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Shaping the Future: Strategic Planning for Small Colleges and Universities.

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Introduction

This paper addresses the importance of strategic planning as a precursor to assessing organizational performance and outlines a change model that has been used successfully at a small college with limited resources. Grounded in extant executive planning processes, this new model demystifies the strategic planning process and establishes procedures that address the practical and logistical issues associated with facilitating a planning process and ensuring that the plan becomes a document that espouses realistic goals, inspires and motivates members of the campus community, and actually provides direction for departments as they create their work plans and allocate resources.

The Strategic Planning—Accreditation Connection

The Higher Learning Commission new Criteria for Accreditation highlight the importance of evaluating organizational effectiveness and performance. This focus is clarified in section 3-3, "Exploring the Usefulness of Cross-cutting Themes as Context for Evaluation," of the Handbook on Accreditation. Here the Commission articulates four themes that cut across the five evaluative Criteria: (1) orientation to the future; (2) focus on learning; (3) connectedness (internally and externally); and (4) distinctiveness.

For higher education institutions, organizational effectiveness and high performance are directly related to each of these four themes. However, the precise standards for evaluation may vary because organizational effectiveness can be adequately evaluated only in relationship to the organization’s distinct vision, mission, and strategic goals. Given this axiomatic connection between organizational goals and organizational effectiveness, strategic planning processes designed to codify institutional missions and priorities have taken on heightened importance.

Off the Shelf and into the Hearts and Minds of the Campus Community Members

For many institutions, meaningful campus-wide strategic planning is not new. However, for many others, strategic planning has taken place around the administrative table and has resulted in planning documents that contain lofty platitudes and that sit on a shelf rather than guide and direct work at the department level. These shelved plans are useless in promoting organizational effectiveness and high performance because most of the people who impact these outcomes are either unaware of or not committed to the ideas articulated in them.

Unfortunately, many colleges and universities simply do not have the human, financial, or knowledge resources needed to create and implement provocative strategic plans that can orient them to future success, connect internal and external constituencies, promote institutional distinctiveness, and ensure dynamic adjustments to student learning needs. These institutions could benefit from following a systematic strategic planning process designed to promote campus-wide buy-in and facilitate accomplishing these essential tasks using existing human resources, little additional funding, and the knowledge resources of a strategic planning leadership team that incorporates representatives from across all campus divisions and job categories.

A Model for Shaping the Future

Baker University developed and successfully launched the Shaping the Future planning process in 2003–2004 and is now in the unit-based implementation phase. The process model is grounded in sound organizational planning practices (e.g., Below, Morrissey and Acomb 1987; Eckel, Green, Hill and Mallon 1999; Lucas and Associates 2000) yet tailored to the needs of institutions whose employees may not be well aware of extant best practices in contemporary higher education, as is often the case for campuses with limited resources for professional development and a large cadre of faculty and staff with long service histories.

Below are the essential ingredients of the Shaping the Future planning model, in sequential order.
Carefully Form and Educate the Strategic Planning Leadership Team

Designate a dynamic, well-informed senior administrator, preferably the provost or chief academic officer (but not the president), as the facilitator of the strategic planning process. The strategic planning leadership team (SPLT) should include all university officers and lead administrators, the director of human resources, key student development staff, plus one progressive representative from each academic area (social sciences, fine arts, business, education, humanities, science and technology, etc.). Do not include faculty curmudgeons at this level. They will have their chance to weigh in later.

Membership on the SPLT is not for lightweights. Be sure to follow Collins’s advice and get the right people on the bus (Collins 2001). They will need to invest heavily in outside reading and be available for two-hour, biweekly SPLT meetings for at least three months, and then be willing to lead a task force group through a three-month strategic analysis phase. Choose members carefully. Designate a SPLT executive committee comprised of a small team of key people who already meet regularly in a work group.

Assign relevant reading to SPLT members. The goal is to bring all members of the team up to a similar level of awareness of strategic planning processes, accreditation criteria, the latest trends in higher education, and the best practices in university leadership. The facilitator should present these readings to each team member in a private meeting in his or her office during which the facilitator will address individual questions and thank the team member personally for participating.

Launch the Planning Process in a Series of Public Forums for All Constituent Groups

Hold special public announcements for staff, faculty, students, the alumni board, the parents’ council, and the board of trustees. The planning facilitator should boldly provide justification for the planning process, introduce the SPLT members, and review the steps and timeline for the process, highlighting opportunities for participation from the university community and the expected outcomes from the process: a new vision, core values, mission, strategic initiatives, and enabling factors.

Clarify the Institutional Mission

The SPLT should meet in workshop settings to craft a revised college/university mission, using a systematic process that seeks answers to the following questions (adapted from Below et al. 1987):

- What are we passionate about?
- What is unique about our university? What can we do better than others?
- Who are our principal students? How should that change?
- What are our principal offerings and services, present and future (focus on groups of offerings, not individual ones)?
- What are our principal market segments, present and future?
- What principal learning methodologies do we utilize?
- What has changed in higher education over the last three to five years?
- What is likely to change over the next three to five years?
- What are our principal economic concerns, and how are they measured? What is our most important economic indicator?
- What philosophical issues are important to our historic or current affiliations and to our future?

Utilize NCHEMS and IPEDS to Identify Peer and Aspiration Institutions for Benchmarking Purposes

Utilize the objective information in NCHEMS and IPEDS to identify a set of peer universities that are similar to the planning institution in terms of institutional characteristics, enrollment, finances, and graduation rates. Adjust these criteria in order to capture aspiration institutions that reflect standards to which the planning institution can aspire within a ten-year period. Avoid comparisons to institutions that are substantially different in ranking categories or have considerably higher endowments. Employ a threshold approach to selecting peer institutions that utilizes a combination of both objective and subjective selection criteria. At the initial level, selection decisions are based on administrative input based largely on informed judgments. In order to allow for aggregate comparisons rather than comparison to a few particular institutions, utilize the objective information to identify about thirty peer and aspiration institutions, and then work with the president and executive members of the SPLT to pare the list down to ten to twelve for each group, using judgments based on firsthand knowledge of the institutions in the peer and aspiration pools, as well as a variety of factors not included among the initial sort criteria. Peer and aspiration institutions may or may not include competitor institutions.
Conduct a Strategic Analysis, and Use the Results to Form the Database for Strategic Planning Decision

- Identify key stakeholder groups.
- Define the salient issues for each stakeholder group.
- Organize the issues into functional categories, and establish task force groups to address issues in each area. Assign SPLIT members to lead the task force groups for areas below (or others that may arise from the process).
  - Academic programs and instructional quality
  - Admissions and recruitment
  - Faculty and staff development and retention
  - Student development and retention
  - Institutional mission and advancement
  - Administrative and support services
- Conduct a gap analysis, comparing the planning institution separately to its peer institutions and its aspiration institutions, noting the gap between present performance and future needs in order to keep pace with peers and move closer to best practices displayed by aspirations.

Codify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

- Distinctive qualities and areas of excellence should be classified as strengths.
- Areas in which the planning institution compares unfavorably to its peer institutions are considered weaknesses.
- Areas in which the planning institution is as strong as its peers but not as advanced as its aspiration institutions constitute opportunities.
- Threats are issues that must be addressed in order to avoid potential harm.

Formulate Strategic Direction

The strategic direction should be based on an honest evaluation of the planning institution’s strengths and opportunities. Capture the strategic direction in a compelling new vision statement.

Articulate Long-term Objectives

Write these in the form of lofty (not necessarily measurable) goals that will transform the institution over ten years. These strategic initiatives will guide the construction of measurable goals and establish institutional work and funding priorities.

Identify Enabling Factors

These enabling factors are actually institutional weaknesses that must be addressed before progress on strategic initiatives can be activated. Typically, they have an impact on revenue, such as student recruitment and retention, enhanced advancement efforts, image campaigns, and technology. However, enabling factors will vary across institutions. At Baker, providing funds to encourage and reward innovation and creative contributions was identified as an enabling factor.

Keep the Campus Community Fully Informed at Every Step of the Planning Process

Ensure campus-wide awareness, promote buy-in, and maximize likelihood of implementation through a special internal communication campaign, including electronic bulletins, a strategic planning Web site, e-mail circulation of draft documents with requests for input, and upbeat markings of major milestones.

Require Unit-Based Planning That Supports the Overall Plan

To further solidify campus-wide awareness and ensure implementation, carefully train all work units to create unit-based strategic plans, using a standard format. Provide adequate support for units as they move through the planning process and allow ample time (a full academic year) for units to complete their plans.
Budget to Fund Campus-wide and Unit-Based Planning Priorities

Use the strategic plan to set funding priorities, respond to funding requests, direct grant writing, and plot fundraising targets.

Immediate Impact on Community Spirit Bolsters Ability to Take the Long View

Strategic planning cuts across the Higher Learning Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation such that an institution simply cannot demonstrate compliance without a well-articulated and pervasively understood mission and plan for the future. Adopting the Shaping the Future approach is likely to help small colleges and universities address this need because it capitalizes on existing human and knowledge resources and utilizes minimal financial resources, while still producing provocative results.

Unfortunately, given the inherently distant strategic planning investment horizon, the Shaping the Future approach to planning has not been fully tested. The final results for Baker will not be fully known for about ten years. However, the planning process itself resulted in an increased sense of community; clarification of institutional priorities and goals; heightened awareness of the university mission, core values, and strategic initiatives that guide department-level work; and practices that align the budget with the plan. All of these early, after-action outcomes suggest that the planning process has been successful so far and will likely produce the desired outcomes if the campus leaders make a strong effort to keep the plan off the shelf and inculcated into the hearts and minds of campus community members. Similar results can be expected if the Shaping the Future model is utilized elsewhere.

References


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