What drives innovation?

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by Charles R. Bantz

Last week, 2,500 people from all over the country came to Indianapolis for the annual meeting of the National Association of College and University Business Officers. These are the executives who manage institutional resources and whose strategic thinking and decision making help shape the future of their campuses. The focus this year was on driving innovation, and I was honored to be asked to speak about IUPUI. Several attendees took the IUPUI campus tour and were highly impressed by the Hine Hall/University Tower conversion as an example of innovation. The NACUBO photographer featured pictures from the tour in the loop playing before the General Sessions speakers came out. It was a great opportunity to showcase our campus to a national university audience. Based on impressions I have and heard from others, they will be talking about us for a long time!

The conference featured stimulating keynote speakers, including economist Jeremy Rifkin, who argued that industrial revolutions take place when new communication technologies converge with new energy systems. For example, in the 19th century, print technology became cheaper when steam power was introduced into the process, ushering in the greater availability of books and greater demand for literacy. Today, it is the convergence of the Internet, green electricity, and 3-D printing that is driving innovation.

One speaker who many found especially thought-provoking was Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts, and Cultures*. He argued collaboration with people from different backgrounds is the key to driving innovation successfully today. He observed that poets, philosophers, scientists, architects, painters, and sculptors came from all over Europe to Florence, Italy, thanks to the patronage of the wealthy Medici family and that having talented people from so many different fields and cultures in one place was the impetus for the Renaissance, one of the most innovative eras in human history.

Where is the best place to break new ground today? According to Johansson, it is where diverse cultures and industries intersect. It is where one brings concepts from one field into new, unfamiliar territory. How termites construct mounds in the African Savannah, for example, led to the design of an energy-efficient shopping center and office block in Zimbabwe. Innovators are changing the world today by stepping into the place where ideas from different fields and cultures meet and collide.

IUPUI has been such a place throughout its history as we have partnered across disciplines and with our community. As we complete our VISION 2025 strategic plan and begin implementation, should we take a page from the business officers and ask how we can increase our innovation?

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