FEATURE ARTICLE

Strategic Planning in the Academy

Reflections on What Really Matters

by Felice Billups

The key to great leadership rests with the leader's understanding of his or her followers.

FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS I HAVE FACILITATED STRATEGIC AND INTEGRATED PLANNING EFFORTS for colleges, universities, and educational nonprofit agencies. These organizations always begin their efforts with the same honorable goals: to create a vision and a plan that will make the most of their future. They focus almost immediately on developing a process with those goals in mind; they almost inevitably end with a product—a weighty document with objectives, diagrams, timetables, and tactics that few ever refer to again. The aspiration to transform the organization rarely materializes.

So what happens between the beginning and the end? My experience has taught me that there are numerous reasons for these less-than-optimal results. Specifically, I believe that there are three essential elements required for an effective planning effort and that careful consideration of these elements can guarantee success: leadership, context, and conflict.

LEADERSHIP

If you asked people to describe the key to success in their campus's strategic planning process, they might quickly respond that great leadership is necessary. The key to great leadership, however, rests with the leader's understanding of his or her followers. I have observed that many presidents endeavor to design and conduct a planning process without serious consideration of the variances among the different groups and levels of institutional participants. These leaders often adopt strategies from successful plans at similar institutions or, worse, they adopt a process that appeals to them as leaders; minimal attention may be given to the interests or needs of the followers.

We all know that colleges and universities operate differently from other types of organizations. From Birnbaum's (1988) original conception of collegiate culture typologies to Bergquist and Pawlak's (2008) later adaptation, many theorists suggest that multiple and often clashing perspectives operate within the academy. Senior-level administrators (including the president and board chair) operate at the political level, negotiating, persuading, networking, bargaining, and calculating wins/losses toward the goal of advancing the institution. Compare those behaviors with the collegial activities of middle management and service staff; their focus is on managing the political activities of their supervisors balanced against the compliance orientation of the bureaucrats. The bureaucrats, most often residing with the support staff and technical groups, worry about following the rules as they work within a tightly held structure. Faculty members, often seen as anarchists, believe in their right to lawlessness in the best sense and affiliate with their peers, academic disciplines, and professional fields. Their belief in academic freedom and their role as upholders of the educational mission entitle them to feel central to any planning process. Lastly, students embody democracy as they seek the ideal, equal educational experience for all "paying customers." Tierney (1988, 2008) and Harman (2002) support these contentions: they believe

that a hierarchal structure is ineffective in a university setting. A college exemplifies loosely coupled pods (Weick 1976) where each subunit (pod) operates independently but maintains intermittent and fluid connections with other pods. These collaborations can be horizontal or vertical and can overlap considerably, but the end result is that of a circular and decentralized organization.

With these conditions in place and revered as the unique characteristics of higher education, how can one adopt a "one-size-fits-all" model for strategic planning? Keller (1983, 2000) argues that this "one-size" mind-set is the reason why so many strategic planning processes fail at the onset. Leaders often adopt a structured and top-down planning process even in the midst of appearing to seek community engagement and involvement. The success of strategic planning depends on the leadership not only saying they want community engagement but also having the courage to accept community engagement.

So what can a leader do to begin the strategic planning process with the cooperation and participation of his/her followers? One model I have witnessed that realized great success was when a senior leadership team canvassed the campus community *before* the process began by asking all stakeholders three questions: (1) What type of input do you feel you can contribute to a planning effort? (2) How would you like to be involved and to what extent? and (3) How would you like to be informed about the process and its progress? While leaders often assume that everyone on campus wants to be involved and have a voice in the planning process, this is not always the case. Providing constituents with a chance to decide their own level of involvement means that the process may begin with a vast amount of goodwill and transparency and end with less consternation.

CONTEXT

There is probably no single more influential factor in the success or failure of a strategic planning effort than the accurate reflection of the campus culture in its design. A structured, controlled planning process that produces a prescriptive document may well suit an organization in which the culture supports chain-of-command management, but strategic planning cannot survive in such a context if the culture runs counter to those norms. I once worked with a college where the culture was very creative, independent, and even rebellious; college leaders imposed a top-down, formal structure in their planning process in order to "teach themselves" to do a better job with planning and be more efficient with their time and resources. These lofty goals ultimately compromised the values, beliefs, and norms of that campus culture.

How can planning be integrated effectively with a campus's culture? The most important consideration may well be to acknowledge and honor the deepest level of cultural identity as expressed in its assumptions, values, beliefs, and artifacts (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Silver 2003). In other words, pay attention to what Bolman and Deal (2013) describe as "the way we do things around here" (p. 263). Culture, in the broadest sense, is often described as a collective set of beliefs, behaviors, assumptions, and markings adopted by a group in order to assist with community building, cohesion, problem solving, and integration that are strong enough as a value set to be passed along to newcomers as the valid way to think and do things in that organization (Schein 2010). Kuh and Whitt (1988) emphasize the power of the external environment and the role of subcultures in collegiate culture by noting that culture is a persistent pattern of "norms, values, practices, beliefs . . . that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus" (p. iv). If the campus culture is formal and conventional, then planning processes should reflect that style. If, however, the campus culture is entrepreneurial,

unconventional, or one that invites more risk taking, then campus leadership must reflect those characteristics in a planning strategy. Taking stock of the campus culture, as evidenced in a culture audit or campuswide discussion about how stakeholders describe the organizational culture, is a good way to ground a strategic planning process.

CONFLICT

Interorganizational or interpersonal conflict is often viewed as negative or destructive, although recent trends in conflict theory have attempted to change those perceptions. Late 20th-century theorists promoted conflict not only as inevitable but also as a catalyst to generate innovation and constructive problem solving (Bess and Dee 2012). In other words, an effective strategic planning process should employ generative conflict to yield the best results. No review of organizational mission, no creation or updating of a vision, and no substantive development of goals and objectives can emerge without disagreement or difference of opinion.

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The least effective plans or planning processes I have witnessed were conducted in an environment of unbearable politeness and acquiescence. Some of the most successful planning processes arose in organizations where every conversation, every meeting, every activity generated debate and argument; the culture supported these behaviors as a way to ensure improvement and abate complacency. These planning processes seemed a bit chaotic in the early stages but worked in those cultures, generating fluid and interactive plans rather than a multi-page document that received little attention in the end.

I recall one particular instance where beneficial conflict produced several innovative ideas. A strategic planning committee was convened that included approximately 25 people from all areas; the group was charged with beginning the strategic planning effort by identifying the major issues for the next 10 years. After a lengthy debate, a heated argument ensued between some faculty and some administrators and the faculty abruptly left the meeting. They did not feel validated in their perspectives about the college's future and viewed the process as hurried for the sake of a time line. The remaining group felt deflated by their departure, but a few days later the faculty returned to the group with a proposal. They had retreated to one of their offices to talk further after the original argument and determined that while they did not appreciate the way things were handled, they did agree on the substance of the questions. As they noted in their proposal, they found that the argument had caused them to "go back to the drawing board." The resulting proposal yielded some wonderful ideas, and today on that campus sits a brand new academic building that originated from that difficult debate. Conflict can and often does produce great outcomes.

So what is the takeaway on the topic of conflict and strategic planning? Allow for and even encourage productive conflict as part of your planning process; a polite process may not be worth your time and effort. Different perspectives and opinions are fertile ground for a substantive strategic plan.

CONCLUSION

While all colleges and universities must embark on strategic planning as an institutional activity, the key to success may reside in the interplay of leaders and followers, culture and context, and positive, innovative conflict. To quote Hax and Majluf (1996, p. 34), "planners should not plan, but serve as facilitators, catalysts, inquirers, educators, and synthesizers to guide the planning process effectively."

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