

I B-Schools' Broken Windows

Urban decay, shattered windows, and boarded up buildings signal that a neighborhood is in decline. In the early 1980s, criminal justice professionals advanced the idea that if a neighborhood simply cleaned up these signs of neglect, it could go a long way toward improving the way both citizens and criminals perceived the community.

New York City subscribed to the same notion in the 1990s by cracking down on seemingly minor infractions such as graffiti painting, subway fare jumping, and windshield washing by panhandlers. In 2005, Michael Levine applied the idea to the corporate world in *Broken Windows, Broken Business*, arguing that companies that do a good job of attending to their metaphorical broken windows often outperform those that do not.

We believe that business schools can benefit by applying the same concept to themselves. Administrators who promptly identify cracks in their foundations and repair their broken windows will increase both the actual and perceived quality of their business schools. Unfortunately, for many b-school insiders, the major challenge lies in seeing the cracks in the first place.

Many schools suffer from what we term *institutional myopia*. This short-sightedness leads administrators to see and do things the way they've always been done. This behavior is particularly rampant in small regional schools, which are so prone to replicating their cultures that they don't realize how much they could grow if they would

expand their perspectives. But, in fact, institutional myopia is pervasive in all institutions of higher education, especially those where tenured faculty have no real incentives to identify areas that would benefit from change.

Schools that suffer from institutional myopia exhibit one or more of these symptoms:

- A lack of vision beyond their immediate region.
- The tendency to settle for "good enough."
- Little tolerance for change, with a strong culture built on preserving the status quo.
- The tendency to follow procedure because that's the way something has always been done.
- Organizational processes that encourage people to lay blame instead of accept responsibility.
- A culture of ambivalence, as opposed to one of accountability.

These indicators are likely to manifest themselves in one of three areas: the strategic management of the school, the behavior of its participants, and the process of determining assurance of learning.

The Strategy

Fundamentally, myopia strikes at the heart of a school's self-image. Since the mission statement provides direction for decision making and continuous improvement activities, a school that has defined its goals too narrowly is almost certain to become a victim of its own limitations. It's important for a school to have an image and an identity—but it's just as important that the school not allow that image to restrict its potential.

For example, a college may see itself as a small teaching school. But

this particular defining characteristic might preclude administrators from exploring meaningful opportunities, such as offering more international courses. Administrators also might be reluctant to revisit and revise the school's mission, fearing that if they overreach their stated ambitions, they might be penalized for failing to achieve them.

Institutional myopia can lead to "paradigm paralysis." If administrators are too paralyzed to consider new alternatives for expanding resources, the school won't have the wherewithal to launch new initiatives. It will be stuck forever in its present incarnation.

The People

Institutional myopia can involve students, faculty members, and administrators. Students are part of the problem when the school recruits them solely from the same regions where they've always been recruited. While this practice helps preserve the status quo, it also leads to a stagnant student body that matches previous demographics and exhibits the same level of academic ability.

Administrators and faculty both show signs of myopia when they allow grade point averages to increase without a documented upgrade in student abilities. In this case, administrators are guilty of complacency and a desire to show improvement in the school's quality—even when no such improvement exists.

Faculty exhibit myopia in teaching when they do not stay current in their disciplinary knowledge and methods of content delivery. Faculty committed to continuous improvement will regularly update their course materials and pedagogy; conversely, instructors who hesitate

to embrace new techniques do a disservice to themselves and their students. Schools that are intensely research-oriented need to pay particular attention to advances in teaching. They can't allow faculty to become so involved with discipline-based scholarship that they allow metaphorical broken windows in the classroom.

On the other hand, faculty at some small teaching schools might view intellectual contributions as unimportant—but this attitude can translate to an extremely large bank of broken windows. Instructors need to keep up with the latest research, even if they are not producing new disciplinary knowledge. They need to read the latest research in their disciplines so their minds remain sharp and their teaching stays relevant.

The Learning Process

Given the basic covenant between a school and its students, assurance of learning failures might be the ultimate broken windows. In this area, myopia is a problem that occurs when curriculum changes and faculty proposals are based on feelings and beliefs, rather than on best practices. One red flag would be the phrase “I’m not concerned with what other schools do—that’s not who we are.”

The school also has a problem if faculty show little interest in becoming involved in the direct assessment process. Assurance of learning is the responsibility of everyone at the school, not just the administration and the comparatively few faculty members on an assessment committee. If faculty don’t care about assurance of learning, the school will never improve and grow.



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Fixing the Broken Windows

We’ve described the broken windows most likely to result when an institution focuses on the way things have always been, as opposed to the way things could be. Fortunately, accreditation standards such as those set by AACSB International mitigate a school’s tendency to replicate the past culture for its own sake.

Even so, deans and administrators need to make sure that incentives and

rewards are in place so that no one in the school falls victim to myopia, paralysis, or complacency. Schools that address their broken windows will operate more effectively and enjoy continuous improvement.

When was the last time you took a good look through your own windows? What did you see? 

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