

The Myth of Faculty Resistance to Change

Pamela Downe, Professor

Department of Anthropology

As a faculty member in my thirty-second year at the University of Saskatchewan – and having served in various leadership roles as well as a member of more committees than I care to recall – there is one refrain that I have encountered perhaps more than most: Faculty are obstacles to change. Most recently, that refrain appeared in Paul Bloom’s *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, “Why Professors Fear the Future.” That piece has finally pushed this old camel past her back-breaking point. It is time to talk back.

Writing from his position at the University of Toronto, but primarily referencing American institutions, Bloom (2026) argues that professors are “conservative” in William F. Buckley’s sense: those who stand athwart history, yelling “Stop.” He suggests that time-travelling graduate students would hardly notice a difference between academic life in the 1980s and today: seminars, supervisors, labs, and libraries would look much the same. Faculty, he also claims, would hardly notice a difference. They would still face “publish or perish.” Their time would still be taken up with writing letters of reference, attending meetings, “spreading malicious gossip,” and flying to conferences.

This narrative is not new. It is also not accurate. It repeatedly misunderstands three things: (1) Faculty have long been stewards of change. (2) Critics conflate organizational change with culture change. (3) Claims about faculty stagnation and unfettered autonomy are simply false.

Faculty as Stewards of Change

Bloom acknowledges that the academy has diversified, with more women and greater racial representation than in previous eras. But he frames these shifts as purely demographic developments “beyond professors’ control.” This is a remarkable obliviousness to history.

Diversification in hiring and student recruitment did not just “happen.” As a woman who entered the professoriate over three decades ago, I can attest – as can other woman-identifying as well as Indigenous and racialized faculty, staff, and students – that increased diversity is not the result of demographic happenstance. It was hard fought. Faculty committees, task forces, equity advocates, and scholarly associations pushed for hiring and recruitment reforms, mentorship programs, parental leave policies, and diversity frameworks. To describe this transformation as something that unfolded without faculty leadership is simply wrong.

The same obliviousness carries over into Bloom’s claims about teaching and research. Professors, he asserts, are too conservative even to discuss shifting teaching, and changing our approaches to research, scholarly, and artistic work (RSAW). Apparently, we “won’t even explore alternatives” to the prevailing status quo.

When the COVID-19 pandemic required a pivot to remote instruction, faculty moved entire curricula online in days. Hybrid models, flexible assessment strategies, experiential learning initiatives, and inter-

disciplinary research clusters have flourished ever since. Faculty reimagined how their disciplines could operate under new and contingent conditions.

Of course, innovation predates the pandemic. In my own department, we launched a community-to-classroom initiative some ten years ago that reversed the usual direction of experiential learning. Instead of sending students outward, we invited community organizations to bring their work to campus. Students engaged in applied scholarship that, in two successive years, culminated in peer-reviewed publications for everyone in the course, strengthening both community partnerships and student academic profiles. This change was imagined, implemented, and led by faculty.

The administrative response? Silence. Invitations to a celebratory book launch went unanswered. College and central administrators did not even acknowledge receipt of the invitation, let alone actually attend the event. It is clear that when innovation is not packaged as “strategic transformation,” it often goes unrecognized. But it *is* change, and it *is* faculty-led.

Yes, there are colleagues who prefer overhead projectors, paper memos, and campus mail. But to generalize from that hipster minority to the entire professoriate is inaccurate and unhelpful.

Organizational Change is not Culture Change

Many critics who bemoan faculty’s supposed inability to change are focused on organizational change: restructuring programs, eliminating units, centralizing services, adopting new performance metrics, cutting budgets. It operates through plans, timelines, charts, and measurable outputs. It tends to rely on clearly defined categories and binary framings: efficient or inefficient, strong or weak, scalable or not.

However, organizational change is inextricably connected to the cultural environments and the modes of culture change that characterize workplaces of all kinds, including universities. Culture change involves norms, values, disciplinary identities, trust networks, histories, and intellectual traditions. It unfolds through shared meaning, professional judgment, and negotiated practice. It is rarely linear. It is rarely binary.

When budget crises demand that units identify “areas of strength” so that “areas of weakness” can be cut, the organizational framing assumes a single definition of strength. Those who understand cultural dynamics immediately see the problem. Culturally, strength is plural. There is no single metric that meaningfully compares a world-class artistic performance with a multi-million dollar science laboratory. Excellence exists on a landscape, not a ladder. Strength does not reside exclusively, or even primarily, in standardized metrics. Strength is built through disciplinary traditions, interdisciplinary collaborations, community relationships, artistic creativity, language revitalization, curatorial repatriation, experimental discovery, methodological innovation, foundational theory-building, none of which scale easily to conform to organizational templates.

In our junior-level methodology courses, we teach students that flawed measurement tools produce flawed conclusions. Yet universities are frequently governed by evaluative models that would not receive a passing grade in those very courses.

Faculty resistance to change often emerges not from opposition to change itself, but from opposition to reductive models that attempt to force cultural complexity into organizational binaries. The order is backwards. Sustainable organizational change generally follows from shifts in culture, not the other way around. When there is a disconnect between organizational reform and culture change, implementation stalls. (The application of UnivRS for collegial processes and career progression, the use of Strategic Program Review [SPR] in the early 2000s to guide faculty complement planning, and the plan to allocate

budgets in response to the 2013 TransformUS reports, are only three examples of this point.)

Organizational change can be imposed. Culture change must be cultivated. It may be easier to blame faculty for resisting reform than to engage in the cultural work that makes reform possible. However, without that work, successful transformation rarely happens.

Wrong

Claims that faculty are allergic to change often rely on outdated stereotypes that are just plain wrong. Two of the most entrenched stereotypes rely on fairly – if not completely – inaccurate depictions of universities and how faculty work is governed.

Bloom's description of universities as constituted by labs and libraries overlooks social scientists and many others who work in communities, clinics, policy arenas, schools, cultural and political institutions, field sites, and digital environments. Entire RSAW and public outreach infrastructures have emerged in the last three decades that did not exist in the 1980s. That emergence was driven, in large part, by faculty. Faculty left the ivory tower caricature decades ago. It would be helpful if our critics caught up.

This caricature goes further. Critics also invoke faculty autonomy to explain our supposed resistance to change. Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring (2011), for example, suggest that faculty undertake RSAW activities without restraints of any kind. They assert that faculty see most proposed reforms as threats to this freedom, and we therefore oppose them reflexively, opting for self-preservation over institutional progress. Kevin Carey (2015) turns his attention to classroom activity to similarly argue that professors have complete autonomy in course development and implementation. He joins Christensen and Eyring to argue that faculty resist change because we currently have the unfettered ability to teach and research what we want, how we want, when we want, with complete autonomy.

Granted, it is true that academic freedom – encoded in our collective agreements – allows faculty to pursue new questions, develop new courses, and respond to emerging social and disciplinary shifts. It is also true that most (though certainly not all) faculty enjoy flexibility in how we structure the majority of our time. But the characterization that faculty are resistant to change because it threatens our supposed unchecked autonomy is wrong. We are not unaccountable free agents floating above governance.

Faculty work is embedded within layered systems of oversight and governance. Academic Program Committees review curriculum. College and University Councils establish academic policy. Assignment of Duties processes structure workload. Research Ethics Boards, research conduct policies, and funding agencies regulate research and professional activity. Tenure and promotion files move through multiple levels of review – often three committees before reaching a Board of Directors – each weighing evidence against established standards. Being required to submit career progression files that include student evaluations that contain comments such as “Prof. Downe needs to dye her hair. The grey is gross” – with only extremely onerous recourse to have such comments removed – does not suggest a scrutiny-free workplace. It suggests a system formally and consistently entangled with mechanisms of evaluation. The claim that faculty resist change because we operate without oversight collapses the moment one looks at how universities actually function.

Conclusion: Change Requires Cultural Intelligence

If change in universities sometimes encounters resistance, it is not because faculty are inherently conservative obstructionists. It is because organizational change that ignores culture mistakes compliance for transformation.

We need greater expertise in recognizing and supporting culture change alongside organizational reform. We need leaders who understand how academic cultures reproduce themselves and how they evolve through collaboration. We need collegial consultation, not perfunctory information sessions after decisions have already been made.

Faculty are already changing the university proactively, reactively, and collaboratively. We have done so for decades. If we want change to succeed, the first step is to retire the trope that says we cannot. If some faculty express concern or trepidation about the future of universities, that should not be mistaken for fear of change. Faculty have spent decades responding to new intellectual, technological, scientific, and social realities. We are not standing athwart the future, yelling “Stop.” More often, we are already building what comes next. Universities will be strongest when that work is recognized and supported by institutional leaders and colleagues alike.

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