

Strategic planning and information use: the role of institutional leadership in the community college

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Abstract *Community college presidents face a daunting challenge in trying to manage and guide an organization that is, by its nature, decentralized and bureaucratic in its decision-making processes, and at the same time they face external demands for greater accountability and internal demands for information. Although technological systems can accomplish these kinds of data collection tasks easily, the implementation of such systems is itself problematic. In many ways, implementing new information and technology systems, when done effectively, mirrors the open-ended, cross-functional deliberative processes of strategic planning. This paper discusses how institutional leaders at community colleges have used the implementation of strategic planning processes to break down information silos, increase collaboration among units, streamline information and work processes, and provide greater access to both academic and operational information. While this process may be time-consuming and disorderly, it is a promising tool for bringing about organizational change.*

Community college leaders face a daunting challenge. Their work consists of managing an organization that is, by its nature, decentralized and bureaucratic in its decision-making processes. At the same time, they face external demands for greater accountability and internal demands for increased effectiveness. While some top-level administrators may prefer to make decisions based on the context of their own experiences and the experiences of those they trust,

others seek to amass the best and most pertinent information that can help provide a context for their decision. These leaders believe that the use of information and data is a key building block in the decision-making process. A closer look at how community college leaders use information systems to meet strategic planning needs, as well as how strategic planning can be used to facilitate the development of information technology implementations, reveals the challenge of how these leaders inform strategic planning with the use of information. Whether a college is beginning the transition from a legacy system to an enterprise system or is seeking to measure improvement in teaching and learning, institutional leadership can play a key role in helping the organization move to a unified vision of the future.

Planning for improvement

Information technology has become a central component in the cross-functional processes of strategic planning. For example, institutional leaders at community colleges have implemented strategic planning processes to break down information silos and to engage faculty and staff in collective



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thinking about long-term goals. Other college leaders have put processes in place that allow colleges to adopt long-term, open-ended commitments in order to increase collaboration among units and to generate organizational drive around agreed-on, common goals. One of the challenges of leadership in higher education is the decentralized nature of the enterprise itself. Higher education institutions have been described as utilitarian organizations that function as organized anarchies, which are often accompanied by unclear and problematic goals (Bass, 1990). In higher education, mechanisms for shared governance often require upper management to consult with faculty on many decisions. However, while this process often brings faculty into the decision-making processes, it does not necessarily build trust between administrators, staff, and faculty.

In fact, at many institutions, there are few incentives for faculty to collaborate across departments, or even within their own department. On the administrative side, many departments are run like small fiefdoms, with their own separate information systems, procedures, controls, and culture. Schuetz (1999) has argued that a truly collegial form of governance can be ideal for community colleges, because it fosters a sense of empowerment, partnership, and vested interest in successful outcomes. Yet many community colleges experience a governance that is primarily bureaucratic in nature and driven more toward the protection of staff and faculty rights, satisfaction, and welfare than toward student and learning outcomes (Cohen and Brawer, 1996).

However, as presidents and other campus leaders attempt to move their community colleges toward improvement, many have used strategic planning initiatives to engage faculty and staff in collective thinking about long-term goals, increase collaboration among units, improve communication between faculty and staff, and join together organizational drive and energy around agreed-on, common goals. Shugart (1999) has noted that strategic planning and thinking can help to establish major goals and themes for the entire community college and can provide a context of stability and predictability that then enables leaders throughout the college to take measured risks.

Effective strategic planning is both people-oriented, involving a wide range of staff and faculty members, as well as information-oriented, using information systems to define and establish needs and measure improvement. An example of this is Capitol College, where the new president used strategic planning to help a divided organization move toward a unified vision of the future. Because this new community college was the result of a merger between a community college with a separate

technical college, the newly-formed college experienced a decline in faculty and staff morale. The president began the strategic planning process by involving a wide range of staff and faculty in an environmental scan of the needs of the community college. This fact-finding scan focused primarily on enrollment issues and perceptions of staff and faculty at the college. This first phase was also directed toward discussion of, and agreement on, a college-wide mission, strategic issues, and long-term goals, the most significant of which was to relocate to a single, downtown campus.

The second phase of the strategic planning process focused on operational-level goals, objectives, work processes, and outcomes. Administrative departments were required to share information, create objectives, and develop procedures to assess their success in achieving those objectives. This second phase extended the planning process to encompass a broader sweep and to include more campus leaders in strategic thinking and information sharing – and created built-in processes for assessment. The committee leading the strategic process was co-chaired by a faculty member and an administrator, and included administrators, deans, department heads, faculty, staff, and students. The process took almost a year-and-a-half to complete – longer than originally planned. But the result was a process and a plan that generated a tremendous amount of buy-in among those who had the most at stake.

As part of the strategic planning process, the college created an information-intensive Web site that included information and updates at every major step of the process. Information about educational consultants, vendors, and others was posted, as well as facilities designs for the new campus as it was being planned and built. When the new campus was under construction, updated photos were posted on the Web as well. This turned out to be a useful marketing tool as the Web site was not only heavily used by on-campus stakeholders, but also by many off-campus community members and business leaders that were interested in the college's plans.

During the facility development process, the president released a staff member to work half-time on technology issues, in order to improve the implementation of the campus-wide information system and to make sure the new facilities included the hard wiring and other features necessary for effective work stations, classroom-based technology, and other information and communication needs. The staff member's job was to enhance communication among campus groups – to improve dialogue among the information technology (IT) staff, faculty, and administrative staff about campus technology needs and planning. The dedicated staff member helped

primarily by facilitating meetings and following through on information sharing.

The example illustrates how campus leadership effectively used the information system implementation process to support the strategic planning process (through environmental scanning and the use of the Web site for internal and external marketing). By investing in a half-time staff position to facilitate team building related to technology planning, campus leadership recognized that technology planning is a people-intensive process rather than a series of purely technical issues. As such, it required communication and decision making by on-campus groups who were not particularly experienced in interacting with each other. This kind of planning process could not have occurred without leadership support from the top, nor without leadership support for the resources and time such efforts would entail.

It has been suggested that the lasting value of strategic planning is the process of communication and debate about issues that involve a variety of stakeholders who need to work toward a common goal, as opposed to the plan itself (Cutright, 1999; Keller, 1983). Given this, what many college leaders have found – much to their chagrin – is that implementing new information processes or technological systems, when done effectively, mirrors the open-ended, cross-functional (and often messy) deliberative process of strategic planning. And it can be argued that it is primarily this connection that makes technology implementation so promising as a catalyst for organizational change.

The president at Richardson College used strategic planning at the system-wide and campus level to enhance technological development. As part of a statewide strategic planning process, the president spearheaded efforts to implement effective technology and information systems across community colleges in the state. This included such things as providing high-speed Internet access at all colleges, as well as forming a statewide consortium to purchase Web-based library materials as a group. Additionally, the college had been involved in regular strategic planning processes for the past decade and had a wide range of on-going cross-functional teams and committees.

As part of strategic planning at the college, the president set up a contingency fund earmarked for innovative projects. Faculty and staff used the funding to develop and test creative approaches to management and teaching. For example, funding was provided for faculty to develop online courses. However, after developing and testing those online courses, faculty research indicated that students performed better with some face-to-face interaction, so more traditional courses with online components were developed.

The president at Capitol College, who used technology and information systems to support strategic planning, and the president at Richardson College, who used strategic planning as a springboard for technological development and innovation – have engaged planning as an activity rather than simply as a means to the development of a final plan. Both college leaders viewed the strategic plan as a means to further discussion, cross-unit collaboration, and goal setting – rather than an end product in itself.

In each of these cases, when the college worked to implement a new information framework, several pieces that had been operating independently had to be integrated. For that to happen successfully, the groups involved had to come to the table and identify the kinds of information they needed to successfully perform their jobs. However, gaining access to that kind of information generally requires a level of information sharing that can undercut current conceptions of organizational control.

Additionally, as colleges have moved in the direction of increased access to data, concerns develop on campus about the ownership and control of data and information. Each institution has its own information culture and data ownership challenges that need to be taken into account as college leaders seek to increase access to data and information to improve the strategic planning process. In some cases, college leaders from the faculty and from individual departments can create more effective processes for sharing information; but in the final analysis, if these processes are to be adopted at a broader level in a way that can transform institutional culture, then college leaders must eventually play an active role in supporting such change.

For example, West College, which is situated within a multi-college district, was successful in developing a Web-based interface within its admissions and records department. As part of a strategic planning initiative to more closely link services and instruction, an interface was developed by a small cohort of academic counselors to help them develop a Web-based view (or portal) to student grades and other records, and to the various interventions that had been recommended for, and accessed by, each student. However, because the portal had been very successful in meeting the objectives placed on it by the academic counselors, it had grown too big for admissions and records. The issue of information ownership was paramount because the project's "owners" wanted it to be adopted district-wide so that it could become a more widespread, long-term solution to the district's information needs, and so that the information could be monitored and analyzed in an on-going way. However, it is not clear under whose authority to place the system; the dean of admissions and records wants to

place it under the institutional research umbrella at the district level. But the dean also knows that the colleges want control over their information processes. If the decision is made to place it under an office that does not willingly take ownership of it, its usefulness may be jeopardized. This case emphasizes the importance of the role of campus leaders in facilitating information needs related to strategic planning across structures and functions within the organization.

Strategic planning and new technology development

The adoption of new technology can be accompanied by an increase in the level of employee anxiety (Chand, 1996). In the implementation phase, the expected benefits of new technology may appear unsubstantial and artificial and the complexity of new systems can be intimidating. Particularly in academic settings, staff and faculty suspect that using new technologies will radically change their established patterns of work and decrease their control. Yet, paradoxically, any successful deployment is dependent on employee acceptance and use of the new systems. For that to happen, the college leadership typically must support the new deployment at critical junctures that occur and reoccur with relentless regularity.

For instance, River College began a long-term transition from a homegrown information system to a major enterprise-wide system. In the old information system, each administrative department had built its own information system that was not easily shared or queried using data from among the other databases. The administrative units became *de facto* owners of their information, and did not share it unless there was good reason to do so. The IT department functioned as the “experts” that provided each unit with access to the information it needed and controlled – which gave the IT staff a high level of influence and power. The college was made up of several campuses; each campus was very competitive with the others and did not share information. Even on individual campuses, there was intense competition between administrative functions. In short, the information infrastructure served to exacerbate a dysfunctional information culture.

The president started the transformation process by forming a technology planning committee whose membership included associate vice presidents of instruction and technology, deans, faculty, student support staff, and IT staff. In hindsight, the process was hugely successful in transforming the information-sharing culture at the college, but it was also, according to several of those involved in the process, very stressful. It took two years to get the committee formed and functioning; another year after that to move from placing blame to the adoption of a

technology plan; and then a fourth year to begin implementation of the plan. Although it was the instructional vice president who proposed the shift to a relational database-type system, even on the instructional side, the different campuses played a zero-sum game. And at many junctures, the IT staff would say, “this can’t be done” and would come up with exorbitant cost analyses; there was no effective way to refute their expertise. Additionally, administrative staff did not want to have their purchases and minute budgetary decisions available for widespread scrutiny, and they slowed down the process whenever they could.

Yet at every crucial step of the process, the president would step in and insist on the end goal – a workable, relational information system – while leaving it to the committee to decide how to get there. During the implementation, as individual units would come on board, there was significant confusion and anxiety among staff in that division. For example, the business office was in turmoil for over a year, working on trying to make the general ledger come together from many different offices and departments. Campus leadership made it clear that information sharing was a primary goal of the college and the college was on a fast track to making that happen. It required a tremendous amount of communication between divisions – communication that had never happened before. In some ways, this process has required an organizational shift from supporting the people who owned the data to serving those who needed it.

Now that the information system is up and running, the culture of the college has begun to shift. Faculty, deans, and department heads are now accustomed to being able to get access to operational information in a timely way. Budgets, for instance, are online and available for all to see. The IT office has changed its outlook from an expert mentality to a service mentality – from a “we can’t do it” to a “how can we help you” outlook. The technology planning committee is an on-going committee that continues to bring up and discuss contentious issues and to press forward. The next step is to develop a data warehouse initiative that will further democratize access to data and information on campus.

Conclusion

The strategic planning process is an opportunity for institutional leaders to help mediate change through the gathering and sharing of data and information. Using these processes to break down information silos and to encourage all stakeholders in the community college to engage in long-term continuous improvement based on informed decision making is one way that community college leaders can face the challenge of guiding their organizations to success. While more democratic access to data and information may

increase pressure on traditional bureaucratic decision-making structures within higher education, increased information exchange within the community college may assist its leaders in the growing external demand for greater accountability and internal strategic planning.

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