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Admin 101: How to Manage the Strategic-Planning Process

Some strategic plans fail because they are perceived as top-down mandates. Others collapse under the weight of too much input from too many committees. Here's how to navigate the middle ground.

If a single insight could sum up the case for strategic planning in higher education, it would be the Stoic philosopher Seneca's observation that, if you don't know which port you're sailing to, 'no wind is favorable.'

Yet all of that time you spend leading a strategic-planning process for a department, college, or institution will prove fruitless if the plan doesn't identify:

- Realistic objectives that can be accomplished within a set period of time.

- Arguments, values, and rationales behind those objectives.
- Metrics to mark their success or progress.
- Resources (money, people, materials, facilities) to reach and sustain the objectives.

Seems pretty straightforward. But of course, many less certain variables — political, cultural, psychological, bureaucratic — can assist or impede a strategic plan. And it is those variables I'm exploring in a few columns of the Admin 101 series for academic leaders. My previous column focused on the preplanning. This month is about how to manage the process itself.

Resist the urge to micromanage. Usually someone at the campus level (often the provost) is tasked with being the 'political" leader of strategic planning, while someone else (typically a vice provost) oversees the workflow. In that scenario, the buck should stop with the provost. However, the administrator running the day-to-day planning process must be allowed to do the work with minimal interference from above.

In addition, throughout the planning process, the workflow administrator should have almost nothing else on his or her plate *but* strategic planning. It's not a project that should be tacked on to the vice provost's 97 other responsibilities.

Make sure the strategic planners are trusted on the campus. Perception matters. I have witnessed and heard of many failed strategic plans that were fatally wounded even before birth. The cause of death: a widespread impression that it was a top-down plan devised by a few high-level administrators with little or no input from anyone else, particularly from regular faculty members.

On the other hand, some plans have collapsed under their own bureaucratic weight because they were overwhelmed by too many committees, took too long to write up, and tried to please everyone.

Obviously, the devil is in the details of trying to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis. During the actual planning process, you want to make sure that the various committee leaders feel empowered, supported, and encouraged to balance democracy and efficiency.

Plan around your highest priorities. A strategic plan is never a blank slate. At any college or university, there are already fundamental priorities and pressing exigencies that would be disastrous or pointless for a plan to ignore or downgrade.

Let me take a typical example now facing perhaps hundreds of institutions. Say you're a leader at a small liberal-arts college with a modest endowment and an operating budget based largely on tuition revenues. Enrollment has been sinking or barely staying level. Your costs, especially for maintenance and faculty retention, are rising. You are locked into a problematic cycle of charging high tuition but then deeply discounting it so your students can afford to attend. Parents and potential students are comparison shopping more than ever. And so on.

Your strategic plan has to engage those big-picture issues head on. If you don't fix the hemorrhages, find cures, and chart new pathways, nothing else you achieve will matter. Because you likely will be out of business.

It's in such situations where strong committee leadership is vital. Someone has to keep steering the committees back — no matter the topic (curriculum, for instance) — to those big-picture issues. The committee leaders must keep asking: 'How do these proposed changes help us solve our fundamental problems and deal with our very-top priorities, or not?

Err on the side of specificity. Make sure the strategic planners are given firm, specific parameters — meaning: deadlines, word-count limits, desired number of recommendations and priorities.

As every architect knows, freedom and structure are not contradictions. Likewise, strategic planning should be an exercise in free thought and creativity, within boundaries. It doesn't help anyone if the planners wander about like Seneca's lost ship without a destination and a date on which they'll reach port.

Each of the committees engaged in a particular area of strategic planning need to operate with a template. You can't have the committee on research produce a concise, practical, on-point report while the one on teaching meanders over 100 pages of philosophizing. Hence the need for word-count limits.

Perhaps most important, a strategic plan — to be at all achievable — must have a limited number of priorities and prescribed actions. They can vary wildly, depending on the size of the unit and the breadth of its mission. But there must be a ceiling on the number of ideas put forth. A plan with a bloated to-do list is doomed to failure.

Can you really afford what you're proposing? You've probably seen the famous *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a scientist facing a blackboard full of mathematical equations, and in the middle it reads: 'THEN A MIRACLE OCCURS.' A similar, overly optimistic delusion fells many a strategic plan: 'We will renovate and modernize the library and pay for it out of increased enrollment revenue.' Great. So, what's your plan for increasing enrollment revenue? And what happens if that miracle does not occur?

Ideally every goal in the plan should include an itemization of the resources required to make it happen.

Strategic planning can be an exercise in proverbially thinking outside the box, discussing dreams and hopes as well as hard choices and stark realities. But you should never plan to do something that you cannot possibly pull off. Committees need to make sure that their goals are plausible. They should include the 'how" of each proposal: How will it be paid for? Who will staff it? What other tangibles (facilities, for example) will be needed?

Resolve the contradictions in the final version. Ideally the planning committees will coordinate their work with one another. That's much easier to achieve in a strategic plan for a department versus a document for the entire university.

Inevitably there will be some discordances, disjunctures, contradictions. A typical one revolves around 'allocation of effort' — meaning how much of people's time it will take to achieve the various goals. We keep loading unfunded mandates and extra duties onto everyone — staff members, professors, administrators — and magically hoping that both the new and the old expectations will be met. So get real about it.

Let's say your strategic plan calls for faculty members to engage in more 'public scholarship' and 'community interaction' — common national trends. Those are very laudable, truly altruistic goals but you have just added a new expectation to the faculty allocation of effort. And that raises a host of questions:

- Does a new priority — in this case, public engagement — fall under research, teaching, or service? Or is it now, in practical terms, a fourth area of promotion-and-tenure and post-tenure criteria?
- Will you be reducing their work expectations in any of the other categories to accommodate the new one?
- What support, financial or spatial, will you be providing to uphold this lofty goal?
- Will all faculty members be encouraged to meet the same standard, or can they trade out some of their work commitments in research and teaching to add some in public engagement?

There is no simple algorithm or formula, but that's the point. If you are going to add something to the campus or to an individual's portfolio, you have to decide whether it's just feel-good marketing or you actually anticipate a practical, sustainable outcome.

Plenty of strategic plans are simply exercises in public diplomacy. In other words, no one really expects to achieve all of the goals but everybody feels like they were part of the process. In such cases, inclusivity is more important than outcomes. As a leader you may determine that that's the right way to go for your particular department or university. But you're missing out on a valuable opportunity to create goals that your people can get excited about and actually want to achieve.

David D. Perlmutter is a professor and dean of the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University and an executive coach for hospitals and universities. He writes career-advice columns for The Chronicle. *Browse the previous columns in the Admin 101 series* here.

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By David D. Perlmutter

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