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process-by-design.*

## Leading With Our Strengths

### How an open planning process helped with the founding of two high-impact academic centers

#### Introduction

Two big changes took place when I arrived as the new president at John Brown University (JBU) in the mid-1990s. One was that I became the first outsider to take office after three generations of much-loved John Brown family presidents. While carefully anticipated by John Brown III, the leadership change was a time of significant transition in the life of the JBU community.

The second was that the university began a new phase of strategic and long-range planning called process-by-design. After engaging in this process for more than four years, JBU has seen many positive, measurable results. This report will focus on how using this process helped us found two important new academic centers—an accomplishment made possible by our commitment to leading with institutional strengths.

#### The Process's History

In 1994-95, my first year, we created an 18-member Strategic and Long Range Planning Committee (SLRPC). I appointed and then chaired the group, which was highly representative of the JBU community. The group's job was to envision outcomes and then lay plans in a way that was inductive—that is, moving from many particulars to general priority goals and future directions. To elicit feedback, we sponsored open meetings with the entire faculty and staff and conducted the SLRPC meetings in open session.

The working subcommittee of the SLRPC was and is the President's Cabinet, made up of five vice presidents and me. Our goal is to keep discussions open and candid; all input is considered and respected, though obviously not all can be acted upon.

By using this open model, we eventually achieved a high degree of consensus on 13 priority goals that broke down into about 70 illustrative strategies, or action plans. We're now involved in a rigorous review of the goals and strategies in light of the significant progress of the past three years. One of those goals, as mentioned above, is to lead with our strengths.

#### The early process of envisioning

We began our group processes with such broad questions as:

- What is John Brown University like?
- What are our greatest strengths?
- What do we want to make sure we never lose?
- Is our mission statement still about right?
- What is our highest and best vision for the future?

These questions were also a means of pressing for vision. I had a pretty clear sense of JBU before becoming president and worked hard to make my vision and guidance clear

while demonstrating respect for institutional history and values. However, I also wanted the community, especially the faculty and the board, to buy into plans for the future. As suggested above, the process was, and continues to be, very open. This requires that the cabinet and I bring strong leadership to the process. We have to be clear in our communications on essential positions and constantly press ahead on initiatives.

The envisioning processes moved slowly at first, perhaps because it was hard for what had been essentially a family-run business to shift gears, or because the community was feeling cautious about the new president. I initially appointed an Envisioning Task Force to lead these processes toward a renewed vision, but that mechanism stalled. Informal discussions through the cabinet and SLRPC seemed to work better. A look through the files on the envisioning process shows that by the winter and early spring of 1995, we had the beginnings of some interesting new concepts. Here is an important one from the notes of that time:

“ ... continue to become a key Christian educational center, internationally sought out ... for family atmosphere, competence in careers, leadership and Christian living, and liberation from ignorance and self-centeredness.”

### **Envisioning's importance**

The ideas spelled out in those notes—drafted well before we began a detailed planning process or established priority goals—are particularly interesting in retrospect. In looking back, we can draw a clear connection between this early expression of institutional strengths and the founding and endowment of our two new academic centers. Now fully funded, established, and endowed, they are the Center for Marriage and Family Studies and the Soderquist Center for Business Leadership and Ethics.

We had several foundations for our envisioning. We first sought to ask fundamental and far-reaching questions. This approach led to active discussions of our satisfaction with the mission statement and then creation of a core-values document. Given the presidential transition, it was a prime time for philosophical questions and deliberation. Eventually, the community opened up and reflected candidly about the future.

The most important thing was that an envisioning process did take place, in this case gradually but with increasing momentum. The university continues this process even today by seeking to imagine the future in about five years, back-filling with reasonable priority goals and strategies, and adjusting as we go along. We try to remain willing to adapt to new information and circumstances as they arise. Because these are times of such rapid and far-reaching change in higher education, flexibility is essential.

### **Process detail: Lots of hard work**

As envisioning gathered momentum, the rest of the processes-by-design got under way. By this point we had reaffirmed the mission of the university, identified and reaffirmed two historic mottoes, reflected on core values, and broadly envisioned the future.

We now did our homework with SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) research and analysis. We gathered formal data as well as informal feedback. Armed with these data, the ideas that came about through envisioning, and much conversation, we began to formulate priority goals and illustrative strategies. The goals set the direction for our efforts; the strategies were the action plans to achieve the goals.

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Once again, we discussed the goals and strategies openly throughout the JBU community. They were revised and eventually endorsed by the SLRPC and then approved by the board of trustees. Some of the goals identified the need for a comprehensive fund-raising campaign, for strengthening academic excellence, and for meeting other qualitative standards. But the goal most directly applicable here, with its supporting illustrative strategies, is this one:

**Goal No. 11:** To be a leader in Christian higher education in selected areas of strengths unique to JBU.

***Illustrative strategies:***

- a. Identifying areas of unique strengths of JBU in which opportunities for leadership impact exist.
- b. Proactively exploring funding sources, organizational structures, and delivery mechanisms for leadership impact related to JBU mission, goals, and core values.

To achieve goal No. 11, we drew together the strengths and visions already identified in the envisioning processes. We recognized as strengths JBU's family atmosphere and existing modest funding for seminars about marriage and family relationships. We took into account our historic emphases on careers, professional competence, and ethical character, as well as existing seminar programs on business leadership.

The university had a history of making use of key national leaders who addressed ways to develop healthy marriage and family relationships based on core Judeo-Christian values. So it seemed appropriate to explore regional and national leadership in higher education, integrating biblical studies, psychology, sociology, and family therapy in comprehensive programming. The entire community, including the board of trustees, expressed enthusiasm for developing a key leadership center in marriage and family studies.

Similarly, the cabinet and board recognized the university's strengths in business-related leadership programs, including curriculum, an outstanding Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) program, excellent relations with many regional businesses, and high interest by our many international students in business enterprises. We were also aware of many requests for guidance in making ethical business leadership decisions, both from for-profit business and from churches, schools, universities, government agencies, and other charitable organizations.

Once again, community-wide discussion took place. People talked about the future and shared and refined their ideas. They were excited about the possibilities. Part of my job was to orchestrate the flow of group dynamics. With broad campus support, I recommended including the two centers in a comprehensive fund-raising campaign. The new centers, based as they were on existing institutional strengths, became two of the campaign's six goals.

### **The Process's Results**

variety of activities helped us fund and endow the centers. We held highly public luncheons to announce each center's goals and invited major donor prospects and foundation and corporation executives. Board members actively engaged colleagues and made support statements at the luncheons. The vice president for advancement and I made many personal

visits and wrote proposals. The staff distributed top-quality brochures to publicize each center and generated excellent regional press coverage. Public interest was high.

### **The Center for Marriage and Family Studies**

The development of the vision for the Center for Marriage and Family Studies (CMFS) preceded that of the Donald G. Soderquist Center for Business Leadership and Ethics by about a year. Board members were key initiators and donors (though some preferred to give anonymously). Response from major donors was strong right from the outset. The exciting result is that by April 15, 1999, the new JBU Center for Marriage and Family Studies was fully endowed at more than \$8 million, including funding for core center housing and a PeopleCare Clinic. A key national leader is in place as the executive director; the program is fully staffed; graduate degrees, supported in appropriate academic divisions of the university, are operational and self-funded; the undergraduate curriculum is significantly impacted; and excellent conferences are funded and operational.

In the first year of full operation the CMFS has served hundreds of churches and thousands of individuals and couples—on campus, in our four-state region, and across the country.

### **The Soderquist Leadership Center**

As the Center for Marriage and Family Studies became a reality, business leaders on the board grew increasingly energized about a center for ethical business leadership. Several trustees urged our board chair, Donald G. Soderquist, to allow his name to be attached to it. The core concept was thus in place to develop the Donald G. Soderquist Center for Business Leadership and Ethics.

The vision and goals of this center are the keys to its success. The vision is to be a key global voice on leadership and ethics. The pre-eminent goals of the center are to:

- Create and implement undergraduate and graduate degree programs that are conceptually based in leadership and ethics (and offered by our Division of Business).
- Create and implement conferences, seminars, guest lectureships, and residential programs for senior executives and mid-level managers of major corporations and organizations across the U.S. and around the world.
- Become a developer of and clearinghouse for materials and research in the areas of leadership and ethics.
- Create research and internship opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and faculty in the areas of leadership and ethics.
- Create a collaborative approach with other universities for national and international opportunities.

To raise funds for the center, the vice president for advancement, board members, and I made personal visits to corporate, foundation, and major donor prospects. We also approached major corporate headquarters with a brochure, mailing, and follow-up phone calls inviting them to become founding partners or charter members by expressing interest and making a significant contribution. More than 30 major donors, most of them corporations, have responded favorably so far. These partners serve as an informal advisory council in future program planning.

The public announcement luncheon for the Soderquist Leadership Center drew a packed house at one of our main regional convention centers. Board chair Don Soderquist,

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business leaders from the JBU board, and Ken Blanchard (author of *The One-Minute Manager*) headlined the program and lent their vigorous support to the center's vision and goals. Donor response, again led by the board of trustees, has been strong.

By summer 1999 the Soderquist Leadership Center's core operations, including graduate programs, were fully endowed at more than \$8 million. We felt it was more important initially to fully endow operations, thus assuring funding in perpetuity, than to build elaborate facilities. But with core operations fully endowed, we are now in a position to develop facility plans and funding. Once the current comprehensive campaign was completed in December 1999, the Soderquist Leadership Center facility became our top fund-raising priority.

The center was fully staffed during the 1998-99 academic year and entered its pilot program year in 1999-2000. During that first year the center's contributions to the undergraduate curriculum included a module in the core curriculum for all students. Other program elements are major seminars for business leaders, collaborative projects with other agencies, and significant facilitation of the new Master of Science degree in leadership and ethics from our Division of Business. The master's program was filled to capacity from the start; we hope to initiate an MBA program in fall 2000.

### Summary

The processes we followed, carefully designed but always flexible, are outlined in Figure 1. As you can see, most components involve fairly straightforward planning as a means to give structure to the process. Arguably even more important are the motivational factors. Vision grows into hope, energy, enthusiasm, and commitment. These factors ultimately drive the desire to see dreams fulfilled. Of course, the efforts cannot be chaotic; to succeed we needed a combination of both enthusiasm and a reasonably orderly way to get things done.

In our case, a vigorous sense of vision—one based on institutional history and identity was essential for effective change. This vision was carried out through an inclusive planning process that led to exciting progress on numerous goals. As president, I had to make sure that I was neither

arbitrary nor autocratic, neither passive nor distant. I had to be active, unifying, and empowering—constantly reconceptualizing and communicating. I had to be rigorously honest but hopeful.

Of course, the outcome could not be all things to all people. We had to make difficult decisions, but criteria for the results were widely available and highly public. A large degree of energy, enthusiasm, and support developed. In the end, our goal of leading with institutional strengths led to the kind of tangible results we needed: two innovative and fully endowed new initiatives, the Center for Marriage and Family Studies and the Donald G. Soderquist Center for Business Leadership and Ethics.

**Dr. Lee Balzer** is president of John Brown University, which has 1520 students and is located in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. JBU is a private, independent, nondenominational university, founded in 1919 by John E. Brown, Sr., a Methodist evangelist, especially for financially needy students of the Ozarks region. JBU still serves a high proportion of financially needy students from about 35 countries and 45 states. ■

Figure 1.

