

## Pragmatic Planning

### Adapting a model strategic planning philosophy to a small college's unique needs

Everyone these days does it. But few do it well.

Since the mid-1980s, when “strategic planning” became the rallying cry of accrediting agencies across the country, virtually every college and university in America seeking reaccreditation had to demonstrate some level of activity on the strategic planning front. However, because change in the academy has often been an irrational and sometimes confused process, planning has never been one of its stronger suits.

Of course, colleges and universities can no longer just evolve out of confusion. Our advanced technological society is undergoing seismic upheavals, and colleges and universities, like for-profit institutions, will go out of business if they do not make well-thought-out choices for the future. The purpose of this essay is to outline a very simple strategic planning model, invented more than a decade ago by a liberal arts institution in New England, which has been successfully assimilated by at least two sister colleges. The so-called Connecticut College Model is well worth knowing about.

#### The concept

The problem with strategic planning in the academy is two-fold: Either the process is so convoluted, complex, and long-winded that few people on campus understand it, or the plan itself is benign or ineffective because it is not linked to the budget. Either way (and sometimes both situations apply), the results of strategic planning can be minimal.

I was president of Moravian College in Pennsylvania, where strategic planning had indeed been episodic and erratic, when I first learned about the Connecticut College Model. Under the gun from the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools to produce an effective strategic planning strategy in preparation for Moravian's 10-year review in 1997, we formed a committee to search out the best small-college strategic planning model in the United States. Members of the committee visited several colleges, but Connecticut College's strategic planning process, around since 1988, caught their eye. And for good reason.

The virtue of the Connecticut College Model is its elegant simplicity. It is based on four straightforward premises, namely that:

1. planning should be inclusive, initially involving the entire community;
2. strategic goals should be clearly defined, open, and measurable;
3. the planning cycle should be no more than five years; and
4. perhaps most important, the strategic plan should be linked to the budget.

The Moravian College planning committee adopted these four basic premises and, following closely but not completely Connecticut College's planning process, developed a five-year strategic planning technique that is still in operation today.

To my great disappointment, I never saw the Moravian plan in action because after serving the college for 11 years, I left in 1997 to become president of Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. But ironically, when I arrived at Randolph-Macon, it too

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was under pressure from its accrediting agency to revisit strategic planning. Randolph-Macon's strategic plan was weak, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools said, because it was not effectively linked to the budget. I immediately jumped at the opportunity and, borrowing from my experiences at Moravian, adopted the Connecticut College Model for my new college.

What follows is an outline of how the Connecticut College Model has worked at Randolph-Macon since my arrival in 1997. In doing this, I want to stress that what really matters is the Connecticut College Model's four-point philosophy, not the details of its operation, which will vary from campus to campus. Indeed, the beauty of the Connecticut College Model is that it can be modified to work at almost any small college.

### Developing the plan

When I arrived in Ashland, Virginia, in July 1997, I immediately began working on the first premise of the Connecticut College Model by canvassing the thoughts and ideas of the entire Randolph-Macon College community. Of course, I had my own preliminary vision for the college already. But I wanted to know what others thought before I weighed in with my own viewpoint. And so, mid-summer, I sent out a survey to faculty and staff, students, alumni, parents, and community leaders asking them, via five simple questions, to share with me their vision for Randolph-Macon.

I also created a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC), chaired by the dean of the college and made up of four elected members of the faculty and four administrators appointed by me. The committee's charge was to consult with the entire college community and then, along with me, create a strategic plan composed of a limited number of measurable goals that we could accomplish over five years. When the committee finished its task, it would go out of business, to be recreated five years hence when the next planning cycle began.

The SPC's immediate challenge between the fall of 1997 and early 1998 was to assimilate the results of the community survey and then, using this material, organize community conversations to which everyone—including faculty, staff, students, and even hourly workers—would be invited. These meetings were informal and scheduled at times that would not only accommodate busy faculty and staff but also draw in students. The dean of the college chaired the meetings.

By February 1998, the SPC had gathered enough community information to begin drafting an initial strategic plan. Drawing from the survey and ideas issuing from the community planning meetings, 10 very general themes began to emerge that captured a sense of the community on various college-wide issues. These themes, in fact, were the progenitors of the five goals that would eventually define the final strategic plan. They dealt with matters as far ranging as curriculum reform, academic and community environment, facilities needs, technology, marketing, and financial management. Like all documents created during the planning process, these themes were made public on the college's Web page and in the student newspaper. Nothing was hidden from the community.

On March 4, an all-college "town meeting" was held to which everyone was again invited. The college literally shut down for the better part of a day. Using an outside facilitator, we discussed and debated the 10 themes publicly. There was plenty of positive but sometimes spirited conversation, and several modifications and additions were suggested.

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I made it clear at this meeting that neither the faculty nor the community as a whole would be responsible for defining the final plan. This would be the job of the Strategic Planning Committee and me, all of whom were present and taking notes. I also told those present that the themes, or goals, that were surfacing from the community discussions and my own still closely held vision for the college would eventually have to converge. I wanted to make it clear from the outset that presidential leadership was a very important part of the planning process.

Finally, I said that there would be no up-or-down vote at the end of the process. This was an inclusive effort in which everyone's voice would be heard. The SPC, the president, and ultimately the board of trustees would make the final decision.

Following this community meeting, the SPC began work in earnest. During the week of March 16, the committee met in my home to boil down the 10 themes into a limited set of goals—with goal defined as a strategic concept that affects the entire community, such as “improving student quality and campus climate” or “enhancing the teaching and learning environment of the college.” Limiting the goals to a manageable number kept faith with the Connecticut College Model.

As a result of the meetings in my home, we crafted a rough first draft of five clearly articulated strategic goals. I say “we” because at this critical point, I began to share my own vision for the college with the Strategic Planning Committee. This vision, I should add, had been significantly modified by the community discussions I had heard since the planning process began. The committee members and I did not initially agree on all points, but in the end we were able to achieve consensus. By that I mean that both they and I had to compromise.

On March 25, the SPC held a second community meeting to further air the five goals. The goals were clarified and refined, though not substantively changed. Unfortunately, faculty attendance at this meeting was relatively low, which worried several members of the committee. But I knew from the Connecticut College experience that even though at the beginning there are many skeptics who question the value of strategic planning and choose not to participate, the situation changes dramatically when the final budget reflects the priorities of those who were actually involved. As is the case with most changes at a small college, it takes one successful planning cycle to finally get everyone's attention and involvement. The second draft of the five goal strategic plan was in hand by early April.

The SPC's next challenge was to make the goals operational by breaking them down into several initiatives and eventually breaking the initiatives into activities. These initiatives and activities had to be assigned not only a metric, by which progress could be measured, but also an accountable person who would be responsible for implementing them. Since these concepts are such an important part of the plan, let me better define them by using illustrations drawn from the actual five-year strategic plan that the Randolph-Macon Board of Trustees eventually adopted.

If a goal is a strategic concept, an initiative describes a specific course of action designed to contribute to achieving the goal. Thus, if a strategic goal is “to improve student quality and campus climate,” an initiative might be “to raise the academic profile of freshmen and keep them at college” or “foster an environment that promotes academic excellence and curiosity.”

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An activity is a discrete action with a clearly defined outcome that fulfills an initiative. Consequently, if the college is “to raise the academic profile of freshmen and keep them at college,” two activities might be “to increase the size of the applicant pool” and “to reduce freshman attrition.”

A metric for the first activity might be to increase the size of the applicant pool from 2,000 to 3,000 by the end of the five-year planning cycle. A metric for the second could be to reduce freshman attrition from 15 percent to 10 percent over the same period of time.

Finally, an accountable person, assigned the responsibility for implementing these two activities, might be the dean of admissions for increasing applications and the dean of students for reducing freshman attrition. In both instances, the accountable person is given wide scope as well as adequate funding to achieve the metric assigned to the activity.

To brainstorm possible initiatives (creating the activities and metrics and assigning accountable people would come later in the process), in early April the SPC asked the community to join one of five discussion groups, each centered around a goal. To assure continuity, a member of the SPC chaired each of these discussion groups, but otherwise anyone in the community could once again participate. Each group was also assigned a trustee liaison as a way of bringing the board more directly into the planning process. These trustee liaisons did not attend every meeting of their assigned discussion group, but the “scribe” of each group was required to share the minutes. Trustee liaisons were then encouraged to contact the SPC and me if they had concerns about any of the initiatives being proposed. The concerns were few.

These discussion groups were encouraged to “think outside the box” and not be concerned about cost issues. This they did with abandon! Each group came up with many initiatives, some absolutely outrageous, others very reasonable. The SPC, meeting with me, then took these proposed initiatives and selected those they thought would best achieve each of the five goals. Again, the Strategic Planning Committee and I, not any other group on campus, had the authority to make these decisions.

It took longer to refine the strategic plan than we had planned (exam week did not help). But by May the goals, along with many of the initiatives, were in good enough shape to be provisionally shared with both the faculty and the board just in case there were significant objections to the direction in which the planning process was going. No objections were raised by either group.

### **Implementing the plan**

Having developed and refined the core of the strategic plan during the 1997-98 academic year, our only remaining task was to link it to the college’s 1999-2000 budget process. This would be accomplished during the fall of 1998 and early 1999.

In past years, the budget had been painstakingly constructed line by line by the president’s cabinet, a group made up of key administrators and an elected faculty representative. Apart from the faculty representative, faculty participation in the budget process had been limited to a Committee on Resources and Plans that reviewed only the academic side of the budget. As I pointed out earlier, there was no formal connection between the strategic plan and the college’s budget process. It was now time to correct this omission.

At the first fall faculty meeting in September 1998, I announced the creation of a new committee that would have joint responsibility for the strategic plan and the budget. The Planning and Budget Committee (PBC) would be made up of four appointed administrators (including the dean of the college and the treasurer) and four members of the faculty, elected in the fall for a four-year term with a staggered schedule for replacement. Since the PBC was advisory to the president, I would meet with the committee only when it or I requested such a meeting. The PBC would have three principal responsibilities, namely:

- to create annually and recommend to the president a balanced budget for the following fiscal year into which the strategic plan is integrated;
- with the aid of the goal teams who report to the PBC (see below), to monitor the strategic plan by approving and overseeing initiatives and activities, including the metrics recommended to measure progress; and
- to update and annually review all aspects of planning and budgeting, taking into account environmental changes and, when necessary, modifying the plan.

The faculty had mixed feelings about this committee. On the one hand, it gave them a significantly larger voice in the overall budget, and this was applauded. On the other, the committee could recommend to the president the fate of current programs and personnel that did not fit into the strategic plan, and not everyone was sure about the wisdom of giving any college committee this much power, even one that enjoyed significant faculty representation.

October was now upon us, and the board meeting was to be an occasion for trustee approval of the strategic plan and at least the five goals. To this end, a full-day retreat on campus was organized, facilitated by the same person who had led the all-community town meeting the previous March.

The board gathered. At separate meetings on the morning of the retreat, members of each trustee committee reviewed the goals pertaining to their area of responsibility. Then in the afternoon, the full board, the newly elected Planning and Budget Committee, and the soon-to-be discontinued Strategic Planning Committee met as a group for a comprehensive review of the plan.

To the great surprise of the facilitator and me, the groundwork for this culminating meeting, including early board participation via the trustee liaisons, had been so thorough that there was hardly any dissent. The board unanimously approved the strategic plan, including provisional initiatives, and agreed that final details would be ratified in February so we could get on with implementation. It was also on this occasion that the Strategic Planning Committee went out of business. The Planning and Budget Committee was now in the driver's seat.

To complete the details of the strategic plan, the newly elected PBC created five goal teams that began meeting in early November. The goal teams had four responsibilities. These were to:

- further refine the goals and initiatives by designing a manageable number of activities that would achieve each initiative;
- recommend to the dean of the college and me the persons or groups who would be accountable for implementing the goals via their initiatives and activities;
- recommend a metric to measure progress in achieving the initiatives and activities during the five-year planning cycle; and

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- continue to monitor the goal assigned to them throughout the five-year cycle and then report results to the PBC.

The dean of the college and I appointed the goal team members, who included people in the community with expertise in the various goal areas.

Simultaneous with the work of the goal teams, and during the fall term, the PBC began work on the regular budget with the vice president of finance as chair (more on the budget process below). Once preliminary work had been done on the budget, the PBC began the process of prioritizing the strategic plan for implementation. First, in consultation with me, the committee approved (or rejected) activities and metrics that were beginning to emerge from the goal team discussions. Then it determined which of these initiatives and activities would be implemented at the beginning of the five-year planning cycle and which would be accomplished later.

Following the example of Connecticut College, which each year creates a six-figure budget item for strategic plan implementation, I strongly recommended identifying from external sources a similar “venture capital” fund to help get critical parts of the strategic plan off the ground. This recommendation came with an understanding that the strategic plan, in whole or in part, was not an add-on but in time would have to be fully integrated into the college’s budget. In other words, some older line items that did not fit the plan or that had become redundant would eventually have to go. But without start-up monies, I feared that immediate implementation of the strategic plan might be compromised.

By January 1999, the strategic plan with goals, initiatives, activities, and metrics in place—was complete. This plan, together with a request for \$242,000 in start-up funds, was submitted to the board at its February meeting. The plan in its entirety was unanimously ratified. We were off and running—except for one final refinement to the planning process.

In the fall of 1999, after I finish writing this essay, we will create an “environmental scanning group” made up of faculty, staff, and trustees with expertise in forecasting the future. The group will research some tough issues that could easily jeopardize the strategic plan. For example, what do group members think inflation will be, and what effect might it have on the budget? Will healthcare costs rise at double-digit rates, as they did with great devastation to college budgets in the early '90s, and what effect might this have on the plan? What are the demographics for recruiting new students? What local threats or opportunities do we see affecting the college?

This group will report its findings directly to the PBC and me so that if we have to make adjustments to the plan, we can make them in a timely manner.

### **The cycle**

nce the planning process was in place and the plan itself was approved by the board, we developed a six-step planning cycle, in large part designed by the PBC.

**Step 1: Early fall.** Following the end of each fiscal year in June, the PBC will publish a progress report on the strategic plan to show which initiatives and activities have been accomplished in the previous year and which have not. Metrics are used to gauge success or failure.

This progress report then becomes the subject of a retreat held in early fall and attended by the president, the PBC, and the chairs of the goal teams. Based on the findings of the progress report, we discuss and finalize initiatives and activities approved by the board the previous February and budgeted for the current academic year. If, in light of past experience, an initiative or an activity now seems unrealistic or impractical, it is dropped. If a metric is unduly optimistic (or not optimistic enough), it is modified. If the board, the environmental scanning group, or the president have last-minute concerns, these are taken into consideration.

The results of this retreat, including the progress report from the previous year and the final list of initiatives and activities to be pursued during the current academic year, are published on the college's Web site. This way everyone in the community understands where the college has been and what it now plans to do.

**Step 2: Fall to early February.** The PBC, chaired by the financial vice president, meets to plan the next year's budget. Benchmarking data are studied and discussed. Financial and strategic parameters are set. The group learns from past experience and listens carefully to ideas or concerns that have been expressed from time to time by members of the community, including the president, the board, the goal teams, and the environmental scanning group. Then the strategic plan's initiatives and activities are prioritized for the next (as opposed to the current) academic year, and metrics are confirmed or recalibrated. If necessary, a venture capital fund is either raised from external sources or provided for in the regular budget.

Based on this work, the college's senior staff budget officers are provided with guidance they can use to develop proposed budgets in their respective areas of responsibility. When the work of these budget officers is completed, the PBC then constructs the new budget for recommendation to the president. The president either accepts it or returns it to the PBC for further consideration.

**Step 3: February.** The president recommends to the board the final budget and the strategic planning initiatives and activities for the following year. After board approval, senior staff budget officers are informed of the strategic parameters and financial targets within which they are expected to operate their departments. Operational details of the strategic plan's initiatives and activities are finalized at the fall retreat.

**Step 4: April.** Goal teams continue to monitor current-year progress of their assigned goals and report their findings to PBC.

**Step 5: May.** The board reviews the progress of the strategic plan for the current year and discusses concerns with the president. The faculty elects a new member of the PBC (replacing the member rotating off committee).

**Step 6: Summer.** The environmental scanning group does its work.

Then the cycle begins again, starting with a progress review at the end of the fiscal year and the fall retreat (going back to Step 1 on previous page).

At the end of five years, with the cycle completed, the Strategic Planning Committee will be re-constituted. The planning process will then begin anew.

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### A final word on flexibility

Studying the way Connecticut College has used its own model, one notices that its planning process has evolved over time. This also happened at Moravian, and it will no doubt happen at Randolph-Macon. At all these institutions, the planning process is modified as the planning and budget committees and the presidents discover more effective ways of doing business. Nothing is set in stone!

Similarly, each five-year plan is flexible. It is probably not a good idea to modify or change the five-year goals and initiatives constantly. But, should unforeseen opportunities or threats arise, it would be foolish not to make modifications or, in some extreme cases, to drop the plan altogether.

I hope that other colleges might find the Connecticut College Model as helpful as I have.

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