



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 2**

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Asking About the Master Plan

While the strategic plan is the true “master” plan, the term “master plan” is used for the overall campus, building, and space plan. The name is a bit too grand, because this plan is subordinate not only to the strategic plan, but to the academic plan and, to a degree, the financial plan. Trustees may be asked to be part of this planning process at all stages, from planning design to final approval. Trustees, especially those who have real estate, engineering, or architectural backgrounds, bring expertise, and they bring the fund-raising energy that can make a design for campus additions and renovations into a reality.

Master planning often requires the assistance of professional space analysts and architects and can be an expensive process. Fortunately, the needs and ideas that drive these plans change slowly. As a result, the master planning cycle usually is repeated only once during the tenure of most administrations. While presidents can serve through several master planning cycles, master plans seldom last through a change of presidents. Administrations are thus often new to the process, and getting it right the first time is important. A primary role for the board is to encourage a high-quality planning process. There is rarely a second chance during a single administration to learn from mistakes.

The questions in this chapter go from probes about the master plan process to two natural outcomes: decisions about new buildings and management of existing space.

The Master Plan Process

A good process will integrate the master plan with other plans and will be broad in scope. The trustees and the president are concerned with all the systems and plans that touch on the master plan and can contribute this overview to the workings of the master planning group. Academic strategies will drive master plans; financial strategies can constrain them. From this integrated viewpoint, trustees can also validate the notion that



the standards for physical space in the plan reinforce the primary strategies of the college. Trustees should also promote an open attitude toward the future. A master plan will be quickly outdated if it is made from narrowly constrained viewpoints that see only today's challenges.

How will the master plan use the results from the strategic, financial, technological, and academic plans? In other words: Will we know what we need before we begin the design? Master planning cannot be done in a vacuum. The board should understand the background given to the master planning group, and that background must include the college's plans for new academic programs and enrollment. Financial constraints and infrastructure goals must be incorporated into any design. A strong answer will leave the board feeling that the guidance given the master planners will create a physical campus that can accommodate its vision for the future.

How will the plan help the college take advantage of opportunities? In other words: Will the plan be set in stone? In addition to the "artist's rendering" of bricks, mortar, and campus paths, the plan should present a set of guidelines to assist decision makers in reacting to new opportunities. These opportunities can come from innovative donors or from new learning technologies, not known at the time of plan preparation. The charge to the master planners should be to develop dynamic guidelines for space as well as more-concrete schemes.

What are this college or university's construction standards for quality, for environmental safety ("green" buildings), and for space flexibility? In other words: Will we help keep the planners from aiming too high or too low? While financial constraints can drive the quality of construction, the college should not settle for space lower in quality than its strategic standards. Institutional leaders should be able to present a standard that the board feels is appropriate. If finances permit going above the standard, the institution is doing well. In all cases, the board needs to ensure that the planning process is going forward with a construction standard that fits the strategic direction of



the institution. A good response would show examples of construction that are at that standard.

“Green” buildings are becoming more than just experiments. A few colleges have set environmental standards for their new construction that assure the incorporation of many “green” features. Colleges and universities are always being renovated. A value for flexibility in function can decrease costs many years later.

What documents, databases, and assessments are we expecting from the master planning process? In other words: Will we get anything else out of this besides a plan? Master planning professionals gather enormous amounts of data on existing space. The master planning process should yield databases that can feed into scheduling, structure renewal tracking, and preventative maintenance systems.

What types of space will the plan include? In other words: Are we encouraging our planners to think outside the box? The master planning process should not be limited to designs for classrooms, offices, theatres, and lounges. The charge to the master planners can include an assessment of needs and uses for non-fundamental space, such as space for contemplation, for mid-day prayer, for team interaction, for child care, and for community interaction. The process should provide for an open search for space needs.

New Construction

Before contemplating new construction trustees will need responses to a few fundamental questions. The questions below focus on the creation of policies that can smooth the initiation of a new construction process and give focus to fund-raising for new construction.

What are the financial requirements before ground is broken on a new academic building? In other words: How much cash must be in hand before we build? While all gifts must be carefully negotiated, all good negotiators know “the line that cannot be crossed.” In this case, college and university leaders should discuss guidelines for



minimum amounts of cash in hand and maximum levels of debt before a project can move forward or a name be attached. Funding the costs of servicing a new building should be part of the plan. The impact that this strategy of funding will have on cash availability and debt service limits should also be part of the analysis.

What are the financial requirements before ground is broken on a new self-funding building (residence hall or dining hall, for example)? In other words: At what minimum vacancy rate will we be forced to draw support from central activities? Revenue-generating projects require a different set of guidelines than those used for academic construction. The feasibility of these projects rests on the certainty and size of the new revenue stream. A good answer will acknowledge the level of uncertainty and the requirements of evidence for new revenue projections. If only a small number of vacancies will put a project into financial difficulty, then trustees must examine the risk that these financial problems will cross into the academic side of the budget.

What will be the role of each of the constituencies in the planning process, namely the board, students, the community, and alumni? In other words: Can we avoid designing something that students and faculty hate? Many colleges have put together planning processes in which the preferences and sound ideas of many constituents are enthusiastically drawn out and evaluated.

For what reasons might we refuse a gift for a building? In other words: Why wouldn't we want a free dairy barn? An institution that accepts then rejects a gift for construction will appear to donors to have uncertain standards and weak decision-making procedures. Donors may come to believe that the institution's standards and values are ad hoc. Gift policies should give decision-makers sufficient guidance to confront these difficult situations with confidence. The college or university should be ready to recognize when to refuse gifts that come with terms that are financially unwise, that limit academic freedom, or that counter the college's strategy.



Location and Space Management

Mission drives location at many colleges and universities. Service to specific communities can be both an imperative and a financial advantage. Other colleges and other universities with less targeted audiences have more options for the locations of their activities. The questions below ask the administration to view location choices and space use with an analytic eye. The college or university may be situated on valuable real estate, have aged buildings with inadequate infrastructure, and be situated at an impractical distance from a primary audience. Approaching this as an opportunity (as it should be termed) takes the kind of bold leadership that only a board and president can give.

What is our process for evaluating locations? In other words: Should we be here or somewhere else? Trustees need to understand the degree of flexibility that the college or university now has, including market possibilities for existing real estate, changes in the desirability of current locations (due to area demographic changes and movements of traditional students), maintenance challenges of current locations, and alternate possibilities.

The cost of purchasing and constructing a new campus less the net realized value of a sale of an existing campus can be compared against the cost of bringing an existing campus up to institutional standards. Most colleges and universities have no alternatives, but a large number could benefit from a thorough analysis of new location possibilities.

Costs of leasing space should also be examined, and compared with an estimate of the value of one more classroom in terms of tuition revenue per square foot. Many colleges and universities are “space-bound,” and the economic incentive to increase space or change scheduling may be great and calculable.

How much of our distinctiveness comes from location? In other words: Does the current set of locations impart a competitive advantage? Changes in the location of competitors, the match between the current location and the homes of commuting students, and the degree of coherence between the current location and the college’s mission are important



pieces of the analysis. The campus can be viewed as part of the package with which the college or university provides service to its constituents. The analysis may also pinpoint geographic areas where the participation of our service population is low because current campus locations discourage attendance.

What is our current space utilization? In other words: Are we wasting space? A space-utilization metric with benchmark comparisons to other institutions responds to this query. An effective answer will include plans for improving space use, perhaps by moving backroom processing to other locations, or by using incentives for departments to improve their space use.

Trustees can contribute much to the master planning process because they see the college or university more readily as part of a larger world than do those who focus on its internal workings. Trustees have a major role to play in setting standards at the college. Many of the questions above will assist the president and the administration in seeing the larger context and recognizing the importance of standards. In the areas of building design, environmental fit, space utilization, and location advantage, trustees will be asking, in effect, “What is our standard for this?”