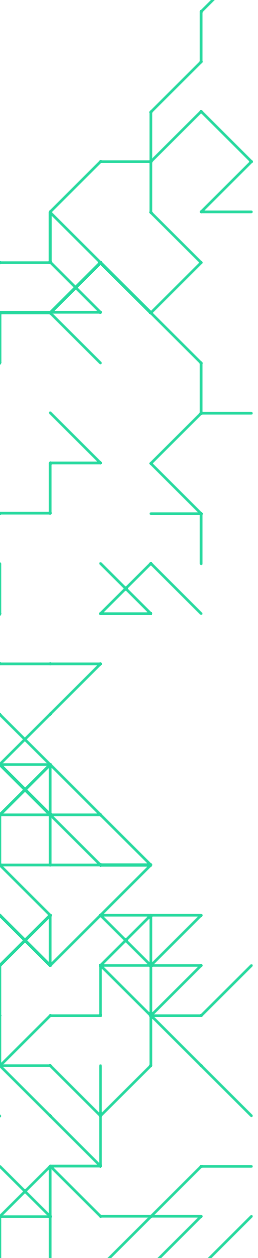
Indeed, several innovation officers told me they don't want to make the same mistake they believe

that chief technology officers on campuses have made over the years—to be seen as an operational unit and a cost center rather than a strategic partner and a resource. Chief technology officers "are always fighting for a seat at the table to be in the inner circle of the president," one innovation officer said.

Innovation officers are trying to avoid that fate by shifting the campus culture to encourage the creation and adoption of new ideas. "The CIO (chief information officer) is always trying to sell us on the next shiny object and cost us more money" said one associate provost in charge of innovation. "Innovation officers who do this right move in more incremental ways knowing this is a long road to change the campus culture."

At Michigan, DeVaney has succeeded in moving the university down that road. He has 50 full-time employees in his unit including learning experience designers, software developers, behavioral scientists, and data scientists. Initially, "we went around campus to pull ideas from faculty." Now, he added, "there is a healthy mix of ideas coming from within and a sense of urgency to them and eagerness to embrace an academic R&D mindset across our colleges and schools."

At a decentralized place like the University of Michigan, with 19 schools some the size of entire institutions, a centralized, on-campus innovation unit like DeVaney leads is critical. Otherwise, leaders of individual units have little incentive to act in the interest of another school if an idea doesn't benefit them directly. Like with the Skunkworks/Autonomous-Entity Strategy, the benefits of the Internal Consultancy Strategy depend largely on an institution's culture and is a good alternative to the external incubator if officials believe that approach will be nonstarter with faculty and if their ambitions are to work within the institution, not to create disruptive innovations apart from it.



THE INTEGRATED STRATEGY

This strategy is a spin-off of the previous approach and offers a good alternative, particularly for small colleges, where it would be difficult to stand up an entire unit like Michigan has done.

Take Keuka College, a small liberal-arts college with 1,800 students in upstate New York. Tim Sellers is associate provost for academic innovation, a new title at the institution, where he also oversees the library, education technology, online learning, and institutional effectiveness. Few institutions have been under as much pressure to change in recent years as small liberal-arts colleges, especially those that are tuition dependent in rural areas. “You need to have a North Star, and mine is how do we differentiate ourselves by enhancing learning,” Sellers said.

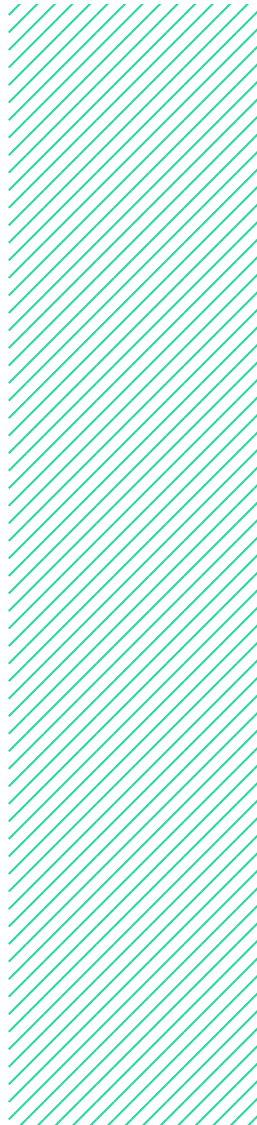
Unlike Michigan, Sellers doesn't have a stable of employees to work on new projects. Rather, he encourages innovation on campus by encouraging risk taking. “By me being at a high level and coming in there and telling them to experiment, it gives faculty latitude that they wouldn't have with the typical organizational structure.”

Under the Integrated Strategy, innovation is a piece of a larger portfolio of a top administrator, usually in the provost's office. The co-dependence with other functions helps those

charged with innovation drive change through their direct reports and where they have control over budgets. “You cannot be just a leader of ideas,” said Susana Rivera-Mills, vice provost for academic programs and learning innovation at Oregon State University “You have to be a leader who can operationalize them and make people accountable for results.”

One potential problem with the Integrated Strategy, and to an extent, the Internal Consultancy, is that like campuses as a whole, the innovation practices risk getting stuck in a silo. When innovation is seen as an academic exercise, those in student affairs or financial affairs rarely participate. Indeed, many of the innovation officers I interviewed told me they have little interaction with student or financial affairs, although much of the innovation that must happen in higher education needs to include both constituencies. Student affairs, for example, is critical to improving retention and graduation rates, so it's important for institutions not to replicate structures that encourage the segregation of ideas when designing innovation efforts.

“We've built central capacity to encourage and enable academic innovation and turn our research mindset on ourselves,” DeVaney said. “But our model only reaches its potential when we create fit-for-purpose partnerships with academic and administrative units to strengthen our innovation ecosystem.”



In many ways, the rise of the chief innovation officer on campuses is reminiscent of the rise of the chief global officer or the chief diversity officer. Those positions came to prominence on campuses in the last decade as institutions tried to project an international view to recruit foreign students and seem more inclusive as the demographics of prospective students shifted. Although many of those positions have succeeded on campuses, others failed when top administrators didn't give them the resources or the exposure they needed.

The same is true of chief innovation officers. Just because a college or university has a chief innovation officer doesn't make it an innovative institution. Innovation is a process and unless higher-education institutions are willing to invest the time and effort in change management to make themselves more deliberate in their innovator's mindset, all the innovation title at the top management structure will produce are complaints from the faculty about administrative bloat. Although innovation offices on campuses are as diverse as higher education as a whole and take on the culture of their own institutions, they do share a few common attributes: a commitment to mission, an iterative process, comfort in ambiguity, and a bias for action.





AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jeff Selingo is a Senior Strategist at Entangled Solutions. He has written about higher education for two decades. He is the author of three books, the newest of which, "There Is Life After College: What Parents and Students Should Know About Navigating School to Prepare for the Jobs of Tomorrow" (HarperCollins, 2016), is a New York Times bestseller.

Named one of LinkedIn's "must-know influencers" of 2016, Jeff is a regular contributor to The Washington Post, a special advisor and professor of practice at Arizona State University, and a visiting scholar at Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities.

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CHOOSING A CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER

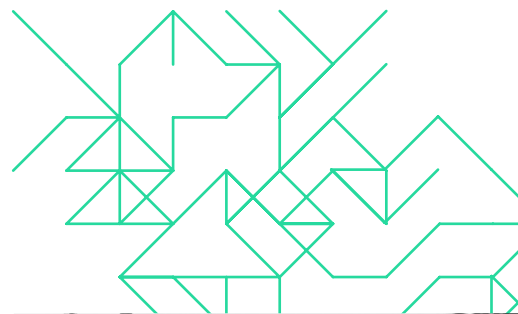
Before selecting a chief innovation officer, it is important first to gain clarity around the why—what's the purpose of having one on your campus; the how—how the person will accomplish their objectives; and the what—what are the role's responsibilities. To do that, it is important to decide which of the three strategies—Skunkworks/Autonomous Entity, Internal Consultancy, Integrated, or some combination of all of these—is right for your campus. Each of these models requires a chief innovation officer with a different purview and skillsets.

The Skunkworks/Autonomous-Entity model, for example, requires a chief innovation officer that can operate with a high degree of autonomy, possesses an exceptional external network, and has the clout and trust of the senior leadership team on-campus. The Internal Consultancy model benefits from having someone as chief innovation officer who has experience managing a consulting operation. And the Integrated approach requires an individual with exceptional skill in working with the faculty.

Equally important is gaining clarity around what type of support will the chief innovation officer have. What will the president, provost, and other senior leadership's role with innovation be? What will the chief innovation officer's team look like? What internal and external resources they will have access to? What do they need to be successful? A common complaint from chief innovation officers without full teams is that their work can be isolating.

Having clarity around these decisions and more is critical for properly defining the role of the chief innovation officer, selecting the right person, and getting the most impact out of your investment.

Not sure where to start? Entangled is happy to talk about your campus' unique needs and discuss options to build a strategy that maximizes your new commitment and investment in innovation. Contact us at innovation@entangled.solutions.



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