Under severe constraints of a public budget in a poor state, the University of South Carolina has examined every phase of services and operations. Central computing, libraries, distance education and media production had been combined for a year when their formal planning process began -- the method, classic strategic planning with broad staff participation. The goal of the process is an ongoing, vital planning process. The panel will look at the method used in planning and the process as well as local roles and issues. The panel will touch on issues of differing professional cultures and of the tensions of change.
The merger of University Libraries, Computer Services and Distance Education and Instructional Support led to the need for division wide strategic planning. Of a total University faculty and staff numbering around four thousand, the resulting Division of Libraries and Information Systems has a staff of over four hundred.

Why plan?

A primary goal of the planning process has been to engage the organization in change in an ongoing way, the better to enable it to operate in a dynamic fashion. Because of its several information "businesses", the University Provost has laid on the Division the burden of leading the University into the next phase of its evolution. Involving all our Division's staff in continual renewal makes it more likely the Division will carry the weight. To emphasize the ongoing nature of planning, "planning process" has been preferred to "plan" as the term for the activities of the last year.

Because of the youth of the Division -- created in October, 1993 -- another chief goal of the planning process was and is to create a coherence for the Division. This sense of the whole has been emphasized in every aspect of the process, beginning with an emphasis on broad staff participation.

Let us look at events and then roles in USC's planning process. Then, let's look at cultural factors, critical local issues and current developments.

The Process

A - Establishing the process

The first stage of the planning process lasted for ten months, from October, 1994, to August, 1995, culminating in a report to the chief of the Division, the Vice Provost and Dean. The report claims to be "a formative step in uniting the Division", the result of its "first comprehensive self examination". To reach this milestone, the Division began by choosing a strategic planning consultant to assist in establishing the process. The strategy within the plan was to employ the classic strategic planning approach but to invite broad staff participation. The consultant had us first convene three dozen division faculty and staff from all levels to set the direction for the planning process.

After this retreat, a steering committee was organized, composed of two members each from the three major areas (Computer Services, DEIS and University Libraries), one Division director and two members from beyond the Division (an Associate Provost and the Registrar Emeritus). A Division staff member provided executive assistance.

Over the succeeding nine months, the steering committee devised and executed a process that was divided into three phases: setting a planning framework (Phase I); acquiring information and deriving recommendations (Phase II); clarifying and presenting overall recommendations (Phase III).

B - Discussion (Focus) Groups

In Phase I (November to February), internal assessment began. Controlled discussion groups were held to get perceptions from division employees on key trends, the strengths and weaknesses of their departments and the Division as a whole, the effects of the merger, etc. in a loose agenda of "what works" and "what doesn't work". The interviews were confidential; after careful cross-checking and analysis, summaries were prepared and given to the Dean in July (Phase III) to provide snapshots of the conditions at the time of the discussion groups.

C - Work of the Units in the Division
To complement the observations of the people of the division, the steering committee asked the eleven who work immediately below the Dean (that is, the Directors) to detail the work of the division's many units. Producing these descriptions took a painstaking effort that extended to the end of Phase II. These documents were termed “Work Processes”: specific activities under these rubrics were reported as “Work Projects”. These documents all the participants in planning and were included as an appendix in the final report.

D - Communications: Plans and Execution

With the help of the consultant, the steering committee initiated a communications plan. From the time of the original retreat, written and verbal channels were used: an open listserv; a bulletin board to hold significant documents, such as the report of the retreat; open meetings at important junctures to summarize activity and take comment; widely available written and electronic copies of visuals from planning sessions; and communications in regular staff meetings. From February on (end of Phase I), news of the planning process was sent to all members of the division approximately every six weeks. Tours were offered in December and January to encourage people to familiarize themselves with facilities occupied by other units. General communication was probably increased when faculty and staff interacted on task forces and then returned to their departments.

E - Task Forces

A critical element of the planning process took place in task forces that worked from February to early May (Phase II). The topics of their study flowed from seven overarching categories identified in the October planning retreat: Marketing, Service, Technology, Staffing, Financial Management, Division Infrastructure, and Organizational Coherence. Under these broad headings, more narrowly focused task forces were created.

The focus for each was defined by the steering committee. Once the task forces were formed, charged and trained by the consultant, each launched into the research and analysis of its topic area. Each task force had a designated liaison to the steering committee. The consultant encouraged every group to develop its own way of working: conduct of the task forces varied widely, from chair-less groups to single-leader groups. Each examined and modified the charge as indicated by their expertise and resubmitted the charge to the steering committee for approval. At the end of March (mid Phase II), the task forces presented progress reports. Then they moved to finalize their findings (near the end of Phase II).

The final reports of the task forces, consisting of background, recommendations and sources consulted, were published electronically and printed for circulation to all departments. Comment was invited in open meetings and privately via a comment form.

F - Recommendations and a Published Report

An important activity began in Phase III (June and July): several meetings took place with directors and steering committee for the purpose of interpreting and responding to the recommendations of the eight task forces. The directors separately rated the recommendations (as did Steering Committee members) and then collectively examined them. With the directors' responses in hand, the steering committee sought to establish the most favorable recommendations and bring out points for clarification.

Directors took the opportunity at this point to identify additional topics of promise for the Division at large. A healthy tension was felt between initiating change in the normal course of operations and incorporating these changes in a longer-term framework. The remainder of Phase III (end of July to mid August) was taken up in completing the elements of the report, with special attention to the roughly fifty recommendations and to suggested plans for implementation.

G - Implementing and Continued Planning

When exactly did we begin implementing? Implementation took several shapes.

Because some initiatives were deemed likely to increase Division coherence and efficiency and because they fell outside the scope of any task force, these were undertaken before the report was finished. Collapsing the several courier and delivery services for books, computer printouts, computer and audio/visual hardware and wiring, etc., fell into this category. Another important decision (confirmed independently in Focus Group reports) was taken by management during Phase III: directors and other managers needed leadership and other managerial training to reduce frustration in the Division and increase the quality of outcomes from all Division effort.
After the publication of the report, five of its recommendations were chosen for immediate action. Teams drawn from across the Division were charged with implementing three of these; a suitable plan of attack has not been confirmed for the other two.

A Monitoring Group was convened in late October (i.e., a full year after the start of the process and a two years after the creation of the Division). The Monitoring Group has devised a method of tracking and reporting progress on recommendations and of alerting management when an implementation goes wrong or too slowly. The same day the Monitoring Group began operation, the Steering Committee was discharged.

Did we stop planning? No, but we are not going back to our old way of planning. The report as submitted alluded to "Area Planning" (where "Area" is the terminology used for one of the large parts of the Division such as the Libraries). As amended by the Dean, the continuing planning at lower levels of the Division is being accomplished by a look at services, clients, future trends and proposed new approaches to providing the needed services; this is termed "models of service". By the mechanism of "models of service", each unit is to revise or reinvent itself to provide better service to its clientele while being looking for ways to integrating more closely with other Division units. In this effort, the units are encouraged to stop offering certain extraneous or unaffordable services. The deadline to make this new conception of their departments is March, 1996, six months after the challenge was derived from the report.

Roles & responsibilities

Here then is description of the roles played so far in USC’s planning process by the various actors. The consultant facilitates, engages, encourages and suggests models. She trains groups, sets timetables and milestone and launches them into their tasks. She diagnoses and troubleshoot sub-processes in the process.

By design, the remainder of the characters come from the institution. The sponsor (the Dean) acts, choosing to embark on the process, finance it and to champion it. He has pointed out key individuals to invite into the process. He injects direction into the process and pushes for implementation.

We have introduced the two original contractors for the planning service. Next come a number of planning groups. The original planning group (three dozen division faculty and staff) set the direction for the planning process. The nine person steering committee was to manage process, communicate to staff and management, commission and manage task forces and ad hoc groups, and submit a report to the Dean. Both these groups needed courage and confidence.

The Task Forces of Phase II of the process were described above. These investigated their topic areas and reported recommendations. Several of the reports went far beyond the charge, making observations and recommendations which could still be used. Members of these groups balanced the intense two-month commitment with the continued connection to their ordinary duties.

Another type of ad hoc group is exemplified by the discussion groups begun in Phase I. These were organized by a steering committee member with professional training in this area and consisted of a cross-section of people in the areas of the Division. Their role was to comment on conditions in the Division; in so doing, they made useful comments on management, the requirements of their job, virtues of the Division and how things might be improved.

During the course of planning, Directors often convened ad hoc groups from their units to answer questions posed by the Steering Committee and by various Task Forces. This continued past the August report date, to begin the six-month thrust to create new service models. The form and duration will differ with every recommendation, but ad hoc Teams will often be the mode of choice to implement a recommendation.

An "internal consultant" evolved within the Division. One of the directors had begun training himself in facilitation for a different purpose and took advantage -- much to the benefit of the planners -- of the consultant's availability to advance those skills. He helped the Steering Committee and the Directors in Phase III to negotiate through the adoption of recommendations. He also conducted some training for the Steering Committee to make them more effective as a group.

On the several levels below the sponsor come the directors and managers. With managers, the directors cleared people for planning assignments and reassigned work in the interim. The directors reviewed planning recommendations and proposed other complementary ones; after adopting a recommendation, they have confirmed the Strategic Plan's action plan, substituted a design or commissioned a group to carry out the
recommendation. Throughout, directors have had to interpret the course of events in planning and then to translate for their faculty and staff, while soliciting their questions and input. They also sought to balance the disruption caused by the planning activity to normal operations and traditional assumptions. This was a role requiring judgment and trust.

What of the rest of the Division? About one hundred of the Division's four hundred members have participated in planning. If one has still not served in a planning or implementing activity, more than forty recommendations will need implementors. In another sense, the whole Division can participate by studying the report and responding.

And the Division's clients? Through the twists and turns in Phases I and II, it became obvious that the Division would first be involved in an examination of internal systems and was not ready for a comprehensive review of services with all the client groups. This activity has awaited the "models of service". With the exception of some Task Force inquiries and a single departmental survey, there was little to go on before the August report. Immediately after, some general topics of campus infrastructure for academic computing were reviewed. Immediately afterwards, a "Computing Issues Report" was commissioned, to get some clients of academic computing to bring forward some of their general goals and parameters. This should be a good beginning for several of the units as they develop their models of service.

Cultural issues and challenges

In the 'marriage' of the older organizations, both clashes and matches resulted. Several levels of culture clash came into play in the combined information organization: inter-departmental, inter-specialty, intra-organizational. The inter-departmental culture conflict was sometimes based on personality types. For example, when a group of largely introverted, highly organized individuals attempted to wrestle over issues side by side with a group of looser, more extraverted individuals, confusion could ensue or disagreements arise.

Inter-specialty conflicts have more to do with the differences in labor performed rather than with personality; however, differences of this kind have just begun to appear and their effect is difficult to judge. The types of differences have to do with the contrasts among operational, clerical, creative, analytical and other occupational sub-types that work in the Division. It is clear that some in the libraries, say circulation staff, for example, have more in common with operations staff in computer services than either has with collection development or University archives personnel in the library or instructional developers in distance education. Most helpfully, once the similarities are discovered, a model from one area can be borrowed and applied. Where differences are honored, then different approaches can also be respected.

Intra-organizational conflicts or barriers were found between areas, between units within areas, between management and staff. Discussion groups revealed the extent and pointed toward the causes of some of these. However, relationships predating the planning and even the formation of the Division formed an amicable basis for cooperation in the planning process. For example, it took only five minutes of discussion in the initial planning meeting to point to four successful projects from the previous decade brought about by the combined effort of staff from the three major areas.

Critical Issues

Through the description of events and players above, some critical local issues can be seen. Because of the size of the Division and physical separation of its facilities, communications were especially important. To attempt to have broad staff participation meant using many media and many venues. The Division found its own weak spots -- lack of up to date office addresses, incomplete lists of unit members, outdated titles, no preexisting communications vehicles to address the whole Division, no room big enough for larger planning events, no standard e-mail package in use, no standard word processing package -- addressing these weak spots in itself is creating a more coherent and rational organization.

Planning and operations have come into conflict. If you are not careful, questioning all the premises of gravity and tensile strength while a climber is clinging to the cliff from a rope will alienate you from the climber. Likewise, there is a natural tension at work between the planning and operational mentalities. Management varies in its temperament with regard to profound planning activity. Nevertheless, the involvement of our directors in Phase III of the process produced a far more implementable plan. While some recommendations may not have been included due to management's objections, most were. Having seen them, management also has considered at least superficially how the outcomes of the recommendations might look.
Current Developments

In the original planning retreat, planners took imaginary snapshots of what the Division would be doing in the year 2000. Likewise, they named the values they used or wished to use consistently in their daily work. The first exercise led to the development of vision statements published in the August, 1995 report. As early as the fifth month (end of Phase II, beginning of Phase III), it could be seen that the Division would choose to focus on internal systems, to focus on efficiencies instead of exploring further the territory of values, vision and objectives. (So, for example, the first recommendations undertaken are all five drawn from the categories of Division Infrastructure, Financial Management and Organizational Coherence.)

In the Division's leadership training, some Division values can be clarified. Useful goals for rank and file to complement the vision statements are most likely to come out the effort to create new service models -- the deadline: March, 1996. It will be interesting to see what happens as a result of our strategic planning process.