

## **Vision for Excellence**

**Isn't that what all strategic plans are called? Successful college plans also share other common elements.**

By PAUL FAIN

### **THE VISION:**

Strategic plans migrated to higher education from the corporate world. Although some universities have been drafting them for at least 40 years, their use has exploded over the last decade, particularly in the last two years. Now virtually every institution, from research universities to community colleges, has a plan.

Competition for students, globalization, cost crunches, and the accountability push from Washington and state capitals, as well as accrediting bodies, have all fed colleges' need for more-detailed performance indicators and financial modeling.

To be useful, the plan must give an honest assessment of where an institution is and where it wants to go, planning experts say. It must also include specific, honest budget numbers.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

#### **1. Recognize the competition**

Marvin W. Peterson, a professor of higher education at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, says universities faced increasing pressure from policy groups, minority coalitions, and lawmakers over access and academic quality from 1985 to 1995. During that period, a more comprehensive approach to strategic planning emerged, he says, and institutions began studying their interaction with the world beyond campus rather than just focusing on internal challenges.

But Mr. Peterson says the current higher-education landscape, with the explosion of for-profit institutions and distance education, requires a new form of nimble, proactive planning.

"Our environment could be labeled as more turbulent and unpredictable than at any previous time," he told an audience during a July meeting held by the Society for College and University Planning.

The first step in creating a good plan is for an institution to know its mission and how it relates to the competition, says Donald M. Norris, president of Strategic Initiatives Inc. and a planner for 30 years.

"The president needs to make a strong assessment about where the institution is in relation to its environment and its history," he says. "The context is so very important."

#### **2. Get everyone involved**

Eugene P. Trani, president of Virginia Commonwealth University since 1990, is now working on his third strategic plan at the university.

He credits the plans with helping spur a surge in VCU's U.S. News & World Report rankings and in facilities, including \$1.2-billion in new buildings, renovations, and technology since 1990.

Mr. Trani says a good strategic plan requires everyone on the campus to be involved, particularly at the beginning. And the final draft needs firm budget numbers and ways to measure success.

"At our university, the worst thing you can do is not participate in the strategic plan," Mr. Trani says. "Then you're not going to get any resources."

Robert L. Bogomolny, president of the University of Baltimore, agrees that wide buy-in is key to a successful plan. He said he encountered skepticism when he began a plan after arriving as president in 2002.

The mood on the campus was "We've done plans before, but they end up on a shelf somewhere," he said. But Mr. Bogomolny was able to overcome those doubts by showing he was serious about drawing a wide range of input on shared goals.

The yearlong process at Baltimore yielded a plan that has been "extraordinarily important" to the university, he says. "That plan has been a cornerstone for our changes here."

### **3. Run more like a business**

Good strategic plans make governing boards happy, Mr. Trani says. Most university board members are from business backgrounds and want tangible ways to track goals, as well as a president's performance.

Linking an institution's aspirations to budget numbers can also help presidents make better pitches to state lawmakers and potential donors.

When he first arrived on the campus, Mr. Trani says, he had to work to sell VCU's virtues to the business community and even to members of the university's governing board. But thanks in large part to strategic plans, he says, "I haven't had to do that in 10 years."

Not surprisingly, given the corporate flavor of strategic plans, for-profit institutions are creating the most sophisticated plans in higher education.

Mr. Norris, of Strategic Initiatives, says institutions like Capella University incorporate marketing information and statistical analyses into their plans. "The for-profits are ahead of the curve," he says.

#### **THE PROCESS:**

It's a rite of passage for newly hired college presidents. First, the inauguration, then the listening tour, and soon the pronouncement that a strategic plan is in the works.

But what happens next varies wildly.

Sometimes a strategic-planning committee spends an earnest year or more plotting the institution's goals and long-term future. The final strategic plan, with approval from faculty members, staff members, trustees, and maybe even alumni and students, becomes a bedrock document that is consulted on everything from curriculum shifts to financial priorities. It can also be used to set goals for fund-raising campaigns.

But just as often, the president and the planning committee half-heartedly put together a plan with vague goals and a boilerplate mission statement. The document languishes in the president's office, its glossy cover gathering dust until the next president tosses it.

In rare cases, a strategic plan can help bring about a leader's downfall. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale's plan, "Southern at 150: Building Excellence Through Commitment," which was unveiled at a black-tie gala in 2003, was later found to be nearly identical to a strategic plan that Texas A&M at College Station had adopted in the late 1990s.

The former chancellor of the Carbondale campus, Walter V. Wendler, had been an administrator at Texas A&M and had worked on the plan there. Mr. Wendler, who was ousted in November 2006, did not acknowledge copying parts of the Texas plan, including a nearly identical eight-point list of "primary gaps."

#### **THE PAYOFF:**

When Carl V. Patton became Georgia State University's president in 1992, the sleepy commuter university had not built a new building in a decade.

Since then, Georgia State has increased its annual budget to \$459.5-million from \$190.9-million and has added 14 new buildings to its campus. It is now a major player in downtown Atlanta. In August the university opened a \$168-million housing complex for 2,000 students.

Paul A. Alberto, a professor of special education at Georgia State and an officer of its Faculty Senate, says the institution's strategic-planning process has "really focused everything. It's just pervasive, in a good way."

An urban planner himself, Mr. Patton worked on plans at other universities before arriving at Georgia State. He says the university's governing board hired him with those skills in mind.

Georgia State's strategic plan incorporates academic issues with long-term goals. From that document flows the annual action plan and budget, as well as the master plan, which tackles facilities.

"All of this relates to our annual budget," Mr. Patton says. "If you don't embody it in a budget somehow, it doesn't mean anything."

---

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Money & Management

Volume 54, Issue 6, Page A26