

Opinion: Higher ed needs to make changes now

By Byron P. White

Somewhere between our group's discussion of three-year bachelor's degrees and its deliberation over the value of general-education courses, the sensation swept over me: I've seen this before—or at least something close to it. Déjà vu.

The people engaged in the conversation were different this time. They were members of Cleveland State University's senior leadership team. We had gathered for President Ronald Berkman's annual two-day fall retreat, which began with an overview of the forces that are driving the need for urgent change in higher education.

Noting our industry's notorious reputation for being stuck in its ways, President Berkman baited his vice presidents and deans: "Do we really have an appetite for change?" he asked. Thus began a vigorous dialogue among my colleagues in which we delved into all manner of institutional innovation.

The scene reminded me of similar sessions at another time, in another place, concerning urgent change in another "mature" industry. That industry was the newspaper business. I began my professional career in 1984 as a newspaper reporter, and after about 10 years, I had ascended to the management ranks of the Chicago Tribune. I recall countless conversations around that time with senior staff and peers at national conferences where we would discuss the powerful forces threatening the industry and how we desperately needed to respond.

We never really did, at least not sufficiently enough to stem the onslaught of technological advancements, disruption of business models, and shifting consumer preferences that have since conspired to pretty much dismantle newspapers as we knew

them. Tribune, parent company of my beloved Chicago paper, filed for bankruptcy a few years ago. In my current home, Cleveland, the Plain Dealer recently ceased home delivery on certain days in order to prolong its survival.

I moved to higher education more than a dozen years ago, just as newspapers were beginning their rapid descent. However, listening to my Cleveland State colleagues during the president's retreat, I could not help but draw comparisons between our current predicament and the one newspapers faced a few years ago.

Byron P. White is vice president for university engagement and chief diversity officer at Cleveland State University.

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