

Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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A Perspective on Strategic Planning: The Equal Partners of Process and Outcome

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Launching Strategic Planning

Eighteen months ago we set off on a path that would lead Ferris State University collectively to a new university-wide strategic plan. Just a bit of background: The last strategic plan was put in place in 2008 and served the university well. Over the past five years we saw record breaking enrollment, big increases in retention and graduation rates, exceptionally high infield job placement rates, and a strong financial position for the university. We also saw the creation of fifty-seven new programs, certificates, majors and degrees, while we eliminated or redesigned thirty-two programs. By almost any measure, the 2008 strategic plan was instrumental in providing the university community with a framework for moving forward in some very exciting directions.

...We started strategic planning from a real position of strength.

Yet, as successful as the previous five years were, the university community was ready for a new strategic plan. We knew early on that we wanted a plan that would build on the many successes and provide a vehicle for addressing emerging opportunities and challenges. We wanted a strategic plan that was different but equally successful. In short, we started strategic planning from a real position of strength.

The Importance of Process

Our strategic planning process began when our university president appointed co-chairs to lead the effort – the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and a senior faculty member. Interestingly enough, this posed our first challenge. It was clear that strategic planning was going to be lead from an academic perspective. However, the strategic plan needed to be a university-wide plan that engaged all of the constituencies, both internal and external. This could not be a strategic plan that only served academics; it needed to be a strategic plan where all members of the campus community could see themselves making a contribution.

Our next two steps were critical to what we hoped

would be the long-term success of the strategic plan. First, we launched into twenty-seven different listening sessions. These were very useful as it allowed us to do a comprehensive appraisal of both the strengths of the university, as well as the challenges we face. Second, we identified a series of co-champions to link our strategic plan to our core values. It became clear in our initial sessions that the university community, both internal and external, embraced our existing core values. Rather than changing the values of the institution, we decided to build our strategic plan around six core values – Collaboration, Diversity, Ethical Community, Excellence, Learning, and Opportunity. We enlisted co-champions around each core value to have even more listening sessions and to identify two or three strategic focus areas for each core value. It was from this work that we were able to develop our very first draft of our new strategic plan.

It took us nearly a year to get to that first draft. Some were concerned that the process was taking too much time, but it was our collective view that if we did not get the process right we would never arrive at a strategic plan that would be embraced and used by the campus community. The real advantage of paying such attention to the process was that we had created a framework for “buy-in” that helped us move from a first draft to the seventh draft, then ending with a final draft in a matter of just two months.

Another critical aspect was the early and continual engagement of our Board of Trustees in the process. We

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had dinner meetings, we had retreats, we had working sessions, we had informal conversations, and we had formal presentations. Our goal was to have our board fully engaged in the process so at the point of our

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A strategy is something you can touch; you can motivate people with...You can energize people around the message.

- Jack Welch

Strategic Planning is a process by which we can envision the future and develop the necessary procedures and operations to influence and achieve that future.

- Clark Crouch

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EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Strategic planning is critical for organizational success and requires a big-picture approach, rather than a single, one-dimensional solution. The strategic planning process defines the college's future direction, establishes how resources are allocated to accomplish its goals, and determines how the college fulfills its mission for the next several years. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community colleges best optimize the value of strategic planning for organizational success?

Amber Holloway, M.P.S.

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Community colleges are being asked to do ever more with even fewer resources, while facing increased scrutiny and calls for greater accountability to stakeholders. Strategic planning, when done well, can be a much-needed guide to navigating such a tough climate. To gain the most value from strategic planning, the community college should engage in a process that is characterized by the following:

Open Participation: The institution should provide regular opportunities and venues for college-wide and community input and review of various planning documents. Invite faculty and staff to continue participating throughout the process by creating groups, committees, or events. Establishing a sense of ownership and investment in the strategic plan is critical to its future success.

Communicate the Plan: The community college president and administration must make a strong commitment to emphasize and support on-going communication of the strategic plan in multiple formats. Channels such as a website, monthly newsletters, standing agenda items at committee meetings, and a formal quarterly progress report on goals and objectives are all options that indicate to the stakeholder community the importance of maintaining visibility and accountability of the plan.

Implement the Plan: The development, communication, and reporting of college-wide planning processes should identify goal sponsors, action steps, measurable outcomes, and timelines articulated in a project charter format. Implementing the strategic plan with such a clear, results-oriented focus will assist in embedding a culture of planning and goal setting throughout the college.

Measure the Plan: To maintain credibility with stakeholders, the institution should measure the strategic plan with key performance indicators. Measuring effectiveness of the strategic plan is the closing and the continuation of the planning loop. The president and administration must acknowledge when the institution is not meeting or exceeding key performance indicators and make adjustments. Measuring accomplishments and monitoring barriers to success are both critical to optimizing the strategic planning process, serving as a catalyst for driving continuous improvement across the institution, and ultimately measuring the effectiveness of the institution itself.

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Daniel Herbst, M.S.Ed.

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The value of community college strategic planning is often difficult to measure. Regardless, most college administrators will support the need for strategic planning as "a deliberate, disciplined approach to producing fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why" (Bryson, 2011). Since col-

leges may be seen as myopic without a strategic plan, many spend countless hours and resources to complete the perfect plan. When finished, the plan is proclaimed an example of the worthiness of the current administration (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Since colleges are under great scrutiny from various entities regarding how public resources are spent, a strategic plan is often used to demonstrate that colleges are good stewards of the public trust (Welsh, Nunez, & Petrosko, 2005).

To optimize the value of strategic planning, it is now time to rethink the process from the ground up. Planning may take a year or more, resulting in hidden costs such as salaries and staff time. Further, the focus is often outdated by the time it is presented to the campus. Colleges must find ways to be more responsive to the changes in student needs, federal laws, and other change regulations. Finally, the finished strategic plan is often presented in a ceremony and then electronically hidden on the campus website (the 2014 version of putting a bound copy away on a shelf). While leaders are well intentioned, often the plan has very little effect on day to day operations.

One suggestion to optimize strategic planning is to develop a direct connection between the college's strategic plan and new Pathways developed by the Higher Learning Commission. By combining the two, staff time is greatly reduced while providing the college with a plan that serves its needs on a yearly basis. The Standard Pathway, for example, allows for the electronic gathering of currently collected data as they are generated over time. If tied to strategic planning, resources would not be duplicated, data would be available to be shared with outside interests, and the college can focus on serving students with innovative programs.

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NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Strategic planning is critical for organizational success and requires a big-picture approach, rather than a single, one-dimensional solution. The strategic planning process defines the college's future direction, establishes how resources are allocated to accomplish its goals, and determines how the college fulfills its mission for the next several years. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders; their answers appear below.

John Marr, Ph.D.

Dean, Cuyahoga Community College
Cleveland, Ohio

Deborah Thalner, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Ferris State University
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Strategic planning is an essential process for any community college seeking to confront the internal and external forces that will significantly influence that college's size, scope, and culture in the future. And while even well-developed and competently executed plans cannot guarantee the end results sought by the colleges that write them, trusting the future of our colleges to the cumulative results of normal day-to-day operations is a recipe for disaster.

...The tools of strategic planning must be employed with rigor and integrity if the planning process is to truly help a college in shaping its preferred future.

Academic leaders know this, and yet many strategic planning processes are little more than the creation of plans and dreams for the school, with no real thought as to the competent implementation of data-driven initiatives and the tracking of aligned measures to ensure that initiatives are delivering on the promise. The less than rigorous execution of important planning processes regularly results in the development of weak plans or the development of useful plans that are poorly implemented--if they are ever implemented at all. Thus the strategic plan that took significant time and resources to develop ends up "collecting dust" with little to show for the effort that went into it. This error is compounded when leaders do not take advantage of the planning process itself to strengthen critical aspects of campus culture and to deepen linkages and relationships within the surrounding community. In today's high-stakes operating environment, the tools of strategic planning must be employed with rigor and integrity if the planning process is to truly help a college in shaping its preferred future.

Most of the basic tools of strategic planning, such as environmental scanning, SWOT analysis, organizational goals, and performance metrics are well known to most of us. Another critical tool is conducting a thorough stakeholder analysis, ensuring that appropriate internal and external stakeholders have a voice in the process and in the initiatives that are developed. Inclusion of the appropriate stakeholder groups will not only help create better plans, but will help solidify the commitment needed for implementation. Active participation in the process by college leaders is necessary to ensure that resulting strategic initiatives are well aligned to the mission and the values of the college. A strong alignment between the initiatives

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and the overall mission of the college ensures a consistent focal point for all stakeholders, and creates a culture where all employees in the organization understand how they contribute to the success of the college.

Sadly for many colleges, even after competent plan development, the process often breaks down during the critical phases of implementation and ongoing evaluation of initiatives and goals adopted as part of the college-wide action plan. Active engagement at all levels of the organization to develop department and

unit goals and dissemination of the plan to stakeholders are important steps in the planning process. The development of measures of success at each level is also critical, and colleges that develop a robust monitoring and reporting system to review progress and engage in continuous improvement will realize the most gain from the strategic planning process. As Peter Drucker has said "What gets measured gets managed."

Ultimately, the major effect of sound strategic planning must be to strengthen or build the organizational culture in ways that make competent execution of a good plan the only acceptable outcome of the entire process. Sound implementation and assessment should be characterized by the same values that guided the completion of the plan from the start. The openness and sharing of information needed during planning is just as important during implementation. The need for every member of the campus community to understand their role during planning is just as important during implementation. And the integrity and care needed to lead a rigorous and honest planning process at the start will be absolutely essential during implementation and ongoing evaluation of the entire effort.

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John Marr, Ph.D., is the Dean of Academic Affairs at the Eastern Campus of Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Marr's almost 30 years in college administration includes mid- and senior-level experience in small, medium, large, urban, and suburban two-year colleges. Dr. Marr has led critical college operations in both student and academic affairs and has consulted nationally and internationally in the areas of assessment and accreditation.



Deborah Thalner, Ph.D. Dr. Thalner's background includes 17 years in the automotive industry in a variety of leadership positions, including senior leadership positions responsible for strategic planning and implementation. She has been with Ferris State University in a variety of positions for the past 14 years, including instructor in the DCCL program.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Perspectives on Strategic Planning in the Public Sector, by Richard D. Young:

Predicated on the theory that strategic planning is critical to public sector organizational success, this study reviews the voluminous literature associated with this topic.

The author examines strategic planning from the historical context, reviews the previous work of noted experts in the field, and presents a model strategic planning process for review.

Read the complete study at:

<http://bit.ly/1naYJLt>

The Real Value of Strategic Planning, by Sarah Kaplan and Eric D. Beinhocker:

The authors suggest formal strategic planning can often fall short of its goals, yet when leaders keep the right goal in mind, formal planning can become a real source of competitive advantage to the organization. Research indicates that successful organizations use strategic planning as a learning tool to create "prepared minds" within their management teams.

Read the complete article at:

<http://bit.ly/1ouV7yh>

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completion we believed strongly that, not only did we have the support of the board, we had the active engagement of the board.

One of the concerns throughout the process was finding a way to fully engage our external constituents. To address this directly, we decided to hold three days of meetings at different locations titled, "Commission for the Future." We used this opportunity to have face-to-face discussions about Ferris' future, Core Values, and Strategic Plan. In addition to some very engaged and helpful feedback on our strategic plan, there were three things we learned from our discussions.

A strategic plan is not of much value unless it is brought to conclusion...

We have tremendously engaged Advisory Board members. A great number of our guests at these meetings were members of various Ferris program advisory boards. These members were both anxious and happy to share their thoughts and ideas regarding Ferris' future. Moreover, they were incredibly respectful. They didn't try to tell us what we should do. Instead, they encouraged us to consider what we should think about. Reaching from a point of introspection and personal experiences, they shared with us what they have learned through their professional experiences, their knowledge of industry trends, and their forecasts for future directions in their respective fields. These conversations were some of the best examples of civility and our discussions and opportunity to learn from each other were richer for it. We were all encouraged, motivated, and appreciative of the ability to continue our important relationships with our advisory boards at both a university and college level.

We are partners with passionate people. Several of our attendees were Ferris alumni. Several were not. Yet, a passionate commitment to Ferris State University was a unifying force at each of the meetings. Our career focus resonates with our partners, and over and over again, we heard how much our partners really like Ferris graduates. They appreciate our hands-on approach to education, our focus on internships, and the students' connections with our faculty. At one point, we spent some time engaged in conversation with a county sheriff. He shared that Ferris graduates were the first people he wants to hire; his simply stated reason: "They're ready to go." In fact, one of the biggest complaints we heard was that we are not producing enough graduates in certain areas. This is a great problem for a university.

Our partners join us in our commitment to our core values. We spent a significant amount of time discussing our six core values at these meetings. Our partners shared their appreciation for our commitment to using our core values as a framework to guide our future as a University. They expressed their common sentiment that our core values provided an excellent foundation for the education of our students. Without

much elaboration or explanation on our part, they communicated their understanding of focusing on practical values such as Collaboration, while expressing their support for the meaningful and intentional efforts it takes to achieve more inherent values like Ethical Community. We got the sense that our stakeholders both appreciated and applauded our holistic and value-driven commitment to developing our future workforce and leaders of society.

Coming to Conclusion

A strategic plan is not of much value unless it is brought to conclusion. With the input from the Commission of the Future meetings, we continued the dialog directly on-campus by holding six more campus-wide events. At the conclusion of that last set of input sessions, we were then able to complete our final draft of the strategic plan. We were ready for the final submission and adoption.

There were there simple steps in bringing this to conclusion. First, we brought this to the university-wide Strategic Planning and Resource Council for an up or down vote. Our position was we had done the very best we could and that we were not interested in any more edits or alternations. It was time for a simple up or down vote. Fortunately for those of us that worked so hard over the past 14 months, it was unanimously supported. Next, we took the strategic plan to the Academic Senate. Finally, we will present the final strategic plan at the end of the semester to the Board of Trustees for final approval.

There were many lessons for us in effective strategic planning: Keeping an open mind, seeking input, listening to all constituencies, and many others. However, the one real lesson is that the process is as important as the outcome. Without paying particular attention to a process of engagement, we would never have been successful. In our case, that process has led us to our next strategic plan.

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Dr. Fritz Erickson, newly appointed President of Northern Michigan University, has served as the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Ferris State University since 2009. He earned his M.A. and Ed.D degrees from the University of Northern Colorado. During the 2013-14 academic year, he led FSU's university-wide strategic planning initiative, with

the goal of providing a dynamic direction for all university stakeholders.

Mindy Baumgartner served as the FSU Director of Academic Communications prior to her departure from FSU in early 2014

