

**BECOMING A CATEGORY-OF-ONE  
UNIVERSITY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of the discussion contained in this paper is taken, including some direct excerpts, from the book authored by Joe Calloway, *BECOMING A CATEGORY-OF-ONE: How Extraordinary Companies Transcend Commodity and Defy Comparison*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003. This discussion is of key relevance at this stage in the development of our new Strategic Plan for three reasons.

First, it points to the fundamental RIT identity that our Strategic Plan must establish. When it is all said and done, fundamentally who are we and what do we represent?

Second, the discussion continues the conversation around brand or institutional identity (B/II) which was introduced in previous White Papers. Carrying this B/II conversation forward will prepare the ground for the B/II initiative that we will embark on in July (immediately after completing the Strategic Plan) and launch in winter 2004.

Third, this paper reemphasizes, in a different fashion, the primacy and centrality of students at RIT. The approach offered should stimulate conversation across the campus.

## FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTES

The basic concept which motivates this paper is that of a Category-of-One University (C1U). In a few moments, we shall define a C1U and discuss how to become one. Before we do that, it will be useful to identify and keep in mind a number of organizational and individual attributes which are fundamental to the successful implementation of the ideas about to be presented.

These attributes are:

- *Ethics* – do the right thing and always encourage others to do the right, honest, and ethical thing.
- *Respect* – treat others with the same personal and professional consideration we expect for ourselves.
- *Balance* – manage the time for both professional and personal success.
- *Winning Attitude* – have a “can do” attitude. Be positive, upbeat, and focused.
- *Communication* – share information, ask questions, listen effectively, speak thoughtfully, and let ideas live.
- *Development* – learn from each other. Teach, coach, and listen. Create an environment where everyone can be a star.
- *Team Work* – value different viewpoints. Execute the agreed-upon plans. Together everyone achieves more.
- *Change* – accept it, embrace it, initiate it, do everything better, faster, and more effectively.
- *Initiative* – seek opportunities, use good judgment, take intelligent risks, champion ideas.
- *Accountability* – know your responsibilities. Live up to your commitments.

As we move through this paper, I would ask you to consider the above attributes.

In the following section, we shall introduce the concept of a CIU.

## **DECIDING TO “GO”**

A CIU does not attempt to be a leader in an existing category. Rather, a CIU creates a different category and strives to become the only one in it.

Deciding to “go” is the first step on the journey to becoming a CIU. Most organizations never decide to “go”. They never make the decision to become extraordinary. The decision they make is to “talk about becoming extraordinary” or to “have meetings” about becoming extraordinary or to “write mission statements” about becoming extraordinary. They never “decide to go”; that is, make the commitment that takes hold, becomes real, and creates a new level of success.

The decision to “go” is a deliberate one. It can take many forms. It initially can be made by one person, for example, the president. Alternatively, it could be a group decision reached over a period of years, culminating with someone in a meeting saying “let’s do this thing”.

When a decision to “go” is made, it must be thoughtfully communicated within the organization and given a chance to gain the support of the faculty and staff. Almost every extraordinary organization can point to a specific moment in time when the decision was made to be “great”. The implementation of the decision is a continuing process but the decision itself is a very clearly defined and identifiable event.

Some people might say that “it goes without saying that everyone in our university wants to be the best. Of course, we all want to be great”. Well, it does not go without saying (sometimes it is never said or even thought about.) Even if people are saying it, it does not necessarily mean that people are believing it or that they even want it. There are many organizations that mistakenly assume that all employees not only want to be the best, but most importantly, are willing to do what it takes in terms of commitment, change, and hard work to make it happen. This is often a false and sometimes dangerous assumption.

There are many people out there, maybe even most of the people out there, who do not aspire to greatness. That is not necessarily bad. There is nothing wrong with wanting to live your life simply doing a good job. That is, some people want to be in the parade; some people want to lead the parade; and some people just want to watch the parade go by. Then, there are also people who live, as Thoreau said, “Lives of quiet desperation”: these people are in the survival mode; achieving greatness is the furthest thing from their minds; they just want to make it through the day.

Nothing of substance will take place without commitment. Pep rallies and talking a good game, and giving lip service to enhancing performance do not cut it. You have to take the first step: you have to “decide to go”.

The organization may not be willing to do what it takes to achieve greatness. If that is the case, everyone should be clear that he/she wants to stay the way they are, which may be in the middle of the pack. The danger is that there is no such thing as holding a position. Everything is changing every day: you are either gaining ground or losing ground. I would much prefer to gain ground.

When you decide “to go”, it means you have to lead with an idea or belief and then follow it with *action*. One without the other will not work. You need the idea/belief *and* action (recall a previous White Paper emphasizing “execution”). Moreover, the belief must be shared within the organization. Without the foundation of shared belief within the organization, any action will lack the power to sustain itself for the amount of time necessary to accomplish something significant.

Creating processes for change will initially mean throwing out old things more than putting new things in place. You have to clear out the “space” for new ideas to move in. You have to look at everything you do and ask the question, “Does this still make sense?”

Communication is critical. You have to repeat your vision over and over again to faculty, staff, students, and other constituents. The training, leadership model, and goals have to reflect the vision. Positive behavior must be rewarded and celebrated at every successful step along the way.

The decision to “go” becomes a never-ending process for the simple reason that you never get there. As you achieve success in the marketplace, the marketplace changes, and you have to decide how to continue to succeed in the new reality. *Success is a moving target that causes a very positive version of permanent dissatisfaction.* It is a form of dissatisfaction that feels good because you are driven by the fuel of knowing you can do better. You celebrate your victories but you do not rest on yesterday’s accomplishments. The fun is not what you did but in what is next.

The discussion in this section is really about culture. Culture is “how we do things around here”. It is the “why” not just the “what” of RIT. Culture reflects the rules we play by and the values we hold, both spoken and unspoken. We must be sure at RIT that the culture we have is the culture we want. We must be sure that who we are matches the idea of who we want to be.

The discussion up to now has implicitly, if not explicitly, focused on change. We turn next to a fuller, explicit discussion of change.

## **CHANGE**

Past success can be, and usually is, the enemy of future success. (The first sentence in the book *Good to Great* is “Good is the enemy of great”.) If you have succeeded in something, you have placed yourself in a dangerous position. When an organization or an individual becomes successful, they inevitably experience the pull of an almost irresistible force – *complacency*. The greatest danger of past success is that you might relax into thinking that you “know how academia works”. You have to be on the guard against the threat of complacency. You have to create a sense of urgency every day in everything you do. If you are successful, that means you know what *used to work*. If you are successful, it means that you can compete and win in markets that “no longer exist”. The game starts over today and will start over again tomorrow.

The principle of continuous improvement is okay. It says that to create quality you should undertake a strategy of constant small improvements in all areas. However, there is a danger to continuous improvement. While it is a good strategy to have, it presents the danger that you can be blinded into not looking above the day-to-day fray and not seeing the bigger picture. The big picture often involves making major improvements that come through the complete reinvention of something.

We are not talking about change for the sake of change. Changing for the sake of changing can be a more dangerous trap than being stuck in complacency.

Many people like to talk about change and how they support thinking “outside of the box”. However, many of these people, in reality, are afraid of change. Their real view of change is “change it back to the way it was”. The irony is that the biggest risk is never to take a risk. People who think change is scary do not realize not changing is even scarier.

How do we achieve effective change? One key can be found in the concept of “not knowing”. We should be able to accept the idea that while we may not know what is going to happen next, we nonetheless are perfectly okay with not knowing. We can navigate periods of uncertainty with a confidence that whatever happens, we can make the appropriate adjustments and will handle it in a way that creates opportunity. Chaos may occur from time to time, but the chaos is welcomed – and well managed.

The above approach requires a great deal of self confidence, aggressiveness, and a willingness to assume risk.

Assuming we are comfortable with change, is change required at RIT and, if so, in what direction? We shall speak to this next.

## **COMMODITY AND THE THREE RULES**

The most basic competitive question, one that a student would ask, is “why should I attend RIT?” In answering this question, we should note that much of the academic marketplace has become “commoditized”.

Students see many universities offering basically the same product and services. In this case, some universities choose to play the “we’re the lowest price in town” game. Other universities, like RIT, will choose not to play that game. To avoid the price war trap, RIT must change the students’ basis of comparison. We must transcend commodity and defy comparison. Basically, we should try to comply with the adage “you are trying to compare apples and oranges”. This is what we want. We want to be an apple and have all of our competitors be seen as oranges.

To survive and prosper, RIT must have a quality product and offer good service at a competitive price. That is just the cost of entry into the game. It is just the beginning. This is where the real competition starts. We have to promise something – and deliver it – that takes us beyond the expected factors of competitive price, quality, and service.

In trying to move to the next level, we have to differentiate ourselves. The real competitive battle that we must win in order to differentiate ourselves is in areas such as who can best offer a relevant, high quality academic program? Who can offer the most help in successfully completing the program? And who can offer the best *feeling* about the total experience?

These questions lead us to the “three rules” that a CIU must follow. These rules are:

- Know more about the student than anyone else.
- Get closer to the student than anyone else.
- Emotionally connect with the student better than anyone else.

Assuming RIT is competitive at the commodity level (that is, price, quality, and service), following these three rules will give us competitive advantage over our competitors, and is the most powerful way to become a CIU.

Let us begin with a consideration of the third rule. Emotional connections are created over time with a series of actions. It is almost always small actions that take place on a personal level. For example, when students first arrive on a campus, having everyone greet them with a smile, a “hello”, and an offer to help them on their way is powerful. This means everyone from the student in the Information Booth who greets students immediately upon driving on to campus, to parking attendants, Campus Safety, maintenance workers, secretaries, faculty, and staff at all levels. In fact, if faculty and staff exhibit this behavior, the student body itself will assimilate it and they, too, will reflect the same attitude toward each other – a very powerful and people-generated force. In short, we all need to take honest interest in each student as a “person”, and it starts when he/she first arrives on campus.

The next two sections examine the first two rules.

## **STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF RIT**

Today, our 60% retention rate tells us that if we do not give our students what they want, the way they want it, and when they want it, they will leave. The seller generally is not in control today. It is a buyer’s market. I am not talking here about denigrating quality, giving up control,

lowering standards, coddling students, or ignoring the critical contributions of faculty and staff. I am talking about the primacy of students. I am speaking to compelling data and analysis, which will be presented and discussed as part of the Strategic Planning process, which indicate that our current student attrition rate is unnecessary and unjustified.

By being a CIU, we can offset the student's natural power and actually exercise some power on the supply side. The paradox is that the only way to gain that preferred supply-side position is to be tremendously student-focused and oriented in the first place.

Students and parents are "tougher" and more demanding than they were five or ten years ago. They are more informed and educated. They are more likely to complain on the spot if they experience a problem. They demand better service than they used to. If they do not get the service that they want, they are likely to take their "business" elsewhere. They are more likely to take action by writing or calling my office with a complaint. They are more likely to tell other people about problems they have experienced with our organization. They do not take "no" for an answer and are more likely to go up the chain of command until they get satisfaction. They demand more value today than ever before for every dollar spent. They feel they have choices in what universities they attend and they will exercise those choices in a second if they do not get the service they want in a particular instance.

Product quality is so important that it has graduated from its past status as a competitive factor (come to us, we have "better" quality). It is now an *expected* factor. Everyone expects to find quality as a necessary condition. We cannot achieve status as a CIU by quality alone, since everyone can make the argument that they have a quality product and service (without a quality product and service, they are in decline). Focusing on students and their *total experience*, not just quality (or price or service) becomes the differentiator.

Value is what is important. Value relates to the entire package: the combination of price, quality, service, convenience, and every other factor involved in making the decision to enroll and graduate from RIT. We do not have to have the lowest price or best quality to compete successfully – we have to demonstrate value, which is the student's *total experience* with RIT.

This means that *the student's total experience in attending RIT has become the new competitor factor*. The good news is that we, as an organization, have a great deal more control, influence, and power over the experience in our university than we do over the quality and the price of our product. We may not be able to offer the same kind of product or even the same quality of product as, let us say, MIT in some areas. We may not be able to set tuition as low as some competitors. However, we do have control and influence over the total experience that our constituents receive.

The expectations of our students are higher than they have ever been. The number one competitive issue is how to meet these expectations. This is an opportunity, not a problem. For as long as the students keep raising the bar and raising expectations, we have the opportunity to beat our competitors by maintaining or increasing the pace by which we match or exceed these expectations. If we are good at what we do, we should be thankful for students who constantly demand more and more because a constantly rising standard of expectation weeds out our

competitors who are not really that good, makes more room for us, and shortens the list on the way to being a CIU.

Kerry Phillips, RIT Associate Budget Director, Finance and Administration, captures much of the substance of this section in a statement that has been framed and hung on a wall in his office for a number of years:

“STUDENTS ARE...

Students are the most important people in our business.  
Students are not dependent on us. We are dependent on them.  
Students are not an interruption; they are the purpose of this.  
Students do us a favor when they come in. We aren't doing them a favor by waiting on them.  
Students are a part of our business – not outsiders.  
Students are not just money in the cash register. They are human beings with feelings like our own.  
Students are people who come to us with their needs and wants. It is our job to fill them.  
Students deserve the most courteous attention we can give them. They are the lifeblood of our business. They pay our salaries. Without them, we would have to close our doors.

- Author Unknown”

## **MAKING THE MOST OF COLLEGE**

The emphasis on students in this paper, especially in the preceding section, brings to mind a number of the conclusions and recommendations in Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, Harvard University Press, 2001. This book, now in its seventh edition, has been awarded Harvard University Press's annual prize for “an outstanding publication about education and society”.

This book took ten years of systematic research to complete. For several years, more than 60 faculty members from more than 20 colleges and universities held regular meetings to design ways to answer two broad questions:

- What choices can students themselves make to get the most out of college?
- What are effective ways for faculty members and campus leaders (faculty, staff, and students) to translate good intentions into practice?

Dr. Light visited more than 90 colleges, ranging from highly selective to open admissions; public to private; and large to small. More than 1,600 undergraduate students were interviewed, many students more than once. Each interview lasted from one to three hours.

Some of the results of the research which relate to this paper include:

- The single most underestimated feature of a successful college experience may be receiving good, constructive, somewhat personal advising.
- Learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities, is vital. When asked to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, 80% of the students chose a situation or event outside of the classroom.
- A large majority of students said they learned significantly more in courses that are highly structured, with relatively many quizzes and short assignments. Crucial to this preference is getting quick feedback from the professor.
- Those students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside of the classroom have a more satisfying experience (here, co-op offers a tremendous advantage).
- A substantial time commitment to one or two activities outside of coursework has little or no relationship to grades. However, such commitments have a strong relationship to overall satisfaction with college life.
- An important part of a great college education depends upon human relationships. One significant such relationship is between a student and one or several faculty members. In fact, Dr. Light states that the single most important bit of advice he can give to a new advisee is to get to know one or several faculty members reasonably well and also have them get to know him/her reasonably well.
- Professors can exert a profound impact on students' development as young scholars, good citizens, and caring human beings. Graduating seniors were asked: "Can you think of any particular faculty member who has had a particularly important impact on you? In shaping the way you think about yourself, or life, or the world around you, or your future?" Eighty-nine percent of the students quickly identified such a professor.
- Campuses have unique cultures. A distinguished anthropologist was asked why faculty members at some colleges seem to care deeply about the effectiveness of their teaching, while faculty in other similar colleges clearly care less. His answer was: "It's in the air. I think it's a combination of history, faculty values, leadership, and student expectations."

This last quote is what this paper (and previous papers), our Strategic Planning process, and the current discussion around student retention are really all about.

This and the previous section point out the critical importance of people and attitude in establishing a campus culture. The next section makes this point more directly.

## **PEOPLE AND ATTITUDE**

People are the great differentiator that will enable RIT to transcend commodity and defy comparison.

There is the story of the student who was passed around from person to person in the university over the phone, with no one willing to take responsibility for solving the problem. Finally, the student was mistakenly directed to an individual who had nothing to do with the issue. When the student and the employee realized that they were not connected on the issue at hand, the student said, “Can you transfer me to someone else?” The employee said, “Sir, you have me on the phone. That means you are my student now and your problem is my problem now. I am going to give you my name and extension number. If you do not talk to someone who can solve your problem within the next 30 minutes, I want you to call back and ask for me personally. I am going to take care of this, sir. Don’t worry about it for another minute.”

This is the kind of attitude we need at RIT. It is an attitude where every person who confronts an issue presented by a student, parent, or other university constituent takes the responsibility for following through to the solution of the problem.

While superstars in an organization are important, it is steady, consistent performers that win the day. When you are in an endeavor in which people *are* the difference (such as RIT), and you can say that *all* of the faculty and staff are the difference, then you have a powerful advantage. RIT’s challenge becomes one of creating the advantage where *all* of our people *are* the difference (and then be able to prove it to our students). Creating an advantage through our people is the best way to create a C1U. However, it is not easy to achieve.

C1U status is achieved when, out of dozens or hundreds of competitors that could be named, RIT is the one that is selected by students. We have to pay attention to the students at all times in order to win and keep them (the example of the student/employee above). This leads to a discussion of brand and institutional identity (B/II).

## **B/II**

If RIT can differentiate itself in a clear and powerful way – i.e., establish a strong B/II – it can become a C1U. Our B/II is not our advertising, logo, or university name. Our B/II is who we are, what we promise, and our ability and willingness to keep that promise. Our B/II may not be at all what we think it is or what we intend it to be. We do not own our B/II.

Our B/II is owned by our students and anyone else who has an impression of RIT. Our B/II resides in the minds of our students, not in our newspaper ads. Our B/II is whoever our students think we are, whatever they think is our promise to them, and whether or not they believe that we keep that promise.

B/II is important because it defines us in the marketplace. It should be a top priority of every employee, from top to bottom, at RIT. Every employee should be working to build, protect, and represent the B/II to the best of his/her ability. It is essential that our view of our B/II matches the market’s perception of our B/II.

Note that we seek B/II *strength*, not just B/II *recognition* (recognition can be negative). We want our students to believe in us and not just “know who we are”. For example, negative B/II’s at RIT are created when:

- We transfer a student four times to different departments and the problem is never solved.
- We charge a student extra for something they thought was included in the original tuition (for example, lab fees, parking).
- We fix a mistake that is ours (a “defective product”) but no one apologizes to the student or parent for their trouble.
- We put a telephone caller on hold for more than a minute.
- Our website is confusing and hard to navigate.
- A parent, counselor, recruiter, or student comes into our office several times over a period of time, and no one greets them by name.

If we have established a positive B/II, the B/II places us past our competitors. When a student wants something that we offer, we are the only or the top name on their list.

It is not the job of marketing, advertising, or public relations to create the B/II. Their job is to tell the story of the B/II. It is the job of the faculty and staff at RIT to establish the B/II through the total experience they offer our students.

For a long time, I have been talking about “student success” being RIT’s mantra. We have to work hard and creatively to be true in every way to that concept.

## **RIT EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS**

This paper focuses on students and what they expect from RIT and on what RIT should do to accommodate its students. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that RIT sets rigorous requirements in deciding which students to admit each year, denying admission to several thousand students in the process. Over a typically four-to-seven year period, RIT decides which students to retain and, eventually, certify for graduation. Along the way, RIT *expects that its students will meet high standards of academic performance and personal and professional behavior*. RIT charges tuition and fees (price) to apply these standards to students’ learning.

In a unique relationship, students pay for the privilege and opportunity to “buy a product” from an organization (RIT) which then judges their ability to master the “product” and determines (certifies) their success in this endeavor.

Paradoxically, because RIT seeks to attract and retain the very best students, it, in turn has to meet the high expectations that students have for RIT. This paper is focused on the student-expectations-for-RIT side of the equation. While RIT-expectations-for-students are clearly relevant in this discussion, I shall save that discussion for another day.

## RIT C1U EXAMPLE

Many RIT faculty and staff are following and exhibiting the principles and concepts discussed in this paper. When all RIT faculty and staff are engaged in this way, RIT will be approaching a C1U.

One such comprehensive RIT example of the culture and mindset proposed in this paper is given in a recent paper written by Professors Keith J. Whittington, Dianne P. Bills, and Lawrence W. Hill of RIT's Department of Information Technology in the B. Thomas Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences. The paper, titled "Implementation of Alternative Pacing in an Introductory Programming Sequence", was presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Conference for Information Technology Curriculum (Lafayette, Indiana, October 16-18, 2003). The research-based pedagogy described is worth your review. I shall summarize some of the results below.

Experience showed that placing all students into the same sequence of introductory courses was resulting in lower than desired student retention rates and academic performance. In academic year 2001-02, the first course (IT1) in the sequence was taught for the first time in a studio format. One consequence of this format was a greater understanding of which students were struggling and, in general, which topics were the most troublesome.

Following up on this result, in academic year 2002-03, an alternatively paced option was introduced into the curriculum. Under this option, students who did not perform at a high level in the first course would take a two-course sequence (IT 2A and IT 2B) following the first course. Students who performed at a high level in the first course took the already established second course (IT2). Under the alternate option, students reviewed (with different examples) some of the difficult material of IT1 and covered the material of IT2 at a slower pace. At the end of three quarters, students in the alternative option were at the same academic level as students who completed IT2. The students in the alternative option used a professional elective to take the second course (IT 2B) in the alternative option. As a result of introducing this curriculum flexibility, all students could progress on a level playing field to IT3.

What were the results? Retention (students moving to IT2 or IT2A) increased from 53.9% to 62.8%. Significantly, the percentage of students completing IT2 or IT2B was 57.9% compared to 47.9% under the prior system and the percentage of students receiving a C grade or better increased from 41.2% to 55.5%.

The faculty of the IT department recognized student differences in academic preparation and ability. As a result, they experimented with a different teaching/learning style (studio model) and introduced curriculum flexibility while maintaining academic standards. The faculty consulted closely with and surveyed their students, allowing the student feedback to shape the curriculum development. The documented results were increased retention, higher academic performance, and enhanced student satisfaction.

Bravo and thank you. I believe the Golisano College mind set, over time, will find additional ways to work with our students to reach the retention level we all seek. Because of

space constraints in this paper, I shall not present examples from other colleges which also represent the principles discussed here and are moving us in the desired direction. I shall ask Provost McKenzie to work with the deans to present a campus-wide summary, which will be of significant value to our Strategic Planning process.

## CONCLUSION

I have several purposes in offering this paper.

- First, I want to reinforce in a different way the concept described in the previous papers “Shaping RIT’s Destiny” and “Very Good to Great”. In those papers, we introduced the notion of a category of universities represented by research universities such as MIT; a second category represented by more traditional universities such as Harvard; and a third category of career-focused universities led by RIT. We identified 17 attributes which, taken together, differentiated the RIT category from the two other categories. The graphic representation was one of three ladders.

I had the opportunity to read the book *Becoming a Category of One* subsequent to those papers. There is a symbiotic relationship between those two White Papers and this book, and I am using this relationship to emphasize the points made, now, in all three papers: RIT has an opportunity at this time to truly distinguish itself and rise to a new, relevant, enviable, and unique level as a major university, perhaps being the only university in its category (becoming a CIU).

- Second, this paper reinforces and speaks to some additional concepts and ideas pertinent to “going” to that next level.
- Third, this paper speaks to the centrality of students – their desires, expectations, and welfare – as a motivator, guide, and standard for everything we do.
- Fourth, this paper continues the B/II discussion of an earlier paper. In this way, I hope to prepare the ground for the more in-depth B/II analysis that will focus around our completed Strategic Plan. Again, this analysis will occur over the summer and fall and lead to action in the winter quarter.

This paper is not meant to be a recipe or a handbook. Hopefully, it can serve as an essay about our aspirations, capabilities, and values. To quote Holocaust scholar and Nobel Peace prize recipient Elie Wiesel, “Questions unite people, and answers divide people”. Please view this paper as leaning to the question side of this equation.

I would be most happy to receive your thoughts, comments, suggestions, and critiques as part of the continuing dialog leading to the completion of RIT’s Strategic Plan for 2005 – 2015.