

# **Very Good to Great**

Albert J. Simone  
President

Rochester Institute of Technology

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## **CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION**

In previous Board of Trustees meetings and in my paper “Shaping RIT’s Destiny”, we discussed the concept of “good to great”. I shall not repeat that discussion here. Rather, I would like to point out quickly that our current path, over the past several years, has taken us from “good to very good”, and has positioned us to maintain this positive and impressive momentum. In this paper, I would like to discuss what we must do as an institution to shift our current path from “good to very good” to “very good to great”.

Why should we seek this new path? There are at least three reasons. First, our continued viability, and even long-term survival, as a university of quality and relevance demands that we not become complacent with any given rate of progress and that we constantly stretch and innovate. Second, we owe it to our alumni and other supporters and constituents to be everything we can be; to recognize our full potential; to optimize our self-actualization. Third, we have an obligation as a leading institution of higher education to contribute as much knowledge and as many quality human resources as we can for the betterment and support of our local, national, and world communities.

Ten years ago, we were not in a position to seek such a path. Our infrastructure, frame of reference, and state of mind were not ready. Over the past ten years, we have made substantial headway in these areas and I believe we now are ready to make the shift. Timing is everything. Things change quickly. If we do not seize the opportunity now, who knows when the next opening will occur? The environment and our opportunities, challenges, and competitors are constantly in flux. We need to be nimble, flexible, creative, entrepreneurial, and aggressive so that when our moment arrives, we can seize it. I believe our moment is now.

## **CHANGING CULTURE**

At our last Board meeting, we discussed “execution”, the discipline of “getting things done”. A trap, especially in academia, for execution is the rational notion that certain resources – i.e., inputs – are a necessary condition for timely and effective execution. The argument typically is made that we cannot execute until and unless we have additional personnel, equipment, laboratories, facilities, development funds, discretionary funds, infrastructure, and so on. I have heard these arguments over and over again over the years.

For example, I have heard that unless the library receives more funds to purchase more books, its ranking among peer universities will fall (I am definitely not picking on libraries – it is just one example out of many I could select). Implicit in the argument is that with more books, the quality of education will increase. While a minimal number of books may be a necessary condition for the quality of education of students, it clearly is not sufficient. For example, are professors assigning the books to students? If they are, are the students reading them? If they are, are they learning anything from them? And, by the way, are these the appropriate books in the first place? If they are, can they be made available through inter-library loans or over the internet (especially for

articles in journals)? My point is that asking for – and providing – more and more inputs to the educational process does not assure the desired educational outcomes.

Even if these additional inputs would lead to the desired outcomes, the demand for them from faculty (and staff and students as well) is virtually insatiable. There never will be enough resources to satisfy all of the requests for “necessary” inputs. This will be the case especially for RIT as it attempts to move from “very good” to “great”. Since RIT definitely will not be able to provide all of the inputs for which very good cases can be made, does this mean our move to the new path is doomed?

Absolutely not. The reason is that we have not yet discussed the most critical input – one that is not dependent on dollars. This most critical input or resource is a *path-changing mind-set*. One by one, each person at RIT – starting with the leadership group – must possess this mind-set. This mind-set, over time, must permeate the entire campus.

What is the mind-set? It is a *passion* for forging this new path. It is a steady and unrelenting *focus* on establishing this new path. It is the *will* – no matter the obstacle – to make it happen. It is a *work ethic* that never tires. Without an institutional path-changing mind-set, all of the resource-enabled inputs in the world will not lead us to the desired path. With this mind-set, I believe that RIT is now positioned to find (clear) the path of “very good to great”.

## **RESISTANCE AND UPSET**

We should expect that there will be resistance to traveling the new path, particularly at the outset, in some quarters. There will be some upset and unrest on campus as the path is cleared. This is because some people will not “understand”; if they understand, they will not “believe”. There will be people who might (rightfully) say that the new path is not the one they signed on for, perhaps many years ago, and we have violated the “original agreement”; they may feel their past contributions are not appreciated or recognized. There may be some people who, as the status quo changes, may see themselves losing influence and stature, and will resist in order to protect their “power base”.

We will do everything possible to build a positive consensus as widely as possible for the new path. We will work hard to “neutralize” certain segments of the campus, which do not support the move at the outset, so that they adopt (preferably) a “wait and see” attitude or a “we’ll stay out of the way” attitude. Eventually (soon), members of the neutral group will have to decide: either they are “with the program” or against it; neutrality cannot endure.

Individuals who are not in support of traveling the new path – either from an initial position of opposition or as a negative split off from the neutral group – will be replaced (“taken off the bus”) with new people who support and can contribute to the changing RIT. Separation of individuals from RIT, if and as necessary, will be undertaken, insofar as is reasonably possible, in a sensitive, respectful, humane, ethical, and professional fashion.

As far as I am concerned, almost everyone at RIT can contribute, in one way or another, to movement along the new path. For those individuals who need to change what they do or how they do what they do, it is up to them to decide if they want to make the change and get on board. I believe most will choose to do so, once it is clear what their contributions need to be. Of course, there may be some individuals who choose not to change, but lie back and are silent about their reluctance. Over time, their actions – or lack there of – will tell the story.

Changing an institution's identity is risky, and never easy. In these uncertain and dynamic times, it will be particularly difficult (and all the more essential). Trustees should hope for the best, that the transition is relatively smooth. At the same time, trustees should prepare for some overt acrimony.

## **CHANGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS**

Figure 1 depicts an organization's dynamics as three mutually dependent, concentric layers.<sup>1</sup> Change initiated at any of the three layers must be consistent with the attributes of the more central layers. For example, an "operations" change must be consistent with the values and directions associated with "strategy" and institutional "identity" if the contemplated operations change is to be successful. Similarly, a new strategy must be consistent with the institutional identity if it is to succeed. Sometimes an organization can fail to progress because, while the changes in operations and strategy are consistent and correct, the institutional identity has not changed and it should change. We must be sure that RIT does not fall into this trap.

For example, operationally a university could introduce a study abroad program, which is consistent with a strategy of internationalizing the curriculum; but the university's identity is as a "local" university. Operationally a university could give a 6-hour teaching load to a faculty member, which is consistent with a strategy of developing applied research through federally funded grants and contracts; but the university's identity is as a "teaching" university. Operationally a university could introduce a co-op program, which is consistent with a strategy of preparing students for careers; but the university's identity is as a "liberal arts" university.

Identity change is serious, risky, and probably disruptive at least in the short-run. If the attempt to change identity fails, the organization's viability can be damaged and its prior success lost.

Two approaches to identity change have been suggested in the literature on this topic. One is "revolutionary" identity change. In this approach, change begins at the innermost layer in Figure 1 and bursts through the strategy and operations layers. A second approach to identity change is the "evolutionary" approach. In this scenario, change occurs consistently over time in the two outer

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<sup>1</sup> The concentric layers discussion is based on Bouchikhi, H. and Kimberly, J., "Escaping the Identity Trap", *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Spring 2003, pp. 20-26.



layers of Figure 1, eventually spreading to and reshaping the identity layer. Change under the revolutionary approach is more deliberate, more disruptive, more risky, and occurs more rapidly than under the evolutionary approach.

I would argue that RIT has been engaging in an evolutionary approach to identity change over the past several years. I would also argue that, to reach the “dream” described in my “Shaping RIT’s Destiny” paper, the evolutionary approach is too time consuming and not dramatic enough to be effective in today’s environment. In addition, I would argue that, since we are “very good” in the current and near term environment, we do not need to embrace the revolutionary approach and its attendant risks.

I believe a critical mass of current stakeholders already understand the desirability of identity change and, because of our financial stability, believe we can move forward successfully at a pace which fits our competitive environment but does not unnecessarily risk our current status. Accordingly, I propose a third approach to identity change, which I term the “step-wise” approach.

### **STEP-WISE IDENTITY CHANGE**

The solid bottom line in Figure 2 shows RIT’s “institutional achievement” from 1990 to 2015. We were fighting to maintain our educational status in the early 1990’s; made moderate gains in the middle 1990’s; and achieved significant improvement in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, establishing RIT as “very good”.

## PATHS TO IDENTITY CHANGE

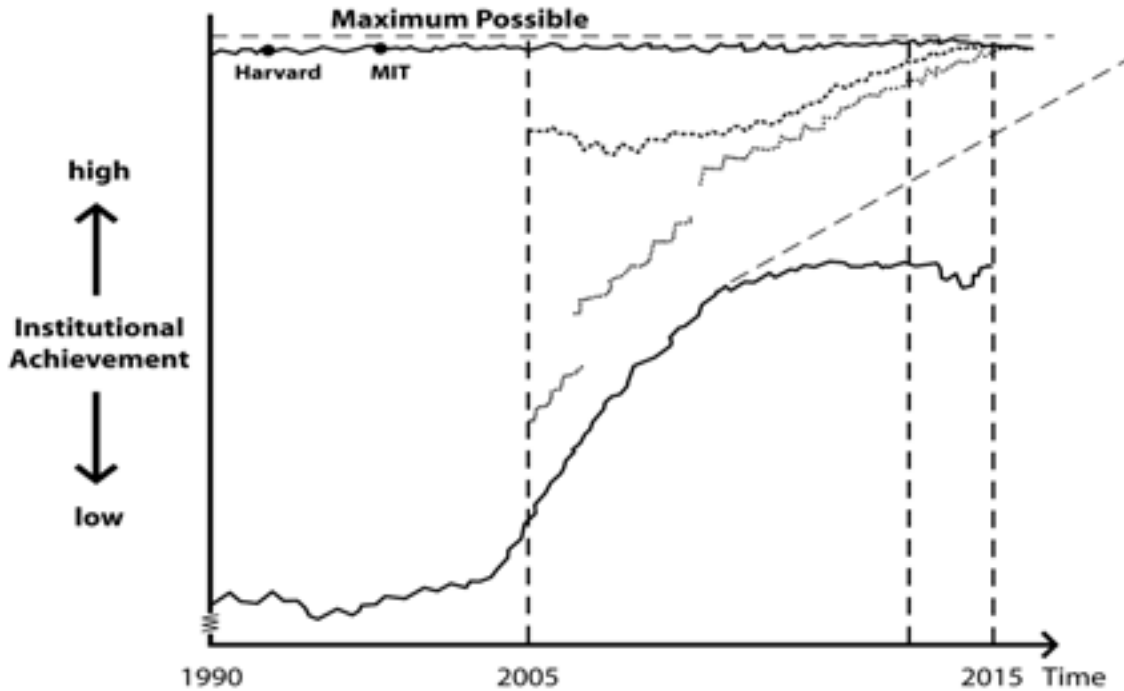


Figure 2

The solid bottom line is the RIT “very good” path going forward. I believe we can maintain the current momentum for several more years, after which we will slow down our rate of institutional improvement, plateauing and maybe even declining by 2015.

The broken block line near the top of Figure 2 shows RIT making a “revolutionary” move to identity change in 2005. The gain in institutional achievement is (unrealistically) large and quick, is hard to sustain in the early years, but eventually takes RIT to the same achievement level (in its educational category, as discussed in the “Shaping RIT’s Destiny” paper) as Harvard and MIT (the top solid line in Figure 2).

The disconnected (three segments) dotted line in Figure 2 displays the “step-wise” approach. In 2005, we make a small jump (step) in institutional identity, maintaining the current rate of momentum for a few years. Then we take a second step in establishing our new identity, again maintaining a strong rate of momentum. Around the year 2009, we take a third step, followed by the same strong rate of momentum.

By the year 2015, the revolutionary approach and the step-wise approach would each bring RIT an identity change which leads to an institutional achievement level comparable, for example, to Harvard and MIT. The revolutionary approach would bring higher achievements sooner, but would be harder to achieve, more bumpy, and more risky. The evolutionary approach (represented by the broken line extension of the bottom solid line as it reaches its plateau around 2009) would take longer to reach the year 2015 institutional achievement level.

## **BRAND/INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY (B/II)**

In the “Shaping RIT’s Destiny” paper, 16 RIT attributes are listed. They are:

- Career focus
- Primacy of teaching
- Co-op
- Technology base
- Diversity
- Quality students, faculty, staff, programs, curricula, and facilities
- Student success
- Experiential learning
- Applied research
- Partnerships
- Service to society
- Student centeredness
- Relevance
- Scholarship
- *First in Class*
- Sense of community

The RIT Provosts’ and Deans’ draft paper “Great Programs, Great Jobs; Great Careers, Great Lives” (July 2003) builds on these attributes, as well as on my earlier paper “Teaching, Scholarship, and Service at RIT: Expectations and Enablers” (April 2002). This paper also helped to shape the Provost’s and Deans’ draft of a faculty scholarship policy that this year was approved by the Academic Senate and which is further influencing the current Provosts’ and Deans’ draft. All of these discussions and policy statements reflect RIT’s current evolutionary approach to identity change.

A key task force in our Strategic Planning effort this year will prioritize and weight these attributes to determine which ones (in combination) will be the “anchor” attributes for RIT’s emerging B/II. These anchors will establish and define RIT’s essence, enduring nature, distinctiveness, and reputation. They will emerge, in part, as a consequence of a comprehensive identity audit, which relies heavily on assessment by internal and external constituencies.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN**

As we develop RIT’s next Strategic Plan (SP), I expect significant reference to our discussions of good to great, execution, B/II, very good to great, culture change, and step-wise identity change. Our work will include a thorough environmental scan, assessment of external threats and challenges, and evaluation of internal strengths and weaknesses.

The SP Steering Committee is composed of the following individuals:

Chair: Dr. Albert J. Simone, President

Vice Chair: Dr. Stan McKenzie, Provost and VP, Academic Affairs

Vice Chair: Dr. James Miller, VP, Enrollment Management and Career Services

Members:

Dr. Mary-Beth Cooper, VP, Student Affairs

Dr. Jorge Diaz-Herrera, Dean, Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences

Dave Edborg, President, Staff Council

Dr. Ian Gatley, Dean, College of Science

Joyce Hertzson, Chairperson, Foundations, College of Imaging Arts and Sciences; Immediate Past Chair, Academic Senate



Steve Shapiro, President, Student Government  
Deborah Stendardi, Associate VP, Government and Community Relations  
Dr. James Watters, VP, Finance and Administration

By Fall 2003, the Steering Committee will establish the task forces, appoint an expediter, identify consultants, and establish channels of communication with the Board of Trustees Committee on SP, Administrative Council, Academic Council, Academic Senate, Staff Council, and Student Government. The July 2004 Board of Trustees meeting is the target date (ambitious) for campus endorsement and Board approval.

## CONCLUSION

A recent five-year study appearing in the *Harvard Business Review* and cited in the *Economist*<sup>2</sup> examined 160 companies from 1986 – 96. The study concluded that superior organizational performance depended on:

- Flawless execution
- A company culture based on aiming high
- A structure that is flexible and responsive
- A strategy that is clear and focused

The RIT of the future will be following these tenets.

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Nohria, N., Joyce, W., and Roberson, B., “What Really Works”, *Harvard Business Review*, July 2003, pp. 42-52 and *The Economist*, “Who Gets Eaten and Who Gets to Eat”, July 12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003, pp. 61-63.

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