IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL CREDIBILITY: COMMUNICATION AS THE CENTERPIECE OF PLANNING IN THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Cathy A. Fleuriet
M. Lee Williams
Texas State University – San Marcos

ABSTRACT

Each year institutions of higher education receive greater pressure from the federal level, regional accreditation agencies, and state legislatures, to become more transparent and accountable for their actions. It is more important than ever, then, for colleges and universities to engage in authentic strategic planning that may be embraced by both internal and external constituents. Unfortunately, strategic plans often do not work to move an institution forward. Using organizational principles and theory, this essay reframes the university strategic planning process with communication as its centerpiece. A case study is presented that illustrates how communication centered strategic planning can lead to the most meaningful and successful plan, thus improving the internal and external credibility of the institution.

> *"In the absence of communication from leaders, the organization will seek information from other sources, whether those sources know what they're talking about or not. Your silence doesn't stop the conversation; it means you're not participating in it."*
>
> Jeanie Daniel Duck
> *The Change Monster (2001)*

INTRODUCTION

Whether an institution engages in strategic planning due to governing board or administrative mandates, accreditation criteria, or because "everybody else is doing it," strategic plans have historically been part of organizational life that will not go away. It is something we do. But far too often, once it is completed, we rarely look at the plans again. Even worse, when our institution happens to have successes in areas not in our plans, we add them in after the fact as sort of a "plan addendum".

Many institutions have not taken planning seriously because the perception is that strategic plans have rarely worked to move them forward. Why is this true? The organizational structure and culture of higher education institutions make strategic planning particularly problematic. Whereas many private sector organizations may reflect a more collective society, colleges and universities mirror the individualistic nature of our society. Academic departments, for example, exist due to their expertise in a particular discipline. Faculty members work as independent agents who carry out their teaching and research duties relatively untouched by larger organizational issues (Willson, 2010). It is no wonder that they cringe at the very thought, much less the creation and implementation, of a strategic plan. In colleges and universities around the country, even administrators often breathe a sigh of relief when the plan is completed and placed as a link on the homepage.

Rowley and Sherman (2001) note that, "In the postmortems [of strategic planning],

faculty, administrators, staff, and members of the governing board all blame the general [strategic planning] process" (p. 5). On many campuses, academic departments quietly go their own way, disregarding a plan for which they know they will not be held accountable.

CHANGING TIMES

In education circles, the infamous 2006 Spellings Report was a major wake up call. It chastised postsecondary education by stating that "the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 3). It initiated a new era for strategic planning and assessment. With pressure from the federal level, regional accreditation agencies, and state legislatures, we have entered an age of "accountability," and now it is even more important for institutions of higher education to take strategic planning more seriously. In short, it is time to shake the dust off the plan and begin an authentic process for engaging in planning and assessment.

Noting changes in regional accreditation expectations, Bardo (2009) states that "the number of reports, the expected details of outcomes measures, and the level of ongoing interaction between the institution and the regional association will continue to increase" (p. 29). He goes on to say that, due to increased accreditation requirements, authentic strategic planning will be a crucial factor in achieving successful reaffirmation. Public institutions have the added complexity of more stringent state regulations and federal requirements. The bottom line is that institutions of higher education can no longer avoid creating and maintaining a transparent planning and assessment process. Academic and administrative departments can no longer go their own way. There is too much at stake.

Added to the complexity of campus attitudes toward planning and assessment are the difficult economic times we are now facing. As institutions across our nation lose faculty, staff, and even entire academic departments, there are now cries of "Why plan? We have no money to address new initiatives anyway." However, scholars who study planning issues argue that strategic planning is indeed worth the effort if carried out appropriately. Rowley and Sherman (2001) observe what occurs when strategic planning is rejected. "Problems don't go away, they get worse. Life doesn't become less complicated, it becomes more so. And if campuses don't improve, they slide further and further into difficulty and thence oblivion" (p. 23).

Strategic planning is a crucial element in helping campuses to make a successful transition from who they are now to what they want to be in the future (Keller, 1983). Shirley (1988) highlights the importance of strategic planning in aligning campuses with increasing numbers and demands of vocal stakeholders. More recently, Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1997) state that strategic planning is crucial to an institution of higher education in creating a dynamic fit with its environment. The problem may be then, not the strategic plan concept, but the *process* used to create the plan.

TYPICAL PLANNING MODELS

Due to the loosely coupled and often decoupled organizational structure of higher education institutions (Weick, 1995), strategic planning is generally driven by the top of the organization. Often the process, and resulting strategic plan, resembles "internal" marketing where "tell and sell" is the dominant communication strategy (Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, 2000). A typical model of the process may be described as follows.

As the five or ten year planning cycle comes to an end, institutional leaders, such as the president's leadership team, meet to decide new goals and direction for the university. They pay attention to legislatures, coordinating boards, boards of trustees, higher education trends, and yes, sometimes a few on-campus constituencies, to come to consensus on what goals the university strategic plan should encompass. These goals are typically shared with a slightly larger internal audience, along with instructions to "disseminate" goals to departments and see that they are implemented. This done, higher administration moves on with the confidence that they have created a plan that will address external pressures and serve university needs.

This kind of executive model for decision-making is not uncommon. Nutt (1999, 2002) tracked the success rate of decisions made by executives and managers at 356 different companies over the course of nineteen years. He found that nearly two thirds never explored alternatives once they made up their minds and that 76% used persuasion or edicts rather than discussion and participation to gain acceptance of ideas. With regard to implementation and success rate, persuasion failed 56% of the time, and edicts failed 56% of the time. This same research indicated that intervention (i.e., discussion of problems and performance gaps) was successful 96% of the time, and participation (i.e., announcing a broad, overarching objective and involving employees in decision-making) was successful 80% of the time. Clearly, the results of this research have implications for strategic planning process models in institutions of higher education.

ALTERNATIVE PLANNING MODELS

Recently, planning scholars have introduced planning models that address the complexity of the process and components needed to ensure success. To varying degrees they address communication as an important element in this process. For example, Cordeiro and Vaidya (2002) outline a variety of "lessons learned" from their work with strategic planning. They suggest the following: 1) identify, prioritize and allocate funds to key strategies, 2) use faculty members as consultants, 3) make the process clear, 4) effectively communicate the planning message, 5) have clear and measurable objectives, and 6) build flexibility to recognize and respond to internal and external environment changes. While the authors mention communication as one of the components of the process, they lean toward the "providing information" aspect of communication rather than an "engagement" perspective. They state, "What is necessary, however, is a methodology for ensuring that stakeholders understand the process, how issues are addressed, and what the plan is intended to accomplish" (p. 30). An actual communication process to facilitate the planning process is not outlined.

Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1997), likewise, describe a ten step planning process that includes such things as performing an external and internal environmental assessment, conducting a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, and formulating strategies, mission, goals, and objectives. They suggest a participative rather than top-down planning process. Again, however, they do not describe a communication model that will accomplish this task. Although references to the importance of communication and participation in the strategic planning process are not absent from planning literature, a focus on communication as the *centerpiece* of successful strategic planning is missing.

Willson (2006) speaks to the notion of combining planning approaches to address higher education institutions. He notes four planning approaches (i.e., rational, incremental, strategic, and communicative) and suggests relating these approaches to the organizational culture of the institution (Willson, 2003). In addition, he explores how Habermas' communicative action theory applies to planning through the use of a case study.

Planning research is also beginning to discuss the notion of change as an issue important to address in the planning process. Lick and Kaufman (2000/2001) outline four roles of change—change sponsorship, change agent, change target, and change advocate—that aid in understanding the dynamics of change and building the levels of commitment necessary to sustain change. However, they do not address how change can be communicated effectively, as has been addressed in much organizational communication literature (Clampitt & DeKoch, 2011). Polka (2007) notes that in order to facilitate change leaders need to address six employee professional "high touch" needs. The first need mentioned is communication.

Finally, in their article on educational planning foci from 1974 to present, Lindahl and Beach (2010) outline major themes that occurred in International Society for Educational Planning (ISEP) publications during these years. They note that, although feedback loops had some emphasis in the late seventies and eighties, "recent articles tend to mention these loops briefly as part of the overall planning process, rather than focusing on them specifically" (p. 3).

A CASE FOR COMMUNICATION AS THE CENTER OF PLANNING

At this point in the article, you may be thinking, "I communicate what needs to happen all the time—in memos, via the internet, and in hard copy. Still, faculty and staff show little understanding of the importance of planning and assessment." The issue is, what do we mean by "communication?" If you, as a leader, are sending messages via the modes described above, you are not necessarily "communicating" with stakeholders. An organization cannot be successful when leaders simply transmit messages, even if the quantity or quality of those messages is excellent. Communication is much more than just sending messages. It involves being audience centered, developing relationships, listening to the needs and perspectives of others, and adapting messages to the receivers' needs. A successful organization is one where stakeholders understand each other's point of view, develop some degree of agreement, and choose to act in a collective way to accomplish their mission. With ineffective communication, an "organization" at best is a collection of decoupled work units. At worst, it is a configuration of disjointed, isolated individuals. Given the decentralized nature of university culture, effective communication may be even harder to achieve within the organization.

Any discussion of leadership, then, must attend to the dynamics of the relationship between leaders and other members of the institution (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Because communication is the fundamental tenant of leader-employee relationships, effective downward, upward, and lateral communication among leaders and employees can facilitate an organizational climate where both routine business and major change initiatives can occur. This, in turn leads to greater success for the organization itself.

Most organizations, public or private, understand the importance of strategic

communication with external stakeholders and current or potential customers. Marketing plans are commonly used to outline strategic communication for these audiences. Yet institutions rarely approach internal communication in the same way. We know, however, that the most successful institutions create missions, goals, values, and procedures to facilitate a more common culture where employees identify with and are committed to the organization (Williams, 2008). A common culture brings coherence to the workplace and greater organizational identification for employees. But how do we achieve this kind of culture? Bacal (1998) notes the following:

> When we look at organizations that use their common culture as a strategic advantage, what we find is that they create that culture through the use of very strategic, coordinated communication strategies. They use multiple methods, consistently. Their training supports their cultural goals, as does their written communication (e.g. newsletters, billboard, slogans, etc.). Their management communicates consistently with common messages in a number of forms (e.g. performance management, department or sub-organization meetings, award and recognition programs, etc.). And perhaps most important, management behavior is consistent with the messages echoed via other communication methodologies. . . internal communication, in its broadest sense, is the key to bringing that [common culture] about. It won't happen unless we are proactive in our communication and coordinate our efforts so they convey consistent, compatible messages (p. 4).

Organizational research supports the notion of effective communication as crucial to moving an organization forward. Belasen (2008), in his discussion of stakeholder theory, outlines seven principles of stakeholder management (often referred to as Clarkson Principles). Principle 2 states that "Managers should listen to and openly communicate with stakeholders about their respective concerns and contributions. . . [Effective communication] involves discourse between managers and stakeholders. Managers should try to understand the multiple perspectives of the stakeholders" (p. 185-186).

Strategic, coordinated communication strategies, then, are at the heart of creating a common organizational culture. Some have even concluded that internal communication, where there is talk back and forth within the organization as well as up and down the hierarchy, may well be more important to a company's success than external communication (Young & Post, 1993).

Yet leaders have been slow to embrace the importance of communication to organizational success. Clampitt and Berk (1996) note three primary reasons. First, communication has been wrongly perceived as a cost that does not produce measurable return. This has occurred because researchers have had some difficulty in linking how an institution communicates with its success or profitability. Second, communication has long been perceived as a technical skill, not a strategic activity. Finally, senior managers have had a longstanding fear of a process they believe cannot be totally controlled.

However, shying away from engaging in strategic communication during times of significant change only serves to alienate employees who complain about lack of information in a decision making process affecting their lives. What leaders need to know is that, as "messy" as the process is, true buy-in to new ideas and new directions for an organization can only occur when those within the organization believe they are part of the decision making process. Salem (2008) notes that "Communication is a social process in which individuals can make sense together, and artifacts are only an opportunity for

making sense, an opportunity for conversation. Complaints about inadequate information are complaints about the lack of opportunities to make sense together" (p. 5).

HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION

A strategic communication model can actually allow planning to serve as an "artifact" that assists faculty, staff, and students to understand their institution, and, more importantly, feel a commitment to its goals. Farmer (1990) notes that effective planning can contribute to the kind of campus environment that supports change. Specifically, an open planning process can provide the dynamics through which the university's vision is translated into specific planning objectives and implementation strategies. Farmer (1990) emphasizes the prominent place of oral communication in the planning process at King's College.

Extensive face-to-face deliberation provides opportunities for immediate feedback, both verbal and nonverbal, on proposed objectives and strategies . . . The ability to deal immediately with responses, acknowledging the ideas and the feelings of people involved in the planning process, helps to nourish a widened sense of ownership and also to transform discussion of planning objectives into productive talk about the implementation strategies (p. 12).

A strategic planning process that embraces a model of open, two-way communication has an additional advantage. It can become a heuristic devise for reconceiving the entire internal communication system. For example, with a new planning initiative, leaders may want to analyze the climate in which the planning will take place. They may ask such questions as "What are the key beliefs and values of stakeholders?" "What is their emotional state?" "What are they willing to do?" "How disposed are they toward change?" A communication strategy that builds an analysis of context into the system cannot only aid the planning but also facilitate successful institutional change.

Implementing the Communication Process

Initially, those in charge of planning for a university or college need to consider three key components of the strategic communication process:

- Who are the stakeholders in the planning process?
- What messages do you want to communicate to the various stakeholders?
- Who will be involved in communicating the chosen messages?

Who are the stakeholders? With regard to stakeholders, Belasen (2008) encourages leaders to include both internal and external groups and individuals. This would include anyone who values "the goals and interests of the organization, in managerial decision-making processes" (p. 179). Although there are differences among institutions due to size, private/public status, region, and state, the most salient stakeholders for most higher education institutions would typically include faculty, staff, administrators, students, parents, governing boards, legislators, and accreditation agencies. All these have some "stake" in the institution's goals. A strategic plan outlines those goals and includes steps to reach those goals. Therefore, it becomes an important artifact in the conversation among stakeholders about the goals of the institution. As you view this list, you can easily see that these groups do not all have the same vision about institutional priorities. Belasen (2008)

states that, because stakeholders often have competing values, leaders should take on the responsibility of finding out what stakeholders want. "Better communication also helps prevent conflict before it has a chance to percolate" (p. 180). This "conversation," although tedious during the initial stages of the planning process, does lead to greater ownership of the strategic plan.

In an effort to bring others into this conversation, the leadership of the institution could engage the campus community in a review of the current strategic planning process. Groups including deans, chairs, faculty, and staff could have input into the process and provide feedback. In this way the president makes it clear that stakeholder opinion matters, and the campus community believes it is part of the future of the university.

What messages do you want to communicate to stakeholders? At first blush, this may seem like an odd question. However, leaders must pay attention to the varied perspectives of stakeholders to understand what is most important to each of them. Although there may be some broad goals on which all stakeholders agree, different stakeholder groups often want to hear their specific interests reflected in the messages they receive about planning. For example, faculty may want leaders to talk about student learning or program development with regard to the plan. Staff may want to hear how important their role is in supporting the academic mission of the university. Governing boards may want to know more about how the strategic plan will lead to prestige. Therefore, leaders must be "audience centered" in their communication. This means that leaders need to take into consideration the knowledge, attitudes, and interests of their various audiences with regard to the institutional goals and direction in order to tailor messages accordingly. They must also allow feedback from the various audiences to refine, clarify, and provide authenticity to the planning process.

Who will be involved in communicating the chosen messages? Most institutions of higher education have an office that oversees planning and assessment. Sometimes the president or provost will lead the initiative. A strategically communicative planning process, however, requires more than the "official" leadership of the institution to lead if it is to be successful. Particularly in larger institutions, deans and department chairs must take an active role in discussion regarding the strategic planning process. Middle management, as well as directors at the first level of management, must be able to have conversations and actually consult with their faculty and staff on the plan's goals and outcomes. They can then serve as liaisons to the provost, president, and other officials in charge of planning in communicating feedback of faculty and staff within the smaller units of the institution. This way the voices of stakeholders across campus will be heard, leading to a more authentic plan with greater buy-in.

Another important avenue for engaging in strategic communication is through opinion leaders within academic and administrative departments (Rogers, 2003). An opinion leader is an individual whose ideas and behavior serve as a model to others. Opinion leaders communicate messages to a primary group, influencing the attitudes and behavior change of their followers. Often faculty and staff pay more attention to experienced, knowledgeable people in their own departments than to anyone who speaks for the "larger" institution. At an academic institution, it isn't very hard to learn who these people are. You have probably even relied on this type of person to chair committees and

serve as a liaison in other capacities for the institution. Opinion leaders provide yet another avenue to carry on the important conversations needed to result in a meaningful plan. It is important to remember that one-way communication is not true communication. True communication will result only if the feedback loops are in place and positive changes result from the conversations.

When selecting those members of the university or college community who should play a leadership role in the strategic planning process, it is crucial that they be perceived as credible. Kouzes and Posner (2003) spent over a decade of research addressing the characteristics of most admired leaders. Consistently, four characteristics emerged: honest, forward looking, inspiring, and competent. At all levels of leadership, whether they be formal or informal leaders, those chosen to engage in communicating with stakeholders should possess these qualities in order for communication to be successful in the planning process.

Addressing these three questions provides a strategic communication framework that serves as the foundation for the planning process. However, this framework, alone, does not ensure success. Communication throughout the planning process should be based on sound principles that have been shown to facilitate change initiatives. Below is a summary of communication guidelines to incorporate into the planning process.

COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES OFTEN OVERLOOKED IN PLANNING

As noted earlier, most planning models do not incorporate effective communication as a centerpiece of the planning process. Implementing the following communication principles provides a necessary ingredient for success:

- The first principle of effective communication is to "analyze the audience." The many sub-audiences and opinion leaders in the organization must be considered to determine their receptiveness to messages and strategies. When communicating change, such as will inevitably occur with the creation of a new strategic plan, leaders must realize that resistance is likely to be encountered at all levels of the organization. Understanding the reasons for resistance and having conversations about related issues will aid greatly in creating a smoother strategic planning process.

- Before the strategic planning process is launched, leaders at all institutional levels should be trained to implement the process as part of the regular business, be knowledgeable about successful communication processes, and be held accountable for providing information and feedback to their departments or divisions.

- Messages related to the strategic planning process should be linked to the institution's mission statement. The mission statement provides a collective identity for stakeholders. It is the "charter" and "constitution" on which the organization is grounded.

- Although more time consuming than regular planning models, a communication based strategic planning process depends upon interpersonal, face-to-face channels

that allow two-way exchange and feedback. This, in turn, will prevent selective perception on disliked topics, provide greater detail, and more effectively get receivers to change strongly held attitudes.

- Designated and clearly identifiable locations on the university website can be used to update the steps in the planning process, provide documents that are under review by various stakeholders, solicit feedback to documents, and allow those in the university community to record their questions.

- The more stakeholders at all levels of the institution are engaged in the "conversation" about planning, the more committed they will be to do their part in implementing the plan. Participation allows stakeholders to voice frustrations and offer suggestions that may be important to strategic plan implementation.

- Those leading the institution must claim ownership of messages. When leadership delegates ownership, it signals to those in the organization that the message is not important enough for leadership to devote time to it. In addition, insufficient communication from senior leaders will often result in middle management killing initiatives.

- Deans, directors, and department chairs are crucial to "translating" the university strategic plan for faculty and other employees as the process unfolds. This translation provides focus and meaningfulness at the operational level and helps stakeholders understand how the plan affects them. In addition "middle management" can serve as an upward communication liaison for suggestions and concerns expressed.

- Communication alone does not create buy-in. It creates expectations that there will be follow through and action taken on the initiatives. Therefore, communication should be considered an ongoing dialogue that supports progress on initiatives that are being implemented. Institutions with a "high say" "low do" organizational climate create the perception among stakeholders that communication is all talk and no action, thus creating distrust.

COMMUNICATION BASED STRATEGIC PLANNING: A CASE STUDY

The case study outlined here involved a large southwestern state university. This process was led by a new president whose tenure followed an administration that used a more traditional top-down methodology. It is an example of a "top down" "bottom up" approach that used communication as the centerpiece for strategic planning. It included the following nine steps.

Step 1: Review of Previous Planning Process

Trust is an essential prerequisite for communicating change and should be "a consciously pursued institutional goal" (Farmer, 1990, p. 10). At this university, dissatisfaction in the planning process, resulting from a long history of limited stakeholder involvement, was a critical issue that needed to be addressed.

In order to attend to this issue, the first step was to allow stakeholders to critique the previous planning process. To answer the question, "Who are the stakeholders?" the president's leadership team met with the associate vice president in charge of planning to come to consensus on this issue. They decided to solicit initial feedback from stakeholders, including deans, chairs, faculty and staff, about the old planning process. Four separate groups of stakeholders were charged with meeting for one semester to discuss, critique, and provide ideas to the associate vice president in charge of planning, as well as provide formal public reports that were shared with the leadership team. Ad hock groups included a presidential task force (consisting of key faculty and staff leaders throughout the university), the council of deans, and the council of chairs. In addition, the standing university committee on planning that was in place when the new president arrived also critiqued the previous planning process. Because the president ensured that academics would drive all university initiatives, an academic planning steering committee convened to review all reports and make formal recommendations for the new process to the president's leadership team. Note that these groups did not just include persons in designated leadership roles. The persons chosen to serve on the academic planning steering committee were true opinion leaders within their colleges and within the university. They embraced the characteristics perceived as important to good leadership. The associate vice president in charge of planning met regularly with the president and vice president for academic affairs to ensure that these recommendations would be included in the new planning process. The committee also developed a planning calendar that incorporated formal feedback loops at all planning junctures.

Step 2: Environmental Scan Process

Most universities go through some kind of environmental scan and evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (i.e., SWOT analysis) when a strategic planning process begins. However, rather than have one office gather and provide information on the environment, a process was developed to identify thoroughly all possible environmental impacts on planning, both internal and external, to all university levels. Academic departments created SWOT analyses and environmental scans that took an "inside out" approach to initiatives they were attempting. Reports included what departments needed for support to carry out initiatives they were discussing, including infrastructure. Departments also had the opportunity to produce an environmental scan that reflected unique environments. In addition, the office for institutional effectiveness provided input for a university scan, including possible local, regional, state, and national impacts. This was the first time that internal and external impacts on planning had been aggregated in a meaningful way to determine how colleges and the university would have to prioritize initiatives using limited resources. The information was gathered and shared with the academic planning steering committee for synthesis. In addition, the information was announced and placed on the planning web-site for review by the university community. This transparency helped engender trust in those who had previously been skeptical of the planning process.

Step 3: "Bottom up" Feedback Process

Often university goals are laid out by administration and "presented" to the university community without true input from those who will actually carry out the initiatives

to support those goals. Such was the case of the university studied in this analysis before the arrival of the new president. The new administration, however, wanted to send a clear message that the planning process would be transparent, and that stakeholders would be consulted about university goals and direction. This message was reiterated to stakeholder groups by the vice presidents, deans, chairs, and members of the academic planning steering committee. At this point in the process, the framework for strategic communication had been set. Stakeholders had been identified, and a clear, consistent message was delivered by appropriate opinion leaders. In addition, feedback loops were in place. This framework provided a more trusting atmosphere where stakeholders knew that they were participating in the planning conversation.

With environmental scan assessments and departmental internal evaluations in place, all academic units were equipped with the appropriate information to frame a realistic vision for their departments. Whereas university goals had previously been framed by administration, university goals actually grew out of the vision and direction of departments and colleges.

In order to capture the collective academic vision for the university, the newly formed academic planning steering committee framed questions that were distributed to all academic departments, seeking essential information to develop university goals. Answers to these questions served as both information for university planning and, more importantly, discussion at the department, college, and academic division levels. The discussions across organizational lines (i.e., department to department and college to college) led to a better understanding of diverse views and the need to engage in dialogue to create consensus about a collective vision among university community members. Instead of "persuasion from the top," the university was collectively contributing to the creation of those goals.

Step 4: Planning Categories

Based on college and department feedback on planning questions, the academic planning steering committee created planning categories that would provide the framework for university goals. Departments provided information about the plans they were creating with regard to academic programs, teaching excellence and student learning, scholarly and creative work, development, and diversity. These documents were made available to everyone on campus via the web. Not only did the resulting public documents collectively assist the framing of university goals, they also activated important conversations among departments and colleges that had never occurred before. This sharing of information allowed departments and colleges to see where collaborations could take place, where duplications of initiatives were occurring, and what opportunities there may be for future academic initiatives. In addition, academics could contribute information to goals they embraced because the goals were part of what academics "do for a living." These categories then became the basis for the creation of department, college, and, finally, university goals.

Within academic affairs, perhaps the greatest value of looking collectively at what individual departments wanted to accomplish was the realization that the university could not do it all. Thus, the new planning process called on departments, colleges and the division of academic affairs to prioritize maintenance needs and new initiatives within their plans. Maintenance priorities included such items as new faculty or operational budgets to maintain an existing program with growing numbers of students. Chairs met with faculty

to create department plan prioritization, deans met with chairs, and deans met with all faculties in their college to discuss the college plan and what it would prioritize. In these sessions faculty had the opportunity to discuss, provide feedback, and make suggestions for the college plan. This iterative process allowed departments to commit to the college plan because they were now part of the "conversation." Deans then presented final plans, including plan priorities, in open forums where everyone on campus was invited to attend. In addition, the forums were taped and placed on the web for those who were not able to attend.

Finally, each dean met with the vice president for academic affairs to make a case for the college's priorities. The vice president of academic affairs was charged by the president to make choices as to what programs and new initiatives would be lifted up to the division plan. This plan, along with academic affairs priorities, was also presented in an open forum and placed on the web for viewing and monitoring.

Because the new planning process continued to engage faculty and staff through communication, in the form of the public presentations and publicized written documents, the university community was able to follow the planning "track" and have a greater understanding of why certain priorities and decisions had been made. Thus, trust continued to build, and participation in the process grew.

Step 5: Mission Statement Review

A crucial part of the success of the strategic planning process was the decision to review the university mission statement to determine what changes, if any, needed to be made. The timing for conducting this review was intentional because the best time to reevaluate the university's mission was when all academic departments were already laying groundwork for their future that would lead to decisions for the university's direction. Rather than having an "imposed" mission statement, the campus community was provided the opportunity to create a mission statement that reflected the direction outlined in the newly created academic plan.

The president wanted a mission statement that would truly be a guide for university initiatives. Thus, the mission statement process reflected the new "open communication" perspective that was now beginning to be embraced by a campus that had a history of limited feedback systems. Academic departments, administrative units, and student body leaders (in groups) reviewed the "then" current mission, vision, and core values statements to 1) come to consensus on elements of these statements they considered fundamental to the mission and create a prioritized list, 2) answer the question "What should be included, but isn't," and 3) answer the question, "What is distinct about our university?" Units were asked to provide their title (e.g., Department of Psychology) along with the number of people who participated in the discussion. Participation was optional. Feedback was collected and publicly posted to the web. The president then appointed a mission statement review committee to synthesize themes, report data, and fashion a draft mission statement. The draft statement was placed on the web for review by all students, faculty members, and staff. After several iterations, the final statement was created and approved by the president's leadership team and later the board of regents.

Step 6: Administrative Division Planning

After the mission review process was completed and academic affairs stakeholders

completed strategic plans, the academic planning steering committee was expanded to included appropriate leaders from administrative divisions so that support divisions could begin their strategic support plans, based on information gleaned from academic plans. The expanded committee was charged to develop, evaluate, and modify planning and assessment processes in academic and administrative units. By providing a framework that addressed basic planning concerns (e.g., assessment and resource allocation), the committee considered the needs of the entire university, as well as external mandates.

With academics at the core of university processes, administrative divisions now had the opportunity to view all academic strategic plans to provide the support needed to achieve university goals. Whereas support divisions had previously created plans separate from the division of academic affairs, they now had the ability to determine academic needs, have conversations with departments, and provide feedback to the administration on the needed infrastructure and other support as they created plans that would support the academic endeavor. In keeping with the planning categories that had been created for academic affairs, administrative units used a collaborative process similar to the academic affairs process for creating their plans. All vice presidents presented their plans in open forums, and all on campus were invited to attend.

The presentations made by support division vice presidents provided an unexpected "plus" for the university collaboration that had not been anticipated. Generally, academic and administrative sides of the university remain in their own "corners," never completely understanding the importance of working together for student success. Public presentations by divisions such as student affairs provided a greater understanding of how academic affairs and student affairs could combine resources and ideas to create a better, broader learning environment for students. The student affairs division, for example, provided formal study sessions in freshman dorms to support similar strategies in academic plans. Again, the opportunity for conversation and feedback led to a better, more meaningful strategic plan.

Step 7: Creating a "Living" Plan

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the most problematic issues facing any strategic plan is whether or not it will actually be used to guide initiatives at all university levels. The new planning process addressed this issue. Committees were formed to "read across" all major planning categories in college plans in order to 1) identify opportunities where colleges could share ideas and build on initiatives, 2) aggregate resources requested by all colleges, 3) identify infrastructure needed to fulfill requests, and 4) report on types of support or guidance that could be provided for colleges about which they may not have information. Each committee prepared a report for the president's leadership team, and separate discussions between committee members (i.e., representative faculty, staff, and student stakeholders) and the deans, vice presidents and the president began. Reports were shared throughout campus, and decisions about prioritizing initiatives within plans were guided by discussions resulting from the reports. For the first time, faculty and staff could see that their plans were not only being read, but were being used to frame arguments and provide information for prioritizing university initiatives, infrastructure, and other forms of university support. In addition, because information was shared, various academic and support units had the opportunity to discuss needs and realistically look at what could be provided.

Step 8: Development of University Goals

Because the university used an open, collaborative, communicative process to determine direction, initiative priorities, and the university mission statement, university goals evolved naturally from previous planning process activities. Although formally reworded, the goals related directly to the planning categories that grew out of original planning questions to academic departments concerning academic programs, student learning and success, scholarly and creative activity, development, and diversity.

For each of these broad goals, "intended outcomes" to make progress toward the goal were created. These outcomes were derived from initiatives outlined in college and division plans, reports and recommendations from "read across" committees, presidential commitment to new initiatives already underway, and external state and accrediting agency expectations.

Step 9: Developing Final University Plan Draft

By the time the final draft of the university plan was completed, all stakeholders across campus had been given the opportunity to provide input on all aspects of the plan via departmental, college, and division discussions, as well as presentations, information, and feedback opportunities via the web. From the plan's initiatives and goals to the university mission statement, campus stakeholders had opportunities for ownership of the final university plan. The implementation of communication principles and strategies proved to be successful in moving the organization forward.

CHALLENGES IN USING A COMMUNICATION BASED PLANNING MODEL

Although the planning process and resulting plan proved to be a success, communicating the process and getting buy-in was sometimes problematic. The following are challenging issues inherent to using a communication based planning process for university planning.

1. *In institutions having a history of mistrust with administration, the introduction of a new planning process can easily be perceived as a "Here we go again" initiative forced on the campus community.*

The new leadership realized trust among some university employees may be a problem as the process began. Following the announcement of a new planning framework, the usual negative comments were made in some departmental hallways and meeting rooms. However, once the president announced that the planning process would be "open and collaborative," all levels of leadership had to consistently illustrate that in every portion of the process. Only when campus stakeholders began repeatedly to see their ideas being implemented in discussions about the plan did trust begin to build. Toward the end of creating the process, much more buy-in occurred.

2. *Implementing a communication based planning process is time consuming, especially within the context of a large university setting.*

From inception to completion, ending in the creation of department, college, division, and university plans, the new planning process took over two years to create.

During that time, the president put on hold the submission of proposals for new Ph.D. or other programs, as well as other proposed initiatives, until the new university plan was completed. Only programs and initiatives specifically given the "go ahead" by the previous administration were cleared to move forward. The president believed that all initiatives needed to reflect the new mission and university plan before they would be considered. Although some departments across campus grumbled, the message communicated clearly that the new plan was a true guide for the future of the university, thus reducing further skepticism on the part of the campus community.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to be both "efficient" and "effective" in a communication based process. However, the benefits of an engaged university community greatly outweigh the time and effort required.

3. *Given the decoupled organizational structure of universities and colleges, and faculty allegiance to departmental goals rather than university goals, faculty participation is difficult to engender during a university strategic planning process.*

Because faculties are crucial to ensuring that university initiatives are actually implemented successfully, their participation in any planning initiative is important. Morris (2000) noted, "We know decisions would not be accepted or implemented without participation [by faculty]—or at least consultation" (p. 55). In addition, organizational literature supports the notion that employee participation has positive effects on job satisfaction, commitment, performance, and acceptance and implementation of change (Miller & Monge, 1986; Seibold & Shea, 2001; Wagner, 1994). Morris (2000) summed up faculty attitudes toward strategic planning participation through the response of one faculty member participating in the study.

> In the eyes of most faculty members, committee work is time consuming and typically results in little more than a report that sits on some administrator's bookshelf. In addition to tangible rewards, there must be visible action and recognition on the part of the institution with regard to the work of the committee. Faculties have to see the effort as more than an "academic exercise" (p. 64).

The initial faculty attitude discussed in this case study differed little from the statement made above. However, over time most faculty became convinced that the planning process was more than an academic exercise. Committee membership included respected faculty opinion leaders appointed by the president. All recommendations made by various committees were taken to the president and implementation of recommendations began quickly. Committees were recognized in the university plan and on the web, as well as in speeches made by the president and other university top administrators. The experience represented a true "flattening" of the organizational structure.

4. *Guiding any process from the top of the organization is always problematic, especially when messages are incorrectly translated.*

Wood (1999) states that previous organizational research has found immediate supervisors to be the primary information sources for employees. Although all parts of the institution in this case study were included in the communication process, first level managers and opinion leaders often had more influence than those at the top of the organization. This pattern is common in organizations undergoing change (Larkin & Larkin, 1994; Quirke, 1996). In implementing the strategic planning process, the university

was dependent on the translation of many messages by department heads and other opinion leaders within the institution. Some department heads and opinion leaders did not believe in the process or had reasons for rejecting it for what they perceived to be advantageous to their individual department or personal agenda. In these cases, they "translated" the message negatively to those over whom they had influence, thus slowing down overall acceptance into the process.

In order to counteract this trend, most of the messages were sent to all university stakeholders to interpret so that they could come to their own conclusions. Although this did bother some middle managers, it did engender conversations that would never have occurred if a larger audience had not received the message.

5. *Because many managers are not knowledgeable about communication principles and effective group processes, this hinders the use of consensus building communication.*

Clampitt, DeKoch and Cashman (2000) note that, in continuously changing organizations, CEOs should engage employees at all organizational levels in communicating the core message. This is one area of the planning process that was problematic. In this case, it was not that managers were necessarily against a communication based planning process. Some simply did not know how to carry it out. Although most chairs and directors had gone through leadership training based on communication principles, there had not been enough training to allow people at all leadership levels to integrate communication principles into their leadership styles.

Argenti and Formen (2002) suggest that "making communication a core value and including it as an integral part of any performance review will guarantee that this value permeates all levels of you organization" (p. 144). Recognizing this, the university has implemented more communication based leadership training for all directors, chairs, and other middle management positions in hopes that training will lead to better leadership.

CONCLUSION

Because strategic planning at institutions of higher education, as well as other organizations throughout the country, will continue to exist as part of the organizational culture, it seems prudent that the most meaningful method of conducting strategic planning be investigated. Toward that end, the purpose of this article was to reframe the strategic planning process with strategic communication as its centerpiece. Although many conducting planning research incorporate communication elements within the process they propose, none focuses on communication as the core component.

To better clarify the communication centered approach to strategic planning, a case study was presented. The planning process employed at a large southwestern state university illustrates how well established communication principles and organizational communication theory can be integrated into a strategic planning process. The resulting plan served as an authentic guide to create and implement the university mission and goals. Furthermore, we conclude that institutions should consider how a communication centered strategic planning process can be used to address both routine and non-routine communication, and thus improve their credibility in the current age of accountability.

REFERENCES

Argenti, P., & Forman, J. (2002). *The power of corporate communication.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bacal, R. (1998). *Performance management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bardo, J. W. (2009). The impact of the changing climate for accreditation on the individual college or university: Five trends and their implications. *New Directions for Higher Education, 145,* 47-58.

Belasen A. T. (2008). *The theory and practice of corporate communication: A competing values perspective*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Clampitt, P. G., & Berk, L. R. (1996). Strategically communicating organisational change. *Journal of Communication Management, 1,* 15-28.

Clampitt, P. G., & DeKoch, R. J. (2011). *Transforming leaders into progress makers: Leadership for the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Clampitt, P. G., DeKoch, R. J., & Cashman, T. (2000). A strategy for communicating about uncertainty. *Academy of Management Executive, 14*(4), 41-57.

Cordeiro, W. P., & Vaidya, A. (2002). Lessons learned from strategic planning. *Planning for Higher Education*. *30*(4), 24-31.

Duck, J. D. (2001) *The change monster*. New York: Crown Business.

Farmer, D. W. (1990). Strategies for change. *New Directions for Higher Education, 71,* 7-18.

Keller, G. (1983). *Academic strategy: The management revolution in American higher education*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. (2002). *The leadership challenge (3rd ed).* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. (2003). *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, why people demand it.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Larkin, T. J., & Larkin, S. (1994). *Communicating change: How to win employee support for new business directions.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Lick, D. W., & Kaufman, R. (2000/2001) Change creation: The rest of the planning story. *Planning in Higher Education*, *29*(2), 24-36

Lindahl,R. & Beach, R (2010). Educational planning foci in ISEP publications, 1974 to present: A retrospective essay. *Educational Planning, 19*(1), 1-9.

Miller, K. I., & Monge, P. R. (1986). Participation, satisfaction, and productivity: A meta-analytic review. *Academy of Management Journal*, *29,* 727-753.

Morris, S. B. (2000). Pondering faculty participation in strategic change. *Planning for Higher Education*, *28,* 55-66.

Nutt, P. (1999). Surprising but true: Half the decisions in organizations fail. *Academy of Management Executive*, *13*(4), 75-90.

Nutt, P. (2002). *Why decisions fail. Avoiding the blunders and traps that lead to debacles*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers.

Polka, W. S. (2007). Managing people, things, and ideas in the "effective change zone": A "high-touch" approach to educational leadership at the dawn of the twenty-first century. *Educational Planning, 16*(1), 12-17.

Quirke, B. (1996). *Communicating corporate change.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations (5th ed.*). New York: Free Press.

Rowley, D. J., & Sherman, H. (2001). *From strategy to change: Implementing the plan in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rowley, D. J., Lujan, H. D., & Dolence, M.G. (1997). *Strategic change in colleges and universities: Planning to survive and prosper*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Salem, P. (2008). The seven communication reasons organizations do not change. *Corporate Communications*, *13*, 333-348.

Seibold, D. R., & Shea, B. C. (2001). Participation and decision making. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 664-703). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Shirley, R. C. (1988). Strategic planning: An overview. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *64,* 5-14.

U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of higher education.* Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED493504).

Wagner, J. A. (1994). Participation's effect on performance and satisfaction: A reconsideration of research evidence. *Academy of Management Review, 19*(2), 312-330.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Willson, R. (2003). Planning theory in our own backyard: Communication action in academic governance. *Journal of Planning Education and Research, 22*, 297-307.

Willson, R. (2006). The dynamics of organizational culture and academic planning. *Planning for Higher Education, 34*(3), 5-17.

Willson, R. (2010, September 10). Why teaching is not priority no. 1. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *57*(3), A1; A6-7.

Williams, L. S. (2008). The mission statement: A corporate reporting tool with a past, present and future. *Journal of Business Communication, 45*, 94-119. doi:10.1177/0021943607313989

Wood, J. (1999). Establishing internal communication channels that work. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *21,* 135-149.

Young, M. B., & Post, J. E. (1993). Managing to communicate, communicating to manage: How leading companies communicate with employees. *Organizational Dynamics*, *22,* 31-43.