

FRIDAY, JULY 18, 2014

Understanding Innovation at the System and School Levels

By [MJ Bishop](#)

Director of the Center for Academic Innovation, University System of Maryland

The following interview is with MJ Bishop, director of the Center for Academic Innovation with the University System of Maryland. Innovation is top of mind for administrators across the higher education space, but in the public system, the roles of systems and institutions in achieving this change become a little cloudier. In this interview, Bishop shared her thoughts on where their respective roles and responsibilities lie, and discusses the similarities in the innovative vision of both institutions and systems.

1. From a university system perspective, what does innovation mean?

As is the case with most public university systems across the country, our overarching goal is college completion. From our perspective, innovation is really focused on increasing access, affordability and quality of the educational experience in order to find ways to remove barriers to that college completion goal. Of course, the prevailing view is then that these three missions tend to be fundamentally in conflict — that



While the end goal of innovation is similar for systems and institutions, their roles in achieving this end are related, but different.

you can't increase access without reducing quality; you can't increase quality without also increasing cost.

Recent developments on two fronts promise to help us break free from that iron triangle and present opportunities for innovation to help us complete our college completion goals.

On one hand, we have these tremendous advances in the cognitive sciences that are providing really interesting new insights into how people learn and

[allowing] us the opportunities to create innovations around effective pedagogical models, learning environments and so forth.

On the other hand, we have all these amazing new emerging technologies in terms of the Internet, [and] the understandings we're starting to gleam from big data, intelligent software and lots of other very sophisticated tools that are going to make it possible to implement these new pedagogical models and learning environments.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Understanding Innovation at the System and School Levels

CONTINUED FROM LAST PAGE

2. Following on this, how does the understanding of innovation at the system level differ from innovation at an institutional level?

I don't think they're very different. Innovation at the system level is still about finding a better way of doing things, just as it is at the institutional level, but what's really critical about system-led initiatives aimed at fostering innovation is evidence. We have seen this time and time again at the University System of Maryland: that we want to be sure we look before we leap, that it's really critically important to understand whether or not an innovation shows promise to create positive outcomes. Innovation is actually in and of itself a value-neutral term. It's neither good nor bad, so it's up to us to first determine whether we should move forward with these things before trying to scale up or sustain those reforms.

3. In terms of creating sustainable innovation and change, how do the approaches of an individual institution differ from that of a system?

The basic model for sustaining innovation is the same but there are things we can do at the system level that institutions can't accomplish as easily on their own. For example, there are system-wide and state-wide policies that can get in the way of innovative practice. Some of the policies we have in place currently with regard to allowing online education into our states are beginning to get in the way of some of these innovations. We have

faculty workload reports that have to be done for the state legislature that are based on older models of thinking about the kind of work faculty do that can get in the way of innovation. Those are things that are very difficult for institutions in and of themselves to affect change. When they can turn to the system for help in those areas, we can help actually clear the path for them.

Lately, I've been thinking about change driven from the system and from a center like the one I'm directing as being like the catcher at the front of the train — that it's my job to clear the path for the institutional efforts so they can get the job done that they need to do.

4. What are the biggest roadblocks to innovation when you're looking at the system level and trying to implement a wider strategy across an entire system?

I've gone back and visited some of the sustainability models that we see in areas like biology, ecology and economic development, suggesting that sustainable change is going to require a balance between economic, environmental and social growth in order to ensure desirable outcomes.

There are some parallels there for what we're doing in higher education that we need to be really aware of, both in terms of the barriers that we present and the opportunities they present.

We have this notion of the economic piece being this discussion we've been having about learning productivity: how do we increase learning quality at a lower cost? We've been focusing a lot of our

efforts there over the last several years on initiatives like course redesign and a lot of the other online initiatives we've seen across the country.

There's been less discussion about those other two pieces in sustainability models, which is the environmental piece and the policy or people piece of this. In terms of the environmental piece, we have an awful lot of facilities and huge investments in our institutions and facilities that may not necessarily be conducive to new pedagogical models. We're going to have to address some of these issues, both in terms of real and virtual spaces.

I would argue that the people piece — that's where the policy issues lay. We're also going to need to begin thinking more about building better and stronger learning communities and engaging in innovations that will elect us to break down some of the barriers that exist in that piece of transformation work as well.

This interview has been edited for length.

Key Takeaways

- When it comes to innovation, the system's role is to try to create wider collaboration and to push for major changes at the state level that allow institutions to innovate.
- Innovation both at the system and institutional level is geared toward achieving the goals of increased access, affordability and quality.