



Creating a Problem-Solving Organization

Author : Mike Smith

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Engines *of*
Innovation
THE
ENTREPRENEURIAL
UNIVERSITY
IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
Holden Thorp &
Buck Goldstein



Chancellor Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein, Carolina's entrepreneur in residence, recently had an interesting piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "[How to Create a Problem-Solving Institution](#)". It is drawn from their new book, [Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century](#). The book is on my reading list, but in the meantime I recommend the article and its thought-provoking implications for our work at the School.

The article begins by making the point that "[b]ig, complex problems require the work of multidisciplinary teams." At our future search planning conference in 1995, public officials told us that their greatest problems required a broader mix of expertise from the School—they argued that their challenges would not be addressed by our continuing to focus so disproportionately on law. Our recognition of that basic truth has caused the School to expand faculty expertise far beyond law—community economic development, public technology, program evaluation, productivity improvement, community problem solving and collaboration, public dispute resolution, environmental finance, public leadership and governance, and other related fields. At the same time, however, we continue to believe that law is critically important—it is foundational. Now that we have assembled much of the necessary expertise to help North Carolina officials, it is fair to ask whether we have created the conditions required for those disciplines to work effectively together.

Holden and Buck identify academic silos as an obvious impediment to organizing multidisciplinary



teams, and they argue that “[t]he conventional responses are fundamentally flawed.” They are exactly right. The tendency is to create permanent new structures and to reorganize existing academic units. Instead, their main thesis is that we should “[f]ocus on culture, not structure.” The School is fortunate not to have rigid departmental structures that make it hard for colleagues from different fields to work together. Our structures take the form of more flexible centers and programs that encourage collaboration across different areas of faculty expertise—like the Environmental Finance Center and the Judicial College. The Applied Public Policy Assistance Network (APPAN) will be designed to bring faculty together as needed across disciplines to address policy questions (more about this initiative next week).

The School’s own silos exist primarily because we define much of our work by client groups rather than subject-matter areas. By focusing so much time and energy on client groups—teaching, advising, and writing—a person has less time for collaboration on broader, multidisciplinary projects that do not serve the clearly-defined needs of those clients. Let me be clear about two points. The client focus has been effective and I am not suggesting that we abandon it, and it has not prevented faculty members from participating occasionally in broader programs and projects that extend beyond their clients.

The question is whether we can create a culture within the School that encourages more collaborative work on projects that cut across multiple fields and multiple clients. It is a question that we will confront squarely as we implement the Applied Public Policy Assistance Network.

We are making progress. The strategic planning implementation committee that has revised our courses in the areas of budget, finance, and taxation is a good example. They are creating a unified curriculum that emphasizes subject matter rather than continuing a separate curriculum for each client group. The result is greater efficiency for faculty and clients, and it may free up some faculty time for other activities. The strategic public leadership implementation committee is reaching across the School to involve faculty from different fields in their work with local governments. The report from the APPAN implementation committee makes it clear that we must encourage faculty and others to work on policy issues that will not necessarily be defined in terms of particular client groups.

What else can we do to strengthen the culture of collaboration at the School, especially when that collaboration cuts across multiple client groups? How do we become more focused on problems and less client focused? Can shifting that focus free time to work on multidisciplinary problems? According to Holden and Buck, “Creating the right culture and the right team with the expertise, resources, and passion to tackle a problem will certainly have greater impact than arguing about developmental structures” No question. I am committed to creating a culture that is focused on helping public officials address North Carolina’s greatest challenges. What else needs to be done to continue promoting that kind of culture?



Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein