

Evaluating the Impact of Strategic Planning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning can be broadly defined as a process used by organizations to define strategy and provide direction regarding future decisions. Grounded in the organization's mission and vision, it is widely recognized as fundamental to an organization's success over time. A growing number of higher education institutions are incorporating strategic planning processes at the institution-wide level, or for individual schools or programs. While there are multiple models of strategic planning, many of which include a periodic review of the resulting goals and objectives, there are few, if any, assessments of the impact of the process itself. This study of one intentional model for strategic planning at State University indicates that the program has been successful not only in assisting departments and programs in developing mission and vision statements, organizational goals, and action plans, but also in disseminating organizational information, promoting participation, incorporating new members, and heightening awareness of strengths and opportunities for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

With its range of missions, multiplicity of stakeholders and distinctive shared governance structures, higher education is a unique industry requiring special considerations when it comes to strategic planning. In his seminal work on academic planning, Keller (1983) set the stage for a new approach to management and organized change in higher education; campuses across the land are being pressed to inquire “What business are we really in?” and “What is most central to us?” and “How shall we proceed?” (p. 72) In direct response to the host of challenges facing institutions of higher education, strategic planning is critical. While there are multiple models of strategic planning, many of which include a periodic review of the resulting goals and objectives, there are few systematic assessments of the impact of the process itself. This exploratory study evaluates the effectiveness of one model for strategic planning at State University¹. As will be offered throughout this essay, there is initial evidence that a structured strategic planning process involving a broad group of participants can have a positive influence on the organization in many ways.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is defined by Allison and Kaye (2005) as “a systematic process through which an organization agrees on – and builds commitment among key stakeholders to – priorities that are essential to its mission” (p. 1). Rowley and Sherman (2001) similarly define it as “a formal process designed to help an organization identify and maintain an optimal alignment with the most important elements of its environmental set” (p. 328). These definitions, and others in the literature, depict strategic planning as an intentional leadership tool for setting future organizational directions in a dynamic environment through a process that takes account of – and ideally engages – key stakeholders.

Organizational mission and vision lie at the center of strategic planning, and the process provides space for active consideration of the organization's *raison d'être*. Bryson (2011) suggests strategic planning is “a deliberate disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it” (p. 26). It challenges all involved to simultaneously consider both “who we are” and “who we want to be.” For Dooris and Rackoff (2012), assessment, planning, improvement, and resource allocation reflect an institution's values, vision, mission, and goals. Similarly, Bryson (2011) captures the importance of mission, vision and values during the process. An organization's mission reflects its unique identity and serves as the foundation on which to build a strategic planning initiative.

A number of models for effective strategic planning currently exist. Hunger and Wheelen (2010) posit four essential elements in the process which include environmental scanning, strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and evaluation and control. Allison and Kaye's (2005) model includes seven phases: 1) get ready, 2) articulate mission, vision, and values, 3) assess your situation, 4) agree on priorities, 5) write the plan, 6) implement the plan, and 7) evaluate and monitor the plan. As these models indicate, strategic planning calls for a

¹ State University is used as a pseudonym for a large, public state university situated in the Northeast United States.

review of both internal strengths and weaknesses and external threats and opportunities. Despite individual differences, existing models share much in common, including clarification of mission, analysis of internal and external influences, identification of core organizational issues, development and selection of strategic imperatives, and implementation of strategic goals (Burkhart & Reuss, 1993; Pfeiffer et al., 1986; Roberts & Rowley, 2004). Another heuristic framework for many strategic planning models includes four phases: analysis, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. A number of texts also address common pitfalls and issues that might interfere with or emerge from the strategic planning process, including a lack of institutional support, a lack of flexibility within the plan itself, a limited amount of time dedicated to the initiative, and a failed transition from planning to implementation (Allison & Kaye, 2005; Mintzberg, 1994).

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As Tromp and Ruben (2010) note, strategic planning is a complex process for most organizations; “the challenge is particularly formidable in higher education, where there are generally few carrots and sticks available to leaders as incentives (or disincentives) and where the communication and organizational challenges are far from trivial” (p. 4). According to Sevier (2000), “While most administrators and faculty intuitively understand the need for strategic thinking at one level, they are often unsure what strategic thinking really is, how it might benefit an institution, or even how to begin” (p. 2). It often appears that the organizations most in need of strategic planning can be the most resistant to the process. Moreover, if the aim is to meaningfully explore questions of purpose and direction, broad engagement of the faculty and staff is essential.

Strategic planning in higher education is not a new phenomenon, yet it continues to grow across all types of colleges and universities. Dooris, Kelley, and Trainer (2004) identify a 1959 meeting of 25 campus planners at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as an important historical marker. The focus of this meeting, and other strategic planning initiatives during that time period, was centered on organizational facilities during an era of rapid expansion (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004, p. 6). Massive changes in the second half of the twentieth century led to an evolution of strategic planning initiatives in higher education. By the time of Keller’s (1983) writing on academic planning, strategic planning had emerged as an influential practice in higher education. Interest in strategic planning in higher education continues to increase and the group of 25 campus planners from 1959 had grown to 4,200 active members of the Society for College and University Planning by 2004 (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004).

An estimated 70 percent of colleges and universities in the United States engage in some form of strategic planning (Sevier, 2000). It is expected to grow in importance, particularly in light of recent assessment and institutional effectiveness trends (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010). In this current era of complexity and rapid change, Hunt, et al. (1997) extol the importance of strategic planning in the academy, saying “higher education leaders cannot control the future, but they should attempt to identify and isolate present actions and to forecast how results from actions taken now can be expected to influence the future” (p. 14).

Current strategic planning initiatives in colleges and universities attempt to address these questions as it relates to the purpose, adaptation, and efficiency of higher education as an institution. Tromp and Ruben (2010) describe strategic planning as “the means by which the most effective organizations establish priorities and goals and coordinate their efforts to anticipate, direct, and manage change” (p. 7). These planned change initiatives challenge organizational stakeholders to simultaneously look back and look ahead in order to identify core priorities.

Ideally, the planning process is a deliberate community-wide initiative which articulates future strategic direction(s) for the college, university, school or program. Wilson (2006) encourages an approach to planning that is both communicative and participative, as exemplified in a recent strategic planning initiative at Cleveland State University (Kogler Hill, Thomas, & Keller, 2009). Additionally, calling for a more iterative strategic planning design in higher education, Chance (2010) points to the limitations of traditional linear and prescriptive approaches to strategic planning. The strategic planning process may align with alternative self-assessment opportunities for the institution, including the preparation for accreditation visits (for example, Middle States Commission on Higher Education) (Dodd, 2004) and award applications (for example, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program) (Jasinski, 2004; Ruben, et al., 2007). As one example, Penn State University uses an “integrated planning” approach to connect strategic planning with budgeting, enrollment management, and human resource planning (Sandmeyer, Dooris, & Barlock, 2004). Northwestern University and its Feinberg School of Medicine intentionally linked their strategic planning efforts with changes in their budgeting structure in order to better align with their institutional mission (Haberaecker, 2004). At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the strategic plan was deliberately infused throughout the organization, particularly during two accreditation cycles (Paris, 2004).

Beyond identifying strategic priorities and charting a course of action, a critical follow-up stage is implementation of the plan—and it is in the implementation that colleges and universities often have particular

difficulties. Indeed, our institutions and our colleagues seem more enthusiastic about brainstorming and envisioning possibilities, than in the difficult and laborious activities associated with the systematic follow-through that translates ideas into realities. An increased emphasis on implementation has led to a shift in vernacular from “strategic planning” to a larger “strategic management” approach in some texts—management, of course, being a not-all-that-welcomed term among academics. Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1997) suggest that successful implementation of a strategic plan in higher education is linked to a sound planning process. Rowley and Sherman (2002) offer a number of recommendations for campus leaders to consider when implementing strategic change in their institutions. An effective approach to organizational leadership lies at the core of many of their recommendations. Strategic planning has “to be carefully situated within the models of thought and responsibility of educational communities” (Morrill, 2010, p. 55). Recent strategic planning trends in higher education are subject to criticism for threatening established forms of governance or for distracting organizational stakeholders from the “real” issues at stake in higher education (Birnbaum, 2001; Rowley, Lujan & Dolence, 1997; Wilson, 2006). It can be argued, for instance, that the emphasis on collaborative focus and direction, may come at the risk of individual autonomy. For these reasons and others, organizations with rich historical narratives and traditions may often be resistant to the increased emphasis on strategic planning, but it is widely acknowledged that traditional approaches to organizational strategy formulation and implementation are simply not sustainable in today’s increasingly complex, competitive and regulated higher education environment.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING

Numerous texts address the complex issues facing the entire system of post-secondary education including, but not limited to, the rising cost of higher education, new federal policies and initiatives, increasing competition, shared governance, public accountability, advancements in technology, the growth of online education and massive open online courses, educational quality and assessment, and student accessibility and satisfaction (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004; Rhodes, 2001; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1998; Tierney, 1998; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). Sevier (2000) identifies nine “megatrends” impacting the higher education environment, including the impact of technology, the changing nature of today’s – and tomorrow’s – students, the cost to attend college, increased competition for donated dollars, changing college curriculum, growing competition of non-college delivery options, changing societal expectations, a shift in power structures, and “blur,” an accelerated and unprecedented rate of change (p. 10). Pressures in all of these areas continue to mount, and these trends inform the ways in which colleges and universities approach strategic planning and live out their mission(s).

Within the context of the emerging realities of higher education, and with no implied denigration of the critical work of colleges and universities, Ruben, Immordino and Tromp (2009) assert that “Higher education is a business... and that business can be described as the production, dissemination, translation and use of ideas, and the cultivation of learning and learners” (p. 225). As higher education evolves, so too must the internal policies, practices, and expectations within the academy. Their argument is consistent with Keller’s (1999) work on the “third stage in higher education planning.” Keller encourages institutions of higher education to consider “adaptive structural changes,” while calling into question “the basic features that we have come to regard as fixed since the 1890s” (p. 4). This emphasis on academic planning, structural change, and the adoption of business practices in colleges and universities emerges at a time when higher education in the United States is in flux. As the literature suggests, this current period is marked by ambiguity, complexity, and rapid change in higher education requiring colleges and universities to think deliberately about their future. For Dooris, Kelley and Trainer (2004), “the soul of strategic planning is this human capacity for *intentionality* – this ability to formulate goals and proceed toward them with direct intent”. (p. 5) Commitment to furthering one’s mission calls for dedicated and visionary leadership. Strategic planning, in the context of organizational change and transformation, provides a unique opportunity for leaders to emerge and excel.

STUDY CONTEXT

The State University Center for Organizational Excellence (COE)² was established in 1993 as an outgrowth of concerns regarding the operation of the university and the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders (Ruben, 2005). The specific impetus for the development of COE was a university-wide faculty and

² The Center for Organizational Excellence (COE) is used as a pseudonym for a research center that provides programs and consulting for units across State University.

staff committee report on administrative efficiency, which made a number of recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the institution, including:

1. Create a more welcoming environment,
2. Introduce technological innovation to enhance service and efficiency,
3. Establish enhancing user-focused systems and processes,
4. Improve collaboration and communication, and
5. Establish a university program for continuous improvement

COE was created specifically to help address these general goals. As COE began to formulate its vision for how it could help create an increasingly service-oriented institution, the following aspirations were articulated for key constituencies, all of whom maintain a stake in the organization:

- Students: Pleased to be attending their college or university; feeling they are valued members of the community with the potential and support to succeed
- Families: Proud to have a family member attending their college or university; recommending the institution to others
- Alumni: Actively supporting the institution and its initiatives
- Employers: Seeking out graduates as employees; promoting the college or university among their employees for continuing education
- Colleagues at other institutions: Viewing the college or university as a source of intellectual leadership
- The public: Valuing the university as an essential resource; supporting efforts to advance excellence
- Faculty: Pleased to serve on the faculty of a leading, well-supported institution, enjoying respect and recognition locally, within the state, nationally, and internationally
- Staff: Regarding the institution as a preferred workplace where innovation, continuing improvement, teamwork, and excellence are guiding values in all facets of the work of the institution

Early on, COE developed a guiding philosophy and a methodology for approaching the work of organizational development within the university. Fundamentally, this approach involves the identification of best practices and standards of excellence in higher education, but also in other sectors (including business, healthcare, and the public sector) and the translation of these characteristics into the language and culture of higher education and; more specifically, the culture of State University. In addition to this translation process, COE is committed to the development of programs, models, and approaches to improved excellence in higher education based on expressed and/or anticipated need. COE continues to provide ongoing support to a wide variety of units across the State University system; to serve as an incubator for new initiatives; and to provide an organizational development research and development center for the higher education community nationally.

COE has continued to evolve by adjusting its models, approaches, and services to changing needs within the university, and changing practices and approaches within the field of organizational development. Colleges and universities today face unprecedented challenges. Our leaders are being asked to achieve high quality, innovate, operate with efficiency and effectiveness, graduate increasing numbers of students, and incorporate increasingly sophisticated technology—and to do so in a way that will successfully address the workforce and civic leadership needs of today and tomorrow. In prior decades the institutional progress needed to sustain these challenges could be achieved through modest changes and localized improvement initiatives scattered throughout an institution. Today, the scope and magnitude of institutional needs requires more comprehensive, systematic and transformational approaches to organizational design, planning, and improvement—and perhaps most of all, it requires knowledgeable, dedicated and skilled leaders to guide these efforts. The primary focus of COE today is to provide programs and consulting services in organizational assessment and change, strategic planning, and leadership advancement for academic, administrative, and academic health sciences leaders. This study will relate directly to the strategic planning efforts of COE.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The State University Center for Organizational Excellence (COE) provides strategic planning facilitation to schools, departments, and programs, as well as other colleges, universities, and affiliated organizations using the *Strategic Planning in Higher Education* framework (Tromp & Ruben, 2010). This framework provides a blueprint for a comprehensive approach to strategic planning that can be applied regardless of the size or structure of the organization (See Figure 1).

Strategic Planning in Higher Education Framework



From: Tromp, S. A., Ruben, B. D. Strategic Planning in Higher Education (SPHE) Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2010, p.9

Figure 1: Strategic Planning in Higher Education Framework (Tromp & Ruben, 2010)

The SPHE framework consists of seven major planning phases: 1) mission, vision, and values, 2) collaborators and beneficiaries, 3) environmental scan, 4) goals, 5) strategies and action plans, 6) plan creation, 7) outcomes and achievements (see Figure 2). The inclusion and application of four cross-cutting imperatives - leadership, communication, assessment, and culture – differentiate it from other models.

Mission, Vision, and Values	Defining the reason for the organization’s existence, the desired future state of the organization and the principles and perspectives that guide and influence daily work and the organizational culture
Collaborators and Beneficiaries	Identifying the major stakeholders and their needs, expectations, and satisfaction levels
Environmental Scan	Considering the social, economic, political, regulatory, technological and cultural environment in which the organization functions including assumptions and potential challenges
Goals	Identifying the organization’s broad, high level ambitions
Strategies and Action Plans	Formulation of the specific, detailed ways in which goals will be fulfilled and through which the approach and concrete activities needed to transform the organization will be executed
Plan Creation	Creating a document that clearly articulates the organization’s plan and serves to inform, influence, anchor, and guide the organization’s future
Outcomes and Achievements	Translating goals, strategies, and action plans into tangible and meaningful measures that can be used in monitoring outcomes and milestones and for assessing the ultimate impact of the planning effort

Figure 2. Major Planning Phases in the Strategic Planning in Higher Education model (Tromp & Ruben, 2010)

Underlying this framework is the recognition that the process of planning is equally as important as the plan itself, particularly in higher education, given the inherent challenges. The multiplicity of stakeholders in particular along with the expectations for shared governance is a significant factor in obtaining a successful outcome in strategic planning efforts. There is a critical need to gain support and commitment in order for plans to be effectively translated into practice. The SPHE model developed by COE pays particular attention to organizational culture and developing a culture of assessment. These four imperatives of the planning process, leadership, communication, attention to culture, and assessment, are especially critical given the challenging nature of higher education. The focus of each imperative includes the following:

- Leadership – creating an environment for collective engagement in planning, implementation and change.
- Communication – creating and supporting investment and interest in the planning process, its progress, and its outcome.
- Assessment – promoting the important role evaluation plays in successful change
- Culture – understanding habits, history, traditions, and the natural resistance to change

It is somewhat unique in broadly engaging faculty and staff in the entire strategic planning process. A representative COE strategic planning engagement consists of several phases: meetings with leadership to establish goals for the planning process; the development, distribution, and analysis of pre-planning surveys of faculty, staff, and other stakeholders which become the basis for issue identification; a day-long facilitated planning retreat; a written report providing feedback on the information developed during the retreat and any outcomes; post-report debriefing with leaders; and as-needed follow up and assistance.

STUDY DESIGN

COE is committed to the assessment and improvement of its programs and processes and regularly collects information pertaining to satisfaction with its services from institutions, departments, schools, campuses, and organizations with which it has worked. To facilitate a more in-depth assessment of the impact and perceived benefit of COE's strategic planning services, the Center conducted a detailed survey of six departments and programs for which COE facilitated planning over the previous three years. The departments included in this analysis are a cross-section of those who participated in a strategic planning process. The selected units were chosen deliberately to be representative of each type of State University program: academic, administrative, service, and professional.³

The survey consisted of both a Likert scale and open ended comments. It was grounded in a client satisfaction survey used by COE, and expanded for purposes of this study to address key measures of the success of the strategic planning effort. The study sought to learn:

- What were the outcomes of the planning effort in terms of understanding, communication, and understanding of mission, vision, and goals
- What was the perceived value of the model and the facilitated retreat process, and
- What actual progress was made toward implementation of goals established during the process⁴

The survey was sent to the primary clients, who were the administrative heads or chairs of each department. While the questions used were common to all respondents, each survey was customized to include the actual goal statements developed by that department during their COE-facilitated planning session as a point of reference in assessing progress and outcomes.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

When asked to provide an overall assessment of the value of the strategic planning session, five of the six respondents said it was “extremely valuable” (2) or had “a lot of value” (3); one respondent said that it had “some value.” Respondent comments on the benefits of participation in the strategic planning session can be categorized as⁵:

Clarification of mission, vision, and goals

- Clearer sense of our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.
- Developed a better mission statement coupled with explicit vision and goal statements.
- Formation of a strategic plan for the department.

³ The programs surveyed are represented in the report using randomly assigned letters.

⁴ Surveys were distributed electronically, with a 100% response rate.

⁵ Comments are paraphrased to preserve the anonymity of individual commenters.

- Changes made and in process should enable [Program] to meet current challenges.
- Development of positive ideas.
- Recognition of limitations.
- Assistance with developing clear goals.

Value of engagement in the process

- An opportunity for new staff to participate in the process.
- Improved understanding of elements needed to achieve goals.

Establishment of shared priorities

- Provided us a focus.
- Priorities were established through group consensus.
- Created a concrete plan of action.
- Knowledge of the unit.
- Good sense of camaraderie, good social event.
- Increased awareness of goals.

Ability to communicate organizational value

- Gave us a vehicle to “sell” ourselves to others.
- Able to reward hard working staff members with promotions under reorganization.

Facilitated progress

- Some key task forces and committees were formed and launched.

ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS COMPONENTS

COE’s strategic planning model includes components that focus on development of a mission statement, vision statement and values; analysis of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; development of goals; and preparation of specific strategies and detailed action plans to implement the goals. The survey assessed each of these components.

Mission and Vision Statements

The planning process includes review and/or revision of the existing mission statement, or development of a mission statement if none existed, and development or revision of a vision statement, defined as a statement of the department/program/organization’s aspirations. Respondents to the question “What value or benefits were realized through the process of identifying and discussing the vision statement?” said:

- [Program] had grown in its programs since the last session and hence we need[ed] to develop a vision that represented all of the programs currently housed within the center. The session allowed for the new team members and programs to have a say in developing the vision which transferred into buy-in for the vision. It also flushed out some issues that need[ed] to be addressed and identified common threads among programs.
- Helped us think more broadly about our vision for [Program].
- Helped members of our community to understand difference between mission and vision statements.
- People became more aware of commonalities and differences/I am not sure it was helpful.
- Not clear. Not clear that anyone has read it, but we do use it on some documents/Not totally clear of the benefits as they are hard to quantify. We have it and periodically note it when discussing departmental activities or initiatives.
- A reminder to those that were involved in the development of the vision statement of our focus and educated new members of the board or guests on our vision.

All respondents indicated they have subsequently taken steps to disseminate the vision statement within the organization, with some citing multiple means.

Dissemination to internal audiences

- All staff have received the statement.
- We published our strategic planning report and distributed to faculty, staff, and students, and the Dean.
- Discussed with faculty at meetings.
- The outcome of the session was disseminated in 20-page, 9-page, and 1-page formats.
- The vision statement was discussed, given out, and revised. It is now included in a department brochure and at the end of every department PR presentation we make.

Dissemination to external audiences

- We have printed it on the back of our business cards.
- Trade show booths, newsletters, email blasts.
- It is posted on our website.

All six respondents agreed that the strategic planning process heightened their awareness or improved their understanding of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The degree to which they felt it impacted awareness varied; half said that it heightened awareness “extremely” (1) or “a lot” (2), and half said that it did so “some” (2) or “a little” (1).

Goals

An anticipated outcome of any strategic planning process is the development and prioritization of goals to support the mission and further the vision. Participants offered these responses to the question “How effective was the Strategic Planning session in helping you to identify clear priorities and achievable goals?”

- Very helpful. Again, new staff needed to be brought into the fold and the session allowed for that to happen. The growth of the program since then [has] required us to put our priorities elsewhere and thus we were not able to focus as much as we would have liked on other areas.
- Very effective. Kept us focused and on task as far as our efforts to grow.
- I believe the strategic planning sessions were very effective.
- The planning was OK but continued guidance and consultation would have been needed to lead to clear progress.
- SP session was very useful for prioritizing. Follow through was not great. Culture of department takes long to change. Most faculty still focus mainly on individual research programs, not department as a whole.
- Very effective.

One important measure of the effectiveness of strategic planning is the subsequent implementation of goals developed in the process. Many factors, such as leadership support, funding, or changes in mission can impact the ability to achieve goals despite the best intentions; still, the degree of progress achieved speaks to the impact of the planning process.

Each department/program was provided the list of goals established during their planning process. On a scale ranging from “significant progress” to “no progress,” respondents were asked to indicate the degree of progress made toward achieving those goals since the session (Figures 3 & 4).⁶

Program	Number of Goals Established	Significant Progress	Some Progress	Minimal Progress	No Progress	No Longer a Goal
A	6		2		4	
B	5	1	4			
C	6	3	1	1		1
D	7	1	2	3	1	
E	6	2	3	1		
F	3	2	1			

Figure 3: Progress Toward Identified Goals by Program

Of a combined thirty-three goals established by the six programs, significant progress has been made toward nine (27%); some progress has been made toward another thirteen (39%). Minimal progress has been made toward an additional five (15%). There are five goals toward which no progress has been made; four of those five are in the same department/program. One goal was removed by the establishing program.

⁶ Each program is represented by a letter. The numbers refer to the goals established for that individual program.



Figure 4: Progress Toward Identified Goals by Measure of Progress (n=33)

Goal identification and prioritization is followed by development of detailed strategies and action plans for implementing the highest priority goals. Respondents were asked to select the statements that indicated how they utilized the strategies and action plans in their efforts towards achieving identified goals (Figure 5).⁷

To outline steps toward reaching a goal	3
To identify individuals and/or teams who could contribute to reaching a goal	5
To consider the financial resources needed to achieve a goal	2
To identify products or deliverables associated with a goal	3
To establish a time frame for implementation	1
Did not use the action plans	1
Other	2

Figure 5. Utilization of Strategies and Action Plans

Facilitators and Barriers

Critical to assessing goal implementation is the identification of facilitators that support implementation and barriers that impede implementation, as they may be mitigating factors in evaluating the effectiveness of goal realization. Respondents were asked to identify, from a list provided, those factors that facilitated success in achieving their goals. The following chart (Figure 6) shows the frequency with which each factor was selected.⁸

Committed leadership	5
Shared vision of a goal	4
Teamwork/sharing of responsibility	3
Time allocated to working on goal or priority	2
Clear plan for implementation and success	1

Figure 6. Factors Facilitating Goal Realization

⁷ Multiple responses could be selected.

⁸ Multiple responses could be selected

Two other possible choices, “availability of funding” and “availability of material resources,” were not selected by any respondents.

Four respondents identified additional facilitators, specifically:

- Felt need for change, especially among staff
- Help with media resources from national association

When asked to identify the major facilitator, four of the six programs selected “committed leadership,” while two selected “shared vision of a goal” and “teamwork/sharing of responsibilities.” Five of the six said that the same facilitating factors applied to all of their goals.

Respondents were also asked to identify the challenges or barriers they experienced in pursuing realization of the established goals (Figure 7). These challenges are not unique to strategic planning at State, but reflect common pitfalls to strategic planning identified by Mintzberg (1994) and Allison and Kaye (2005).

Lack of commitment or motivation	4
Insufficient time	3
Insufficient funds	3
Competing or conflicting priorities within the unit	3
Insufficient knowledge regarding implementation of priorities and goals	2
Lack of accountability within the unit	1

Figure 7. Perceived Barriers to Goal Realization

Three other possible choices, “complexity of organizational structure,” “change in leadership,” and “insufficient leadership support,” were not selected by any respondents.

When asked which factors posed the biggest challenge or barrier, three of the six respondents identified “insufficient time.” Other factors identified as the biggest challenge were “competing or conflicting priorities within the unit” (2), “lack of commitment or motivation” (2), and “insufficient funds” (1). One program added “lack of staff” as an additional choice, saying that they had lost over 50% of their staff in one semester. Four of the six respondents said that the same challenges applied to all goals.

Respondents were evenly divided on the question of whether the strategic planning process adequately considered the challenges to be faced in achieving the goals. Those who said the process did not adequately consider the challenges offered the following ideas for improvement:

- Need for more work beyond sessions wasn’t emphasized enough
- Ongoing support and consultation at some level

Other Findings

Three of the six programs have updated their strategic plans since their planning sessions; two indicated this was a continuation of what had been done in the planning session. Of the three who had not updated their plans, two agreed that they would benefit from future strategic planning sessions.

Other Comments:

Difficulty in implementing plans

- One of the challenges I had as a leader was to decide which priorities could and should be tackled first, developing an understanding of how to continue to progress toward goal achievement with multiple competing priorities, delegating responsibility, and follow-up. I left the session amped up to conquer the world and tell the [Program] story. Then reality and life crept in and things came to a screeching halt. On a positive note, we have recently dusted off the report, we are reviewing it with current leadership to ensure it is still current, and we are looking at trying to accomplish one or two of the goals that we believe are doable; tackling them one at a time. There is hope!
- Need for follow-up to review plan every year is needed.
- Cooperation was not sufficient to allow coherent action in some goals. In one goal we were stymied by external university politics.
- Task forces and committees were set up but follow through was weak on many initiatives.

Need for ongoing support

- I believe some ongoing consultation needs to be included.

Benefits of facilitation and participation

- The session was great and well facilitated.
- [The facilitator] did a fantastic job with our group and helped us through a tedious process with a great deal of finesse and style.
- Glad we did it. We need lots of new blood in our department.

CONCLUSIONS

While the survey findings are important for the applied work of the Center for Organizational Excellence, this study also offers an appropriate post-test for strategic planning processes in multiple types of educational institutions. The implication is that a structured strategic planning process involving a broad group of participants can have a positive influence on the organization in many ways. With very few exceptions, the study participants, who represent a diverse set of academic, administrative, service and professional programs, indicate that the facilitated strategic planning model and retreat process had value for them and for their departments, programs, and organizations. More specifically, the results indicate that the strategic planning program has been successful not only in assisting departments, programs, and organizations develop mission and vision statements, organizational goals, and action plans, but also in disseminating organizational information, promoting participation, incorporating new members, and heightening awareness of strengths and opportunities for improvement. Because results were disseminated throughout the organizations, the positive outcomes associated with participation in the planning process impact both current and future participants. Notably, the only recommendation for improving the process is the addition of post-retreat consultation to support the implementation of action plans.

This study considers issues related to both plan development and plan implementation. It suggests that while development of a plan with actionable goals is important, follow-up assessment of goal implementation is also critical. Achievement of goals requires those engaged in the planning process to anticipate, consider, and plan for approaches and activities that will serve as facilitators in the implementation process, and for ways to mitigate those factors that will act as barriers to goal realization. This finding of the current exploratory project points to the importance of follow-up assessment as a way of both advancing dialogue with key planning stakeholders and improving the ways that planning is accomplished in the future.

The Center for Organizational Excellence has evolved to meet the unique needs and expectations of the State University community and continues to adapt to changes in the higher education landscape. Caution should be exercised in efforts to generalize the results of this study to other strategic planning programs or their outcomes, because of the limited number of participants and the specific structure of the COE program. While they may not apply to all such programs, these findings capture important themes related to the strengths and challenges of any strategic planning process. The themes that emerge from the survey responses point to the importance of the strategic planning process, particularly in the context of American higher education. Typically characterized by a culture of collaboration, decentralization, and shared governance, the process of strategic planning in colleges and universities proves to be as important, if not more important, than the plan itself. Similar research, focusing on the impact of other strategic planning programs—with similar goals and structure, or variations thereof, would be very useful. Additional longitudinal research could further enhance efforts to identify the long-term benefits of strategic planning initiatives. The process of strategic planning is ripe for future qualitative and quantitative analysis.

More generally, the study points to the value of research efforts aimed at assessing and improving organizational intervention efforts such as strategic planning programs. The benefits include providing input for program improvement, a better understanding of the unique challenges to strategic planning in higher education, as well as evidence of the potential value and return on investment of such programs—a topic of interest to those who facilitate these kinds of programs, as well as to leaders throughout the organization.

Excellence in higher education seldom results by simply collecting talented faculty, staff and students to pursue their own individual goals. Rather, excellence is far more predictable when faculty, staff and students share a common vision of where they are headed, see opportunities that can derive from working together, and become committed to collaboration in pursuit of common aspirations. Because higher education, as a sector, faces unique challenges including broad missions and a multiplicity of stakeholders with differing priorities, achieving these outcomes requires leaders who are adept at engaging their colleagues in envisioning and creating a collective future, who know how to make good use of planning models to facilitate but not overly script or stifle the creative energies of colleagues, who can inspire their colleagues to create institutions, organizations, and programs that become far more than would be possible with only the simple sum of their individual talents. This exploratory essay seeks to unpack the value of the strategic planning process in higher education – a process that both engages a wide variety of organizational stakeholders and often influences the very direction of the organization. As college and university

leaders continue to wrestle with the nuances of strategic planning within the context of higher education, we would encourage additional research that studies the impact of the process on planning itself.

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