Scenario
For six months, senior academic and IT leaders at a large state college have been evaluating the institution’s LMS, which was initially implemented more than a decade ago. Because of rising costs to maintain the existing system and complaints that it doesn’t support cutting-edge applications, the leadership team has decided to transition to a new LMS. A dedicated project manager has been hired to oversee the technical aspects of the transition, but the team is also concerned about the “soft” side, the cultural dynamic of replacing a system that is central to how most faculty and students conduct academic activities. More than 80 percent of the college’s courses use the existing LMS, and it also supports several successful, entirely online programs with large enrollments. Moreover, the current system has two vocal groups of ardent supporters: faculty who have invested considerable time incorporating the system’s advanced features into their teaching, and faculty who only use the LMS for the class roster, syllabus, and grades and see no value in learning how to use those tools in a different system.

Officials involved in the LMS transition establish a change management group, led jointly by an IT director and a representative of the provost’s office. The group includes several members of the faculty (both early and late adopters), students from various disciplines, and two members of the college’s administrative staff. They adopt a change management framework that has proven effective at other colleges and universities.

The group knows that the move to the new LMS might be polarizing for the campus community, and they target their efforts at awareness and education, not only among the detractors but also for the project’s champions, some of whom appear to have unrealistic expectations about how quickly the new system will be online. They coordinate the timing of their efforts with the project manager’s schedule, and they use the college’s social networking and other online vehicles to spread the word, answer questions, set expectations, and build trust. The group arranges for live demos of the new system—again, for the eager and the reluctant. The combination of the framework they selected and the familiarity among the group with the college’s history and culture puts the group in a good position to help this difficult transition succeed.

1 What is it?
“Change management” refers to the business practices and procedures that address the human and cultural aspects of organizational change. Whereas project management attends to the technical, logistical, and financial facets of initiatives, change management attempts to facilitate a smooth transition by building awareness and understanding among those who will be affected by the changes. In higher education, changes such as a curriculum redesign or campus-wide deployment of new technologies might be seen as unnecessary or not worth the effort, and the campus community might not understand the impacts the change has on other areas. By establishing a set of processes designed to ensure a common understanding of the end goal and the steps to achieve it, change management can cultivate awareness, understanding, and support as it helps people adapt to and deal with change. Technology has certainly contributed to the frequency and impact of changes in higher education, but technology tools can also play an important role in effectively managing those changes.

2 How does it work?
Change management runs concurrently with the programmatic change that it complements, such as the introduction of competency-based learning or the launch of an online degree program. The process can range from a relatively informal approach to a highly structured framework such as those put forward in the Kotter method or the ADKAR model. A change management team, whether a standing group or ad hoc, should comprise a diverse group that represents both those who are driving the change and those who are affected by it. This composition provides multiple perspectives, which can be used to inform the change process. In a college or university, this would generally include administration, staff, faculty, and students themselves. Regardless of whether the change is managed by one person or a team, at least one individual must have the authority and empathy to track reactions among those who are affected and to address fear or build consensus when needed. Those who manage the change must establish a rationale for the end goal, determine a path to get there, and ensure that stakeholders are notified about new developments throughout the process.
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3 Who’s doing it?
Some institutions establish a dedicated team of change management professionals. At Northwestern University, the Office of Change Management engages with schools and departments, evaluating opportunities for institutional change, designing approaches to address challenges or develop solutions, and supporting the implementation of change. Supported initiatives run the gamut from university-wide strategic planning to optimization of loading docks to a new accreditation approach for Northwestern’s School of Law. At the University of Notre Dame, the Office of Information Technologies, Training and Transition Services needed to train IT support staff for the campus-wide move to Gmail and Google Calendar. The change management team engaged IT staff with a game and launched the Google Apps Jedi Academy. IT staff were soon testing their knowledge of key features they would be supporting on the new Google platform. Non-IT staff soon asked to participate, and 92% later said they learned new skills. Rio Salado College developed a change management process outlined in “Planning Transformational Change for Student Success within Higher Education,” which offers a step-by-step plan, walking the reader through each phase from preparation and brainstorming to feedback and development. The text includes brief examples of what Rio Salado did at each stage, suggested alternatives, and recommendations gleaned from experience.

4 Why is it significant?
A significant portion of change initiatives fail to achieve their goals, and effective change management can improve the prospects of such efforts. The college or university that employs some means of managing strategic change, whether administrative or pedagogic, is more likely to succeed, protecting its investments in money and human capital and positioning itself strategically in an educational ecosystem where changes are becoming more frequent and more pervasive. That said, change is always at least somewhat disruptive. A deliberate process of change management can clarify next steps and reassure participants, building a bridge between the existing campus culture and a critical project.

5 What are the downsides?
Change management takes time and focus, which some may see as additional effort on top of already difficult initiatives, particularly those that involve institution-wide programs or services. Timely and inclusive communication often requires messages tailored to different audiences, adding to the complexity. When change management processes take longer than expected, some participants experience “change fatigue.” A failure to notify and update populations affected by change can lead to communication via rumor, something that can leave a team struggling with crisis communications. Despite the benefits it offers, change management is rarely easy, and some will question whether the investment is justified.

6 Where is it going?
The frequency of innovations in technology means that, although many projects can have discrete start and end dates, the condition of change is increasingly becoming a fact of life in higher education. Colleges and universities that cultivate effective change management can accustom users to a state of ongoing change. Here, technology provides support. Meetings associated with change can move online when necessary. Online public postings via social media can reach more participants and consumers in the information stream, making them more aware of change and better able to follow it as it evolves. Specialists in the field have observed that a strict organizational hierarchy interferes with successful change management, suggesting that a strong shared-governance model can be an advantage in these efforts.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?
The uneasiness that frequently accompanies change is a legitimate response to initiatives that directly affect teaching and learning. Programs that restructure classrooms can change course presentation from a lecture-based to a small-group model; blended or flipped classes can reorient faculty/student interactions; and social media used in coursework and research alters opportunities for and expectations of faculty. Yet, colleges and universities will continue to explore these and other changes. For that exploration to be successful, skillful and effective change management needs to be part of the process so that good ideas—both big and small—won’t be dismissed for the wrong reasons. Change management provides a structure for including everyone affected, regardless of their attitude about the change.