

FEATURE ARTICLE

Placing Academics at the Heart of Higher Education Planning

by Robert C. Dickeson

Academic programs should serve as the centrifugal force, informing and driving the accomplishment of all other institutional plans.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to assert that academic programs are at the heart of the higher education institution, that such programs constitute the core of who we are and why we exist, and that therefore attending to their effectiveness and sustainability ought to drive the rest of the institutional planning portfolio.

It should be understood at the outset that higher education planning is all about values. What a college or university intends to be, how it goes about achieving its aims, and how it assesses its progress toward the future reflect the values of the institution itself and its key participants.

Higher education planning is all about values.

As we confront an uncertain future in higher education (the financial model is broken, the demographics are challenging, the regulatory environment is stifling, and the pace of technological change challenges our traditional notions of learning), effective planning has become more important than ever. I still run into college and university presidents, however, who resist planning: “It’s impossible, because things are changing so rapidly that you can’t predict the future.” Anticipating the future is not a fool’s errand; it’s a basic requirement for institutional survival. The old adage used to be, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” Unfortunately, many of those roads are now closed, and still others are under construction. In all cases, the higher education enterprise has to treat planning in a more planful way.

Several years ago the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) initiated a major redirection of our thinking about higher education planning by championing the notion of “integrated planning.” Generally speaking, integrated planning is advisable because, quite simply, an inventory of existing plans on a college or university campus reveals a couple of realities:

- » There are a lot of them. Capital plans, development and fund-raising plans, enrollment management plans, technology plans, school and departmental plans, library acquisition plans, workforce development plans, student development plans, financial plans—the list goes on.
- » These plans don’t speak to each other. Created at different times by different people holding different values, existing plans overlap or ignore certain areas critical to institutional life.

Integrated planning, therefore, argues for a more holistic view of the institution’s future and begs for a more comprehensive look at key planning components—from environmental scans to assessment of implementation strategies and everything in between.

As colleges and universities have responded to the integrated planning movement and tried to catalog and then assess their myriad plans, several important questions have arisen:

- » Which plan, among the many, is primary?
- » Is there—or should there be—a hierarchy to plans that would reorder how we conduct planning?
- » If plans conflict with each other (and they usually do, probably about resources), which plan holds sway?

Institutions of higher education do not exist for the physical plant. Our space resources ought to reflect what is needed to mount our academic programs with quality.

Nor do we exist because of our enrollment management plan, as central as enrollment is to most American institutions' financial well-being. The enrollment management plan serves an enabling function, not a primary one.

No mission of a college or university holds up a financial plan as part of its vision. Yet the lack of a financial plan derails an institution's most noble aims.

And so it goes across the inventory of plans. The one overriding aspect of institutional life, now and in the future, the sole reason students come to us, the reason we seek and secure research grants, the reason we are called upon to provide expertise and specialized service, is the academic program portfolio of the institution.

As the integrated graphic in figure 1 depicts, academic programs should serve as the centrifugal force, informing and driving the accomplishment of all other institutional plans.

How should colleges and universities undertake the recalibration process to assure that academic programs are truly central? There are several essential elements:

1. OPERATIONALIZE THE MISSION. Institutional mission statements are notoriously vague and thus not helpful in aligning or evaluating academic programs. Full of high-sounding and noble aims, the mission statement is typically overbroad. It needs to be operationalized—

with either a “statement of program direction” or an “operational mission statement” that brings the high aims down to practical realities. Institutions cannot be all things to all people (although most mission statements could be used to justify that) but must focus on those programs that are needed and that its people do well.

2. CONFRONT THE REAL ISSUES. Many plans are merely collections of wish lists; they do not take into account the strategic issues (usually external, not internal) that will affect the institution in both the short and long term. Our future is beset with major environmental challenges: the maturation of the nation; an increasingly mosaic society; a redefinition of individual and societal roles; a growing need for informational literacy; a shift in user expectations; a revolution in personal and global health; a restatement of family and other social structures; and a significant sense of shifting political alliances at home and abroad. How will our academic programs respond to and help shape these major influencers? Certainly doing the same old things in the same old way is unacceptable.

Figure 1 **The Central Place of Academic Programs within Institutional Planning**



3. **INTEGRATE THE RESOURCES INTO THE PLAN.** Most plans in higher education are fiscally unrealistic. They fail to acknowledge either the full costs of implementation or where the human, fiscal, and physical resources will come from. No plan should move forward without an honest assessment of resource availability and advisability. Without it, the plan is meaningless.
4. **STAY WITHIN THE SCOPE.** Higher educators tend to meander. We honestly believe we can solve all the problems of the world through higher education. However, the mission and scope of any given institution is necessarily limited. To be mission-focused means that our programs and plans should also be mission-focused and not range outside that focus. To do otherwise squanders resources unnecessarily.
5. **QUIT DOING SOME THINGS.** Most college and university plans are additive: they fail to identify things that institutions should stop doing. The most likely source of resources in the future will come from reallocating existing resources from lower to higher priorities. Such a reallocation requires that institutions take seriously the need to set academic (and nonacademic) priorities. Prioritization is hard work; letting go of programs (and frequently the people associated with them) is often painful. And yet the future will require that institutions reinvest their scarce resources in (a) developing new programs that will better meet the needs of their stakeholders and (b) funding more fully the very strategic initiatives that will emanate from the new plans.
6. **FOCUS ON IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT.** Inasmuch as higher education plans ignore implementation strategies, a realistic implementation plan should be included as part of the plan's rollout. Implementation takes time; often we will not be able to assess the impact of some academic program initiatives for several years. Assessment is equally critical and often ignored in plan construction. How will we know

whether we accomplished our goals? What lessons learned can inform our future planning? What will we do differently next time around? Our current plans would be stronger had our predecessors thought about assessing them.

7. **MAINTAIN A PLANNING DATABASE FOR MANAGEMENT PURPOSES.** Good plans are data-driven. They require enormous amounts of information to justify decisions and to advocate for resources. If we concentrate on not just establishing such a database, but also on maintaining it, we can use it as a management tool for implementation, for assessment, and for institutional sustainability going forward. Such a posture signifies a culture of evidence.

I suppose that each generation assumes that its particular time is the most challenging. Certainly this generation of colleges and universities can assert that the forces at work internally and externally guarantee us a challenging time. Our future is uncertain. The institutions that thrive will be those that figure out how to cope with and help shape that future. I believe that the primacy of academic programs in the development of plans will presage our success.

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WHAT IS INTEGRATED PLANNING?

Integrated planning is the linking of vision, priorities, people, and the physical institution in a flexible system of evaluation, decision-making and action. It shapes and guides the entire organization as it evolves over time and within its community.

Why INTEGRATED PLANNING?



» REMOVE SILOS » WORK COLLABORATIVELY » USE RESOURCES WISELY

You've heard the stories . . .

- . . . every budget meeting is a trial because priorities aren't established.
- . . . an institution goes on probation because it did not "pass" planning on its accreditation review.
- . . . a system opens multiple new buildings on campuses across the state but does not have the funding to operate them.
- . . . a new president's leadership falters because his or her staff resists working transparently or collaboratively.

What is INTEGRATED PLANNING?

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Benefits of INTEGRATED PLANNING



ALIGN INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES WITH RESOURCES

Three years of using an integrated budget process, one

where funding decisions were transparent and clearly tied to strategic goals, brought about "the end of whining" for a Midwestern, regional university.

MAKE ACCREDITATION WORK FOR YOU

The SCUP Planning Institute helped put integrated planning to work at a Southern university and it resulted in a "no concerns or problems" accreditation review.

CONTAIN AND REDUCE COSTS

As part of a comprehensive sustainability effort, integrated planning meets the requirements of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), and that adds up to savings in utilities for campuses across the country.

Core Competencies for INTEGRATED PLANNING

Senior leaders excel when the people who report to them understand how essential it is to

- » engage the right people
- » in the right conversations
- » at the right time and
- » in the right way.

Integrated planning might not solve every problem on campus, but it is sure to provide a solution to the most important issues. To be effective, and for you as a senior campus leader to be successful, everyone who plans on your campus needs these core competencies:

ENGAGE THE RIGHT PEOPLE: Identify the people who need to be in the room and work with them effectively.

SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE: Create and use a common planning vocabulary for communicating.

KNOW HOW TO MANAGE A PLANNING PROCESS: Facilitate an integrated planning process and manage change.

PRODUCE A SHARED PLAN: Produce an integrated plan that can be implemented and evaluated.

READ THE PLANNING CONTEXT: Collect and filter relevant information.

GATHER AND DEPLOY RESOURCES: Identify alternative and realistic resource strategies.