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Moving at the Speed of Academe

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By John Kilbourne

Last year I met with a former student whom I had mentored during his early years in college. Today he is the founder and chief executive of one of the largest and most successful fitness-and-wellness programs for children in the world. As many children practice his programs as watch the popular television program *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

During our meeting he shared with me the speed at which his company acts and responds to ever-changing trends in technology, business markets, and health and fitness. He said, "John, if I have an idea on Friday, we implement it on Monday." Sadly, I shared my frustration at being, in higher education, on the opposite end of that continuum. I replied to him by saying, "If I have an idea on Friday, I consider myself lucky to have it approved by the first of what might be three separate committees during the first year."

The importance of my friend's comments came into clearer focus shortly afterward with the attention given to the death of the Apple co-founder, visionary, and entrepreneur, Steve Jobs. It seems that much of Mr. Jobs's success was a result of what co-workers at Apple called his "reality distortion field," or RDF.

The RDF was Jobs's intense enthusiasm for convincing others that the task at hand was doable, often within very short periods of time. What's more, much of the current literature on the best ways to prepare college students for careers shows that taking risks, thinking creatively, and moving swiftly are key, affirming Mr. Jobs's formula.

It is unfortunate that many colleges, which are charged with preparing the next generation of entrepreneurs and innovators, embrace a culture of time-consuming, unhurried progress when it comes to curriculum, personnel, and governance. Nowhere is this more evident than in their committee structures.

For example, at my university, to make any changes to existing courses, propose new courses, or make program changes, faculty must navigate through three separate curriculum committees. Too often the members of such committees have zero connection to the subject area or content of the

proposals under consideration, yet they are free to voice their concerns, objections, disapproval, or approval.

A few years ago, I proposed content changes in a course I teach that is required of all majors in my department, to reflect current trends and practices in the field. The changes I proposed were the result of my consulting with several department faculty members over an entire semester.

After my home department's curriculum committee approved the changes, and after I received the support of the department faculty, the proposal went to the college curriculum committee. It took nearly a year for that committee to approve it. It then moved to the university curriculum committee, where it was approved and sent on to the provost for final approval.

The entire process took nearly three years of time and effort—time I feel would have been much better spent on what I and others do best: teaching, providing meaningful service, and contributing to our fields of study. By the time the course received final approval and was ready to appear in the university catalog, I had to revise it again to keep up with recent changes in research and scholarship.

As a professor, I often feel that I live a divided life. On one side of the divide I am engaged with students in and out of class, sharing with them information from a rapidly changing world, hoping to keep them up to date and informed so that they might somehow use this information to follow and achieve their dreams. On the other side of the divide, I face a world consumed with sluggishness, personified by committees and committee structures at the department, college, and university levels.

At my university there have been several actions in my department—curriculum proposals, sabbatical applications, contract renewals, tenure and promotion decisions—that were unanimously approved by the department faculty only to be denied or rejected by a college committee. One rejection letter said, "While your current proposal has not been approved, we do encourage you to revise, strengthen, and resubmit a proposal for the following academic year."

The following year! One entire year gone, and the efforts of the department faculty wasted.

What's to be done? Colleges can bridge the divide and promote more efficient use of people and resources by putting greater trust in faculty at the department or unit level. After all, these are the people who know the subjects and content best. Let's work to remove the unreality distortion field of higher education. If faculty have an idea on Friday, let them put it into effect on Monday.

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