



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 1**

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Asking About Strategic Planning

Trustees set the direction of the college by guiding strategic planning. A strategic plan answers the questions: Where are we going? What will we look like when we get there? How will we get there? How must we act to preserve our character and integrity while getting there? The process of strategic planning should teach people to react to new situations in a way that acknowledges a dynamic environment and that sets the institution on a path to success. It should give them a framework for making everyday decisions. Each decision should move the college or university closer to its goals.

Because of the board's responsibilities for institutional strategies and policies and because of the need for board guidance at the strategic level, many board members may be involved in the planning process. To avoid misunderstandings during the development of the plan, trustees should be informed of the planning process design at an early stage, when the administration is "planning to plan." Trustees should communicate their expectations for the process of planning and for the resulting plan. The board should be assured that the design of the planning process can lead to a worthwhile conclusion. The questions in this chapter can help a trustee share concerns about the planning process and set standards for the strategic plan itself.

The chapter begins with questions on the design of the planning process. A better design will lead to a better plan. The second set of questions assesses the college or university's expectations for the final strategic plan. An effective process pulls together all the pieces and pushes an institution to understand itself and its environment better. The resulting point of view is strategic in that the institution will have organizational processes that make it ready to cope with the challenges of the environment.

Responses to the following questions will allow institutional leaders to explain the structure of the process. Often the board executive committee takes a lead role in maintaining board contact with strategic planning. The executive committee is a good



forum for these broad questions. College or university leaders are asked to explain to the board such fundamental process aspects as how it has developed the rationale for developing a plan, how it will involve the college community, and how it will maintain focus.

What is the case for planning? In other words: Do the times call for strategic change? A case for planning describes new challenges and new opportunities facing the college or university. Such a case would describe the college's strengths and shortcomings and state a goal for the planning process. The first stage of many planning processes is to search for new challenges, opportunities, strengths, and shortcomings. In the next stage, the institution structures ways of meeting the challenges, choosing and taking advantage of opportunities, building strengths, and reducing or averting the impact of weaknesses.

The board should understand whether the president intends to change the direction of the college or university through a planning exercise or to focus the exercise on improving performance or both. On one hand, the president may expect a full assessment of the college's direction. On the other, the president might indicate that she or he is satisfied with the institution's overall strategy but will be using planning as a way of embedding continuous improvement into everyday thinking. Perhaps the president aims to do both. Clarity of purpose is important. Trustees may anticipate that a strategic shift will be proposed; while the president may intend only to do all things better. Both are valid intentions for planning, but the word "strategic" can carry a different meaning for a board member than a college president.

A good case for planning will deepen campus community "buy-in" for the planning process. The case is the first step toward building a shared understanding of the mission and vision of the institution. The college or university should also offer the design for presenting the case to the campus community.

What is the plan for participation? In other words: Will everyone be onboard? Every plan presents a vision: the college or university as it should look in a successful future. Reaching that vision requires that every member of the campus community take daily actions and make daily decisions in ways that move the college toward that vision. The



degree of participation in the planning process helps determine the understanding by each person of the vision and that person's acceptance of his or her role in advancing the college toward its vision.

The board should understand how all members of the campus community are being asked to contribute. The board's confidence in the process should improve after its members are shown the manner in which participation is structured for alumni, former students, current students, staff members, and part-timers—all groups that are occasionally forgotten. Of particular interest to the board should be the design for their own participation in the process.

The amount of guidance and structure given to departments and offices is an important design question with strong implications for participation opportunities. Departmental goals should relate to the institution-wide strategy. A departmental strategy to add competence in a narrow field does not immediately seem to relate to a university strategy to improve students' life chances, for example. The design must assure integration of these goals.

How will the college or university know the ways in which it must move toward the vision every day? In other words: Where's the implementation plan? Developing real structures for assuring change should be a critical step in the plan design. A good design will include stages to formulate critical strategies for change and improvement. The intent should be to devise strategy statements that communicate modes of moving toward the vision through action. The plan design should include a process for assigning responsibilities and obtaining measurable goals for the steps along the path to the vision.

How will college or university leaders provide focus? In other words: What are the critical factors for success? There are an unlimited number of ways in which any college or university may change and improve. The strategic planning process should include a stage that narrows these options to the ones that are most important for reaching the vision. The everyday decision of where to invest resources requires an understanding of priorities. Priorities should not be based on preferences, but on the evident necessity of the investment for success.



A clear process will recognize that the resources of the college, especially administrative leadership, are not limitless. The process should show how resources will be placed where they can do the most good. A commitment of resources restricted to the most critical tasks, not all possible tasks, should come from this process. The process needs to have a thrust that discovers and articulates what should NOT be done.

What concepts must be grasped for the process to be successful? In other words: What should be shared knowledge? Too often planning processes fail to acknowledge the need for intellectual control of internal or external systems before actions are designed. Understanding is the basis of progress. Colleges are collections of complex systems, enmeshed in a complex environment. Changing, improving, and reacting to these systems require systematic learning.

Education of the community should be part of the plan. For example, before we can work toward making the college or university more affordable, we will need to understand the factors driving tuition, the financial needs of students, and policies for awarding scholarships and loans. In this example, the concepts of financial need and financial aid packaging must be more widely understood before progress can be made.

How will this college or university learn from this planning exercise? In other words: Is this a learning organization? A learning organization uses ritual, ceremony, process change, and regular assessment to retain knowledge. Organizational learning differs from individual learning. The learning of individuals drifts in and out of the grasp of an organization as people change positions, enter, and leave. Organizational retention requires the establishment of policies, the reinforcement of ceremonies, and the habit of rituals. The college or university should build a plan that demonstrates concern for ceremonies, processes, and policy change. Participants need to understand the steps that any planning result must go through to become legitimate, particularly when new policies are suggested by the plan. Just writing it down in the plan does not make it so.



Designing Plans for Results

Trustees should also understand how the plan and the planning process will result in strategic change in the institution. The search for and implementation of strategic changes that help a college meet new challenges requires careful analysis. The institution needs to understand the kinds of people that it has served well and the advantages it has offered over competing options. The planning process should result in a plan that showcases institutional values and special characteristics. Guiding strategies must be clear. The process should produce a plan that states a vision, and it should provide a clear strategy for implementation. For example, an institution that can discount tuition no further may need to develop a strategy to improve the value of its programs.

How will the college or university employ the mission in the planning process to make clear the kinds of people it serves best? In other words: Are there target markets? Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody.” Colleges are no different. The most fundamental strategic change an institution can make is to choose to serve new people. The board should use this question to determine whether this particular strategic choice is on the table. Is the process expected to clarify the college’s definition, through its mission, of the people it serves? The end result of this exercise may be an affirmation of the mission, a discovery of a poorly served portion of the identified audience, or an explicit goal to serve new populations.

The administration should provide an analysis showing that the current student population matches the characteristics of those people anticipated in the institution’s mission. Institutional leaders should also show that these groups are not only being served but served well. The administration should be able to describe how its planning process will test ideas about its service population. The mission of some institutions implies that all people are to be served. In many cases, however, institutions best serve a more limited population. Not all institutions are “right” for all people. At institutions where the definition of a service population is ambiguous, a good planning process can be used to discover those groups for whom it has strength.



Will the process change or clarify our vision? In other words: Will we recognize success when we see it? This may be an unnecessary question. Few colleges skip the planning step where the campus community develops a description of itself in a successful future. The vision should portray the college or university as having successfully met challenges, taken advantage of opportunities, leveraged strengths, and avoided the pitfalls of weaknesses. This stage should include techniques that will turn dry goal statements into vivid pictures of the future college or university. This stage should also be structured so that all members of the campus community will come to see themselves in that future.

Colleges and universities can portray themselves as “ever striving.” This more ambiguous rendering of a vision, unfortunately, thwarts any chance of experiencing actual success. Always seeking the impossible dream may be perceived as always failing. A strong vision-creation process will help the institution to define success in tangible, measurable terms.

In the end will we know why students (or donors or funding agencies) choose us? In other words: What is our competitive advantage and who are our competitors? The board must be certain that the administration is not moving into planning under the assumption that its competitive advantages are evident to all or that the institution is beyond competition. Students, donors, and funding agencies make choices. A college or university exists because those decisions have been favorable to it in the past. Whether the college is open to the idea or not, competitive advantages have kept it running. A strategic plan that does not build on its existing strategic advantages is risky. To use an ancient example, the reasons a person bought a Ford—its strategic advantages—did not lead them to buy an Edsel. The plan for the Edsel apparently did not build on Ford’s strategic advantages.

The planning process should foster a better understanding of the lure of competitive institutions and agencies (and lifestyles). Why might a potential student choose a competing opportunity? The process should have as a goal the development of effective, competitive strategies in response to these changing competitive pressures.

Will the process help us find the values—the distinctive ways in which we operate—that will keep us true to our mission, tradition, and principles? In other words: What business



are we in? Passed from generation to generation, the ideals of the college founder include the special reasons why the college was founded and ideas about how a person is to live and behave. All institutions have the opportunity during the planning process to find or affirm its special character. The character-building and style of conduct that are passed on become both a desirable gift to the community and a distinction that carries competitive advantage.

To survive, a college or university must offer something unique. A good response will show how the planning process will tie the college's style of working with students to the character attributes that it intends to impart to students. The planning process should foster the sharing of college and university values and should show how these values will affect both the creation of strategies and the conduct of everyday actions.

At what stage will we find guiding priorities? In other words: What is our strategy? Many planning designs go from mission to projects without pausing to consider strategies. A college that has a vision of becoming affordable and raising compensation to the highest national levels may have conflicting goals. A strategy is needed to resolve this conflict. How will that college manage both?

The knowledge of institutional values, mission, competition, and vision should lead to a guiding strategy on how to move toward that vision. A strategic planning process needs to show how such a set of strategies will be derived. A strong process will define the characteristics of a successful strategy.

How will the plan reveal which decisions are strategic? In other words: Are planning and action linked? The strategic plan will not have an effect on the college or university unless institutional leaders can give guidance on how the strategies should affect day-to-day action. A good process will demonstrate how plans like those for financial resources (in other words, the budget), for the development and use of technological resources, and for the development of human resources can be linked to the strategies. For example, a strategic planning process may have a phase where a team creates the format for an annual report demonstrating that the budget responds to the priorities of the strategic



plan. An unsatisfactory planning design isolates the plan from the budgeting, hiring, and concrete planning that goes on daily.

Many of the questions that trustees must ask in their effort to guide an institution are specific to that institution. Questions that improve the quality of the planning process and the final plan, as above, can be more generic. At the initiation of a planning process, trustees can help assure that the plan will have a positive impact. Board queries such as these will help the institution develop an effective process. Trustees can ensure that the college or university avoids thrashing through a demanding planning process with little more outcome than a list of pre-existing desirable projects. The institution can avoid this weak outcome—if the trustees raise the bar on plan design.