

I The authors present an overview of strategic planning, examine its history and mystique, and conclude that planning, if properly implemented, can have a powerful impact on advancing and transforming colleges and universities.

Strategic Planning in Higher Education

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Homo sapiens is the classical term used by philosophers to elevate humankind from the remainder of creation. The term, of course, refers to our ability to think, conceptualize, mull, peruse, and innovate. It also extends to other defining functions and faculties, such as problem solving and imagination. Rationality certainly characterizes most jobs and professions, but it crescendos in the world of strategic planning.

The editors of this volume believe that the soul of strategic planning is this human capacity for *intentionality*—this ability to formulate goals and proceed toward them with direct intent.

Planning, Intentionality, and Human Behavior

The Frenchman Henri Fayol, a parent of organizational theory, implicitly dealt with the notion of “intentionality.” In the early 1900s he described planning as assessing the future, setting goals, and devising ways to bring about these goals. Mintzberg and Quinn (1996, p. 10) were thinking along these same lines when, speaking about strategy as plan, they specified two essential characteristics about strategy: it is made in advance to the actions to which it applies, and it is developed consciously and purposefully.¹

Herein, then, lies the essence of strategic planning. When we strip away the models, schema, and paradigms; when we discard the PowerPoint presentations; and when we look beyond the grids, scorecards and matrices, we confront our ability to think with intention. Planning concerns an ability that is awakened by the human appetite to better our condition. In the business world, bettering one’s condition includes capturing market share and improving profits. In higher education, bettering one’s condition

includes hiring better faculty, recruiting stronger students, upgrading facilities, strengthening academic programs and student services, and acquiring the resources needed to accomplish these things. Since most institutions of higher education share a similar mission and compete for these same objectives, an essential part of strategic planning involves shaping the institution in ways that ensure mission attainment by capturing and maintaining a market niche in the quest for resources, faculty, and students. Thus strategic planning has both external and internal faces.

Strategic Planning as Formal Practice

Considered in the context of human thought and behavior, planning is certainly not new. To the contrary—since planning embodies essential features of *Homo sapiens*, it is by definition as old as humankind.

On the other hand, when one views strategic planning as a structured management discipline and practice, it is barely out of its infancy. The date on the birth certificate of strategic planning is smudged, but it seems safe to say that it emerged as a distinct methodology sometime between the 1950s and the 1970s. Steiner (1979) asserted that formal strategic planning with its modern design characteristics was first introduced under the rubric of “long-term planning” in the mid-1950s by large companies and conglomerates; Mintzberg (1994a) wrote that it “arrived on the scene” in the mid-1960s when “corporate leaders embraced it as ‘the one best way’ to devise and implement strategies that would enhance the competitiveness of each business unit.” Others attribute the emergence of strategic planning to the turbulent environment of the 1970s when, with the energy crisis and other unanticipated events, organizations scurried to find a more pertinent planning system (Rosenberg and Schewe, 1985).

Many would argue that searching for the birthstone of strategic planning is chimerical since planning is an evolutionary process. Certain dating stones can be located, but strategic planning possesses no single event of origin. What is clear, however, is that the last several decades have been a boom period for strategic planning—a development in which higher education has shared.

Strategic Planning in Higher Education

Higher education’s courtship with strategic planning was originally focused on facilities and space planning during an era of rapid expansion. The first significant formal meeting of higher education planners was a 1959 summer program attended by twenty-five campus planners at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. With sporadic meetings through subsequent years, key members of that group (all with physical planning backgrounds) eventually founded the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) in 1966 with a base of more than three hundred members, most with a primary interest in campus physical planning (Holmes, 1985).

The environment for higher education began to experience notable unsteadiness in the 1970s with demographic, economic, and technological swerves. Higher education costs began to consistently outpace inflation, and foundational stress fractures were detected in the public's support for higher education. Ideas about planning began to change. The 1983 publication of George Keller's *Academic Strategy* marks a pivot for a shift that occurred around that time, as colleges and universities took a closer look at strategic planning. The 1980s' conception of planning emphasized its use as a rational tool for orderly, systematic advancement of the academic enterprise. Guided by an ennobling mission, institutional leaders could march through a series of prescribed steps and actualize their vision. Linear approaches flourished, featuring a cognitive procession of functions: identifying and prioritizing key stakeholders, environmental scanning, situational analysis such as SWOT, specification of core competencies and distinctive competencies, strategy formulation such as TOWS, goal setting, objective setting, action step setting culminating in alpha-omega activity, and evaluative feedback loops. There is much to be said for these rational models, and they continue to propagate fresh sprouts, notably the Baldrige Educational Criteria for Performance Excellence (for example, Baldrige, 2003) and the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

From the 1980s through the end of the century, the visibility and volume of strategic planning in the academy continued to ascend. Keller's 1983 seminal work was named the most influential higher education book of the decade by both the *New York Times* and *Change* magazine. By the 1990s, accreditors were touting strategic planning as a *sine qua non* of organizational effectiveness. The 1998 Council for Higher Education Accreditation's *Recognition Standards* set forth an expectation for "evidence of policies and procedures that stress planning and implementing strategies for change" (CHEA, 1998, p. 7).

By the first year of the new millennium, SCUP membership had swelled to forty-two hundred, and its topical breadth grown to a full range of strategic considerations: governance, budgeting, learning assessment, faculty workload, student engagement, market segmentation, endowment management, and so on.

Three Themes

Three themes, embryonically apparent in the 1990s, have come to maturity. First, a rational-deductive, formulaic approach to strategic planning is being tempered with a cultural-environmental-political perspective. Bryson described this theme vividly: "Most of these new management innovations have tried to improve government decision making and operations by imposing a formal rationality on systems that are not rational, at least in the conventional meaning of the word. Public and nonprofit organizations (and communities) are *politically rational*. . . . The various policies and programs

are, in effect, treaties among the various stakeholder groups” (Bryson, 1995, pp. 10–11, emphasis in original).

Second, strategic planning is now increasingly about learning and creativity, with the recognition that college and university leaders need to challenge assumptions and consider radically changing existing structures and processes. Relatively recent conceptions of strategic planning center more on dynamism, flexibility, nimbleness, inventiveness, and imagination. They focus on strategic thinking as opposed to syllogistic analysis. In this vein, Henry Mintzberg observed: “Strategic thinking, in contrast, is about *synthesis*. It involves intuition and creativity” (1994a, p. 108). Bryson eloquently admonished: “Indeed if any particular approach to strategic planning gets in the way of strategic thought and action, that planning approach should be scrapped” (Bryson, 1995, p. 3). Flexibility is a key to organizational success today (Hussey, 1999).

Third, there is a new and powerful emphasis on moving from formulation to implementation, from plan to practice, following Benjamin Franklin’s aphorism that “well done is better than well said.” More and more administrators are asserting that the purpose of planning is not to make a plan but to make a change. In fact, it is not easy to find a text in today’s business schools entitled “Strategic Planning.” Most authors prefer the moniker “strategic management,” which is meant to embody both thinking and doing. John Bryson speaks of this, in a touching confession in the Preface to the second edition of his acclaimed *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*: “The second edition thus reflects a major trend in the field. . . . People also realize that it is not enough just to think—organizations must act as well. And it is not enough just to decide what to do and how to do it—the doing matters too. . . . The result is a book that is as much about strategic management as about strategic planning. I have kept the original title, however, because of the recognition and following the first edition achieved” (1995, p. x).

Critiques of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is not uniformly applauded. Some have questioned whether it is a vital process, a core function, or the latest fashion in the technique boutique. Williams’s canine comparison tugs at our hearts as he laments that strategic planning “lies still and vapid like a tired old fox terrier on the couch. An occasional bark, but no bite” (2000, p. 64).

Upon scrutiny, some of these soothsaying scholars are actually offering a strawman argument in order to criticize strategic planning efforts and trends that go astray, before offering their prescription for success. Robert Birnbaum (2000) focused on higher education’s adoption of management “fads,” among them strategic planning. Rosenberg and Schewe (1985) contend that strategic plans succeed only 10 percent of the time; they rail against such defects in the planning process as mechanical treatment of the

environment, separation of planners from operators, and resistance of organizational cultures. Sevier's recent words are scorching: "There are probably few phrases that cause a greater group groan on most campuses than 'strategic planning.' The fact is, most colleges and universities look at strategic planning as a path to pain, rather than a path to plenty" (2003, p. 18.).

Then Sevier quickly reverses field, logs a number of lessons learned, and concludes that strategic planning "remains a powerful tool for advancing a college's or university's vision" (p. 19).

Harsh as the criticisms appear, they are largely targeted at poor practices that impede creative planning, and the critics, as noted, often offer stories of both failure and success. Mintzberg, perhaps the most cited writer in the field, makes a compelling scholarly argument in his solidly researched 1994 text (Mintzberg, 1994b). He presented considerable evidence that organizations have often had a counterproductive love affair with planning, weighted down by "lead boots" and slowed down by "paperwork mills." Mintzberg also, however, offsets those negative evaluations with a number of corporate success stories spotlighting approaches that were less rational, structured, and rigid. Tom Peters (1994) offered similar ideas (with a lighter touch), hanging the torturous term "death by a thousand initiatives" on strategic planning and other management trends.

So, Does Strategic Planning Work in Higher Education?

Confirmation bias is a well-accepted principle in social science research. As human beings, we are genetically programmed to seek patterns, to conform cognitive input to what we already know, to explain what we see on the basis of our beliefs about how the world works. Especially in the absence of sound empirical analysis, observers—including the editors and authors of this volume—are prone to see the answers we expect to questions such as, "Does strategic planning work?"

After reviewing the literature and consulting with knowledgeable colleagues, we have concluded that a convincing, generalizable empirical study on the efficacy of strategic planning in higher education has yet to be published. There is, of course, no shortage of anecdotes from both sides of the aisle—that is, from the proponents and the critics of strategic planning in academe. Even in the case studies offered by the authors in this volume, there is no definitive answer to the question.

The research design needed to address the effectiveness of strategic planning poses many challenges. Strategic planning in a college or university occurs in a complex, dynamic, real-world environment, not readily amenable to controlled studies, or even to quasi-experimental designs. It is difficult to parse out the measurable effects of strategic planning from the influences of such other important factors as institutional leadership, demographic change, fluctuations in state and federal funding, politics, the

actions of competing organizations, social and cultural forces, and the like. Thus, to the best of our knowledge, the present empirical evidence about whether strategic planning does or does not work in higher education is less than conclusive.

Implications

Although we understand and agree that skepticism is warranted from a social science perspective, it is fair to note that on the basis of our research, experiences, and reading of the literature, we are proponents of planning. We find that the central lesson from such critical observers, carefully read, is not that strategic planning does not work; instead, we believe that a more defensible conclusion is that planning can be done poorly or it can be done well. Strategic planning can produce successful results, or it can be ineffective.

We are encouraged by the cases and advice related by the contributors to this volume. We thank our colleagues for sharing their thoughts on how, in the real world in which colleges and universities operate, strategic planning—wisely used—can be a powerful tool to help an academic organization listen to its constituencies, encourage the emergence of good ideas from all levels, recognize opportunities, make decisions supported by evidence, strive toward shared mission. . . . and actualize the vision.

Note

1. Mintzberg and Quinn (1996) also discuss a perspective of strategy “as pattern” that defines strategy as consistency in behavior, whether or not intended. This theme is extended in Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998), *Strategy Safari*, a fascinating work that describes and offers the historical foundations of ten distinct schools of thought on strategy formation.

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