

CULTURE IS THE HIDDEN ARCHITECTURE OF CHANGE

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Most colleges do not falter at change because they lack plans, values, or effort. They falter because daily culture quietly rewrites the plan into something the institution already knows how to do. New language gets translated into familiar routines, new expectations get interpreted through old incentives, and early friction triggers protective moves that feel sensible in the moment. The result is a common pattern: a change effort begins with real energy, then gradually loses force, until the institution is left with more activity than durable new practice.

When a college takes on a transformation agenda that is genuinely ambitious, culture moves to the foreground. It becomes the operating environment. It shapes what leaders can ask for without triggering shutdown, what managers can reinforce without exhausting their teams, what cross-unit work actually produces, and whether evidence changes decisions or merely decorates them.

Culture decides what happens when the process gets hard.

At the same time, culture is rarely the only issue. Many change efforts stall because the institution lacks clear operational guidelines. The business process is ambiguous. Responsibilities are diffuse. Handoffs are informal. Measures are unclear. In those conditions, even a strong culture will struggle to execute, and a weak culture will use the ambiguity as cover. The hard truth is that culture and operations are not competing explanations. They are interacting forces.

Culture and operations are a coupled system

Colleges often speak about culture as something intangible and speak about business processes as something concrete. In day to day work, they are tightly linked. Culture shapes how people interpret processes, and processes shape the culture people experience. Middle managers live at the point where that coupling becomes visible, because they are responsible for translating institutional intent into workable routines while keeping teams supported and students served.

Operational guidelines tell people what to do and when to do it. Culture shapes what people actually do when the guideline is inconvenient, unclear, or costly, and it shapes what people do when two priorities collide. A process can say, "Use this routing protocol," yet culture determines whether it is treated as a firm expectation, a suggestion, or a starting point that can be bypassed when the day becomes crowded. A policy can require early outreach, yet culture determines whether outreach is viewed as core work that deserves protected time, or as an added task that disappears when staffing is tight and urgent issues arise. A redesigned advising model can be thoughtfully built, yet culture determines whether it is adopted consistently across teams, or reinterpreted into local variation that feels practical in the moment but undermines predictability for students.

This is not about people being resistant. It is about how organizations behave under real constraints. When staff are overloaded, they naturally triage. When guidelines are ambiguous, people improvise. When exceptions are frequent, exceptions become normal. Culture, in that sense, is the set of informal rules that govern what happens when formal rules meet reality. It is also why the same process can produce very different outcomes across different teams, even when everyone is acting in good faith.

The interaction runs the other direction too. Business processes shape culture, sometimes more powerfully than speeches or values statements. When responsibilities are vague, frustration grows and accountability becomes harder to hold in a fair way. When work depends on heroics, teams learn that survival requires constant improvisation, and that learning can turn into cynicism over time even among highly committed professionals. When decision rights are unclear, meetings multiply because people are trying to create safety through consensus. When there is no reliable review cycle, performance conversations become episodic and high stakes, so they feel personal and stressful, and people avoid them to protect relationships.

Over time, operational ambiguity can create a culture that feels cautious and fatigued. People become careful about taking risks because the ground rules are unclear. They become hesitant to own outcomes because authority and responsibility do not line up cleanly. They become less willing to coordinate across units because coordination is costly and often unrewarded. None of this reflects a lack of care. It reflects a system that asks professionals to carry uncertainty without giving them consistent structure.

This is why the practical question is not whether a college needs cultural change or operational change. The question is whether the institution can redesign the way it works so that the desired culture becomes easier to sustain under normal conditions. Culture shifts fastest when operations make the right behavior the default, when expectations are clear enough to execute, when exceptions are tracked rather than normalized, and when managers are supported with the authority, time, and tools needed to reinforce the new routines consistently.

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The ways culture neutralizes change

Culture rarely blocks change openly. More often it neutralizes change through patterns that are widely recognizable across community colleges, especially those with long histories, strong professional identity, and legitimate constraints. Many of these patterns are intensified when operational guidelines are unclear.

Caution that becomes a permanent stance

In many institutions, “wait and see” becomes a default posture because it feels safer than commitment. This is often learned from experience. People have lived through cycles of initiatives that were launched with urgency, resourced unevenly, and then quietly replaced. Over time, caution feels like wisdom.

Culture neutralizes change through small, reasonable exceptions.

Operational ambiguity strengthens this stance. When a change is announced without clear processes, roles, timelines, and decision rights, people reasonably assume it will not survive contact with reality. The practical effect is a slow start that never

catches up. Change work is asked to prove itself before it is given real ownership, yet it cannot prove itself without that ownership. The system then produces the very lack of progress that caution predicted.

A strong preference for harmony that weakens performance conversation

Community colleges tend to have caring cultures. People want to be respectful, and they want relationships to hold. That is a strength, yet it can also create a pattern where feedback is welcomed when it affirms effort, and resisted when it evaluates performance or requires behavioral change. The institution gets skilled at encouragement and less skilled at sustained, evidence-based accountability.

Weak operational routines make this worse. If there is no agreed process for reviewing results, then performance discussion arrives as a surprise, and surprise feels like threat. When review is episodic, feedback gets interpreted as personal. When review is routine, feedback becomes normal, less emotional, and more actionable.

Professional identity that turns critique into threat

In many colleges, people take deep pride in their expertise and in the realities they manage every day. That pride is earned, and it protects quality.

Yet it can also turn proposed change into a perceived critique of competence. When that happens, the energy of the organization shifts from improvement to defense.

Process design matters here. When a change is introduced as a fixed mandate, professionals defend their autonomy. When the change is introduced as a clear operational aim with space for structured testing and learning, professionals often engage more constructively. Clear processes for piloting, documenting, and adjusting can reduce defensiveness because people can see how their expertise will shape the final practice.

Deliberation that substitutes for ownership

Colleges can become excellent at discussion. They diagnose problems, convene committees, refine language, and produce thoughtful documents. Deliberation is often necessary in shared governance environments, and it can raise the quality of decisions. Yet it can also become a substitute for ownership. People can earn standing by being insightful, while the harder work of making decisions, assigning responsibility, and tracking follow through feels exposed.

Discussion can become a safe substitute for ownership.

Operational clarity reduces this failure mode. When decision rights are explicit, when milestones are real, and when the next action is assigned and tracked, deliberation remains valuable without becoming endless. When those elements are missing, discussion expands to fill the void, and culture learns that talk is the safest form of participation.

Consensus habits that slow momentum

Many colleges treat broad agreement as a prerequisite for motion. That instinct comes from a desire to be inclusive and fair, and it often prevents reckless change. Yet ambitious transformation usually requires a rhythm that includes small, well-designed tests, faster

learning cycles, and decisions that are clear enough to act on even when not everyone is fully comfortable.

This rhythm depends on operational discipline. Without defined cycles for testing, review, and scaling, the institution has only two modes. Endless discussion, or abrupt implementation. Both intensify resistance. Clear operating cycles create a third mode. Structured learning that respects professionalism and still produces momentum.

Local excellence that does not add up to system performance

Community colleges are complex institutions. Departments can perform well inside their own boundaries, and still produce a fragmented student experience. Students reliably feel the gaps in the system through registration handoffs, advising referrals, policy exceptions, and the maze of support services. While culture shapes how people respond to those gaps, the deciding factor is usually the strength of the processes that carry students from one step to the next. When handoffs remain informal, coordination depends on personal relationships that vary by person and circumstance, and when protocols exist but are not consistently enforced, exceptions accumulate until the system becomes hard to predict. In that environment, a culture that prizes independence can intensify fragmentation when the operational scaffolding is weak, and even a culture that values coordination can fall short when the processes make coordination difficult to execute day after day.

What these patterns look like in real implementation

When a transformation agenda moves from plan to practice, culture shows itself in small, repeatable signals. Many of these signals are also signs of process weakness.

Leaders hear support that is sincere yet conditional, where engagement is delayed until someone else demonstrates follow-through. Managers translate new expectations into minimal compliance rather than redesigned practice, often to protect already strained teams. Groups request more clarity while avoiding decisions that would make performance visible. People may ask for data, then use it mainly as a debate tool rather than as a trigger for change. Cross-unit work remains polite, but ownership stays local, and coordination remains dependent on individual relationships rather than institutional routines.

In the background, the operational indicators are visible too. Decisions do not have owners. Milestones do not have dates. Policies have exceptions that are not tracked. New processes are introduced without training, without auditing, and without a feedback mechanism. When those conditions persist, culture will do what culture always does. It will stabilize the system by returning to what feels workable.

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Culture change that supports execution

Culture does not change because leaders announce new values. Culture changes when daily incentives, routines, and expectations make new behavior easier, safer, and more normal than old behavior. That is why operational guidelines and culture have to be treated as a single design problem. If the operating system of the college still rewards the old habits, the new language will be adopted in meetings and resisted in practice. If the operating system makes the new habits workable under real constraints, culture begins to shift in ways that are durable.

Operational guidelines and culture have to be treated as a single design problem.

Middle managers are central to this shift because they carry the translation burden. They are asked to protect staff capacity, maintain service quality, and deliver new outcomes at the same time. The goal is not to demand

more effort. The goal is to redesign the conditions so that the effort managers and teams already give produces more consistent results.

First, reduce the cost of commitment

People commit when follow-through is consistent and visible, and when committing does not expose them to unnecessary risk. In many colleges, staff have learned to be cautious because they have seen priorities change, initiatives fade, and promises become temporary. That lived experience shapes culture more than any motivational message.

Leaders can reduce that caution by earning credibility through disciplined follow-through, starting with commitments small enough to keep and then keeping them consistently, while providing enough operational clarity that staff are protected from avoidable ambiguity. That means making ownership explicit so work does not float: assign one clear owner for each deliverable, define who contributes, who decides, and who is accountable for the outcome, and set timelines that are specific enough to prevent a permanent “we are working on it” posture. Decisions should be visible so staff can see what has been decided, what remains open, and what is expected next, and exceptions should be tracked so teams are not quietly encouraged to bypass the new process whenever pressure rises.

These are not bureaucratic steps. They are trust building steps. They signal that the institution is serious, that managers will not be left carrying unclear expectations, and that staff will not be asked to improvise the meaning of the change in the middle of a busy week. Over time, these moves support a cultural shift from caution to participation because they lower the personal and professional cost of committing.

Second, strengthen the performance conversation without damaging trust

Most community colleges value relationships, and most managers want to protect morale. The risk is that performance conversation gets reduced to encouragement, or avoided until problems become acute. When that happens, feedback arrives late and emotionally charged, which makes it feel personal even when it is not intended that way.

A healthy culture can hold evaluative conversations without becoming punitive, yet this depends on both language and routine. Teams need shared language for results that does not imply blame. They also need a predictable review routine so that performance discussion becomes normal rather than exceptional.

When review is predictable, feedback feels less personal because it is part of the operating rhythm. People know what will be looked at, when it will be looked at, and what the purpose is. When review is absent, feedback becomes episodic and high stakes, and that makes it feel like judgment. Predictable review also protects managers. It gives them a legitimate structure for holding expectations, and it reduces the sense that they are arbitrarily choosing when to “get tough.”

The most constructive performance conversations are specific and improvement oriented. “What did we expect? What did we see? Where are we getting variation across teams? What

is creating friction for students? What is the smallest change that would improve consistency?” Those questions keep the focus on practice, not personality. Over time, this builds a culture where evidence is used to improve work, and where accountability feels fair because it is grounded in shared expectations and shared data.

Third, make coordination an expectation, not an extra

Students experience college as a system, and they notice where it breaks down. Many institutional improvements fail to scale because they depend on goodwill and informal relationships rather than clear cross-unit expectations.

Coordination becomes durable when it is treated as part of performance. That begins by defining cross unit outcomes that matter to students, and by assigning shared ownership. Shared ownership means no one unit can declare success while the student experience remains fragmented. It also means managers have cover to do the hard work of alignment because coordination is not optional work that must be justified. It is expected work.

Operationally, coordination needs simple routines, standard handoff protocols, shared definitions, clear escalation paths when exceptions occur, regular cross-unit check-ins that focus on a small set of outcomes rather than broad update, and a short list of measures that reveal whether the system is behaving consistently.

When coordination is tracked and reviewed, it stops being dependent on personalities. The culture shifts as well because teams learn that alignment is noticed, valued, and reinforced. People begin to anticipate the needs of adjacent units because the system rewards that behavior. Fragmentation becomes harder to hide, and coherence becomes easier to sustain.

Fourth, establish an execution rhythm that produces learning

Big change does not require endless new initiatives. It requires a steady cycle of decisions, tests, measurement, adjustment, and scaling. Without that cycle, colleges tend to swing between two unhelpful modes. Long discussion followed by abrupt implementation, or continuous pilots that never become standard practice.

An execution rhythm reduces both problems. It clarifies when decisions will be made, when pilots will be assessed, when scaling will occur, and what evidence will be used to judge readiness. Put the cycle on a calendar, make it visible, and use it repeatedly. Repetition matters because it creates organizational memory. People learn how change happens here. They learn what counts as evidence. They learn that pilots are not side projects, and they learn that adjustments are expected rather than treated as backtracking.

This rhythm also protects staff capacity. It reduces the churn of competing priorities because change work has a clear cadence and a limited number of focus areas at a time. It gives managers a way to pace work, to communicate expectations, and to keep teams from feeling that everything is urgent all the time.

When an institution sustains this cycle, culture begins to shift in a noticeable way. Improvement becomes normal. Learning from results becomes routine. Adaptation becomes a sign of seriousness rather than a sign of confusion. That is the point where change moves from being an initiative to being a dependable way the college works.

The central test

A college can have a strong plan, committed people, and a compelling mission, and still struggle to change in practice. That gap is not usually a question of sincerity. It is a question of design. The decisive issue is whether the institution will treat culture and operations as a coupled system, and then do the unglamorous work of aligning them so they reinforce each other under real conditions.

Most failed change efforts have a predictable shape: leaders announce a direction, teams interpret it through local realities, and managers try to carry new expectations on top of existing workloads. Practices vary by unit because the rules are not sufficiently clear, or the operating routines are not strong enough to sustain consistency.

Over time, the organization concludes that the change was unrealistic, when the more accurate diagnosis is that the change was never fully operationalized in a way that made success repeatable.

Treating culture and operations as a coupled system changes the approach. It means leaders do not ask managers and staff to “buy in” as the primary strategy. They build conditions that make follow through normal. They clarify decision rights and ownership so work does not float. They establish review routines so performance conversation becomes predictable and less personal. They design handoffs and coordination so students do not experience the seams. They reduce the number of simultaneous priorities so teams can execute with quality rather than cope through triage.

What endures is what becomes default.

Durable transformation ultimately depends on cultural leadership that stays close to practice. Leaders build trust by showing that commitments will be kept, that evidence will be used to improve work rather than to assign blame, and that accountability will be applied fairly and consistently, while managers are given clear expectations, real authority to enforce new routines, and protection from being handed outcomes without the tools, staffing, and decision rights that make those outcomes achievable. Over time, staff begin to see that the new processes are not a temporary campaign, and that the institution is serious about making them the default.

When that happens, change no longer needs to be reintroduced each year, because it becomes the way the college operates, visible in how decisions are made, how work is assigned, how progress is reviewed, how cross-unit coordination is handled, and how learning is embedded in normal operations. The central test is simple to state and hard to execute: whether the college can design daily work so that the right behavior *becomes* the easy behavior and a new culture takes hold.

Sources

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