



MORE HEARTS AND MINDS AT THE TABLE

Need an institutional strategic planning process that meaningfully engages all campus stakeholders? A collaborative approach could be the answer.

By Patrick Sanaghan

Gone are the days when linear thinkers drive a strategic planning process, with their ideas illustrated by colorful charts, complex numbers, and confusing matrixes. That's true also for the visionary president who single-handedly dreams up a grand plan for the campus and spends a great deal of time selling it to skeptical stakeholders. In our increasingly complex and challenging world, all ideas need to be welcome at the planning table.

We must all be encouraged to become “horizon thinkers,” looking to a future far beyond today that can only be realized by people coming together and sharing solid information, diverse perspectives, common values, and heartfelt hopes. That's why I suggest using a collaborative process that focuses on various ways to collect input, facilitate dialogue, and generate consensus. I define “collaborative strategic planning” (CSP) as the “disciplined and thoughtful process of meaningfully engaging relevant stakeholders in creating a shared, future vision and goals for their institution.”

Chief business officers are no strangers to this team environment, and much has been written about the benefits of forging relationships with other campus leaders (for example, see the article “When Counterparts See Eye to Eye,” in the October 2008 issue of Business Officer at www.nacubo.org/x9593.xml).

In my years of consulting with higher education institutions, I've seen all kinds of strategic planning exercises. Often, these efforts fall short of their intended aspirations and outcomes despite the enormous amount of time, energy, and money invested in them.

In one instance, for example, the president and administration failed to meaningfully involve the faculty. A draft plan, which incorporated only limited faculty input, was sent out for “approval.” Not surprisingly, the faculty rejected it outright, because they believed that it did not reflect their best thinking.

A BOOK TO GUIDE STRATEGIC PLANNING

In his work over the past 25 years with more than 100 higher education institutions, education consultant Patrick Sanaghan has observed that even the most well-crafted and detailed strategic plans often fail—simply because internal stakeholders often are not involved in the process and feel no connection to the outcome. Sanaghan's five-phase Collaborative Strategic Planning (CSP) process tackles this challenge and guides higher education leaders in involving stakeholders in the process, from concept to implementation.

The CSP model can be tailored to an institution's needs, resources, and aspirations. The process also goes beyond traditional strategic planning to offer some enduring benefits, encouraging an institution's stakeholders to think strategically every day, breaking down silos, educating participants on other campus community perspectives, and fostering an interconnectedness that ensures dovetailed campus operations. In this comprehensive book, Sanaghan supports the CSP model with examples of lessons learned and numerous sample documents and tools that illustrate collaborative strategic planning in action.

The softcover 152-page book is priced at \$44.95 for members and \$59.95 for nonmembers. To order, go to www.nacubo.org and click on “Products.”



What could have been a generative process turned into a polarizing event. It took more than a year to organize and implement a more constructive approach and begin to mend the rifts that were created.

On the other hand, at an institution where distrust between faculty and administration was pervasive, a new president announced that all pertinent information, especially financial information, would be shared with everyone throughout the planning process. While this did not immediately solve the trust issue, it did begin to create a sense of openness, honesty, and the beginnings of collaboration.

One of the main reasons that strategic planning often fails to live up to its promise is the way it is conducted on campuses. It is the process that is the problem. Often, campus stakeholders don't feel connected to the planning activities and, therefore, aren't committed to implementation of the designated priorities. People feel that the plan is something done to them or for them but not with them. They do not believe that their ideas have been heard, because no real attempt was made to authentically solicit their ideas, concerns, or hopes. They were never given strategic information to review and think about or an opportunity to learn about the financial realities and the real implications of key decisions.

Some might try to gain inclusion through relatively anonymous information gathering. However, while surveys and questionnaires have their place in strategic planning efforts, they cannot drive those efforts. That's the easy way out.

Rather, campus leaders must learn how to craft strategic planning processes that meaningfully engage campus stakeholders, if they are to create robust strategic plans that will enable their institutions to thrive in the future. In a new book, *Collaborative Strategic Planning in Higher Education* (NACUBO, 2009), I detail all the elements, activities, and principles of this collaborative approach to strategic planning. (See the sidebar, "A Book to Guide Strategic Planning," for a summary and order information.) Following are the highlights of such a collaborative model.

LET PRINCIPLES GUIDE YOU

Seven principles define collaborative strategic planning:

1. Make meaningful engagement of institutional stakeholders the heart of CSP. By "engagement," I mean face-to-face interaction and discussion of ideas. Although impersonal information gathering has a place, do not expect it to drive the process. Using CSP, plan leaders conduct a stakeholder review, identifying and prioritizing potential internal and external participants. More importantly, meaningful ways to engage selected stakeholders (e.g., faculty senate and administrative council meetings, student government activities, and focus groups) are identified and specific venues created for CSP facilitators to meet face to face with these stakeholder groups and discuss institutional issues, challenges, and aspirations.

2. Share with all relevant stakeholders the information that is gathered throughout the planning process. Transparency is essential—there are no secrets, taboos, or controls over who gets what information, especially financial information. The decision-making process is clear to everyone involved; there are no clandestine deals or agreements. On one campus, I observed that strategic plan-



ners had shared the draft plan on the campus Web page, along with a feedback process that allowed for interested parties to provide comments. They also held a series of “chews and chats,” during which stakeholders came together for a light breakfast or lunch to share their ideas and reactions to the draft plan. The result: Participants felt informed and included.

3. Actively seek and encourage a diversity of ideas and multiplicity of perspectives. If we are to solve the many complex challenges we face in higher education, we need more hearts and minds at the table. CSP assumes that everyone can make a contribution to the planning process and explicitly creates a wide variety of opportunities for stakeholders to participate.

4. Use the resources, skills, and knowledge of institutional stakeholders. Whether or not a consultant is involved, there can be no sense that the plan is driven by an external expert. That’s because CSP relies on the expertise of the people on campus. If the process is led by a consultant, the role of the consultant is twofold: to help build the capacity of internal stakeholders to use the collaborative practices and help facilitate—not drive—the planning process.

5. Include reflection and sense making as key elements of CSP. Too often, people tend to rush to solutions before fully understanding the complexity of the problems, opportunities, and challenges they face. Build into the planning process from the very beginning the time to reflect and make sense of emerging issues.

6. Actively seek external perspective. One of the dangers of planning is listening to yourself too much. At times, institutions can get trapped in their own way of thinking about issues, become a little too self-referential, and be unwilling to take an honest, tough look at themselves. All campus stakeholders need to understand the bigger picture they live in and be cognizant of the events, trends, and issues facing higher education in general.

The following are relevant resources for gaining an external perspective for a campus:

- NACUBO publications and research available at www.nacubo.org.
- EDUCAUSE (www.educause.edu/), for information on current technology trends.
- The National Center for Education Statistics (www.nces.ed.gov/), for details on enrollment projections for elementary, secondary, and degree-granting institutions.
- The College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (www.cupahr.org/), for its periodic report on trends affecting higher education.

7. Pay attention to the sense of community and connection that resides on your campus. The relational dimension of planning is crucial to achieving strategic outcomes. While effective planning relies on quality information, good research, and disciplined thinking, a lot of the process is about people: their shared hopes and aspirations; their deeply held values and principles; their sense of pride about their campus; even their feelings. So, an essential part of collaborative planning is about building community and connection with people throughout the campus.

This does not mean that CSP is some strange, touchy-feely approach to planning, during which artificial games or techniques are foisted on people to create a false sense of community. But, when you consciously involve diverse stakeholders in what truly matters on their campus—



creating opportunities for open dialogue across institutional boundaries and making information transparent—people begin to understand each other’s perspectives. This enables them to do informed dreaming together and create shared aspirations.

A MULTIPHASE FRAMEWORK

I’ve outlined the collaborative model as a five-phase approach for arriving at a plan that can be embraced by all.

Phase 1: Getting organized. As you begin your institution’s planning process, know that two factors guide your future success.

- **Establishing the planning task force.** The composition of this group will make or break the planning effort. Each task force member must have an excellent reputation and be willing to work collaboratively with others over the course of the planning period.

It is best to have two co-chairs, preferably a well-known, credible faculty member and a high-level administrator (for example, the CBO, a senior vice president, or an executive vice president). CBOs are excellent candidates for the co-chair role. At their best, they deeply understand how the institution works, develop constructive relationships with faculty, understand the president’s and trustees’ perspectives about the future, and are trusted by campus stakeholders. Because many CBOs’ plates are quite full—particularly in these challenging days—the undertaking of this important role needs to be carefully considered and negotiated. At the very least, the CBO must be a member of the planning task force.

Selecting the co-chairs is the first strategic thing a president does in the planning process and will communicate volumes about the importance of the planning process and its potential for success. It also tells the campus that this activity will be a collaborative endeavor from the very beginning.

- **Focusing on capacity building and organization of the process.** Members of the task force work together with a consultant or select one of the task force members to organize and facilitate collaborative planning meetings throughout their campus. These meetings are well structured, outcomes-based, and ensure full participation by all attendees. Important goals of such meetings are, for example, establishing a deadline for conducting a stakeholder review, outlining a communication plan, and developing specific ways to meaningfully engage a large number of people over the course of several months. For large institutions, this could mean soliciting input from as many as 500 to 1,000 people. When I visited Winona State University, Winona, Minnesota, several years ago, I thought its communication plan was quite robust. It included a strong Web presence, brown-bag lunches, video conferences, and meetings with the president.

This shared learning experience builds real ownership for the planning process because task force members organize the work to meet their campus’s unique needs, complexities, and culture.



Phase 2: Gathering data and encouraging engagement. As mentioned, the heart of CSP is the meaningful engagement of stakeholders throughout the institution. During this phase, task force members work with partners and engage stakeholders throughout the campus. All the data that emerge from the different meetings and forums are entered in a central database that is available to all stakeholders for review. This information begins to craft a powerful story about the present and future possibilities for the campus.

Phase 3: Making sense of the input and reflecting on possible outcomes. This phase brings together the task force with senior leadership to define the major issues that need to be discussed and identified as the key drivers for the future. Once the strategic themes are agreed upon (they may include things like academic excellence, student engagement, communication, diversity, and so forth), the task force members are charged with creating “concept papers” that will describe each strategic theme in meaningful detail. This phase puts boundaries around what the strategic plan will embrace over the next period of time and focuses attention and thinking on a handful of essential strategic themes.

Phase 4: Scheduling the “vision conference.” To gather momentum around the ideas and goals that will lead the institution into a positive future, the collaborative strategic planning process calls for a vision conference, a structured and highly interactive one-day meeting involving 50 to 75 stakeholders. Plan for the composition of attendees to be approximately 70 percent internal (including all the members of the planning task force along with other faculty, students, and administrators) and 30 percent external (e.g., alumni, business and community leaders, and so forth). The combination helps provide the perspectives people need as they think together about the future of the institution. A large institution might plan several one-day vision conferences rather than one large one so as not to convene meetings so large that communication is difficult.

A vision conference is not an open brainstorming session during which every idea is a good one and participants provide loads of uninformed ideas and opinions. Rather, the session is grounded in institutional realities and quality information (concept papers) and culminates with attendees creating a shared “preferred future” of the institution worthy of their commitment. At the conclusion of the conference, a vision statement is created that brings together the hopes and aspirations of attendees and helps shape a powerful future for the institution.

Phase 5: Establishing the “goals conference.” Approximately one month after the vision conference, the planning task force convenes for one to two days to create a broad implementation plan for the institution. At this time, other campus stakeholders (e.g., human resources, finance, physical plant) who may not have been involved in the earlier planning, are included to share their expertise. Often, these individuals will be the ones who will be implementing the strategic plan; therefore, they need to be meaningfully involved in crafting a reality-based implementation plan.

Participants use the vision statement to create a set of specific goals for each of the strategic themes identified through the planning process (e.g., achieve academic excellence, engage students in a meaningful higher education experience, encourage diversity). After the goals



have been agreed upon, individuals begin creating action plans for each goal in their respective areas. Specific feedback processes ensure that all participants have the opportunity to share their advice and ideas in creating the action plans.

These draft action plans then go to the president's cabinet for discussion and review. It usually takes several months to produce a detailed implementation plan that identifies resources, accountabilities, and measurable outcomes. The collaborative process, however, makes it more likely that the resulting plan will be approved, embraced, and implemented.

While the collaborative strategic planning process requires commitment and a significant amount of time, energy, and manpower, as outlined here, in the end, it can create a powerful, motivating, positive picture of the future for any campus that believes in inclusion, shared values, and democratic processes.

Enjoy the journey.

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