When Shared Vision Meets Business Planning

Successful Strategic Planning Means Alignment, Opportunity, and Collaboration

From the president’s office to the instructional technology department, higher education campuses are littered with well-intentioned strategic plans. But how effective are those plans? And how many actually lead to institutional change?

For several years, the NLII has been exploring ways in which institutions of higher education can align action—in the areas of policy, budget, project selection, and assessment—with strategic planning for the purpose of transforming teaching and learning. Several sessions at the NLII 2003 annual meeting in New Orleans examined the elements of planning as well as the transformational outcomes that are possible. Out of those presentations emerged three characteristics of successful strategic planning: alignment of planning; dynamic, opportunistic planning processes, and collaboration.

Alignment of Planning

Take a look at any college or university campus today, and you’ll find a full array of technological resources being put to good use. What’s lacking are the mechanisms that would enable institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and organizational units to combine those resources so as to ensure campuswide transformation. “For optimal cost-effectiveness and maximum impact,” said NLII annual meeting participant Henry Ingle, “campus communities need to focus on developing a shared vision and a shared set of strategies for their online instructional efforts.”

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison (http://www.wisc.edu/), the value assigned to horizontal and vertical alignment is immediately evident on the institution’s strategic planning Web site—http://www.chancellor.wisc.edu/strategicplan/—where a link provides substantial help in relating your plan to the campus plan. Today the central
campus information technology organization and its departments are in alignment with each other as well as with the Academic Technology Solutions department, whose visions and priorities now complement plans for both the campus and the information technology organization. They also give staff a higher purpose and a much-needed focus.

With the UW approach, strategic planning amounts to more than just an abstract exercise: it’s a way of keeping the fundamental values and the educational mission of the institution at the forefront. As a result, the university is closing an achievement gap by means of a program that emphasizes recruitment and retention of four targeted student populations: African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Southeast Asians. The four-year, precollege, technology-training and access program for high school students who are deemed demographically underrepresented at the college level prepares such students for competitive universities such as UW. It builds study and standardized-test-taking skills, offers mentoring by university professionals, and incorporates a technology-training component to increase the number of students interested in and prepared to assume information technology careers. UW hopes to inspire students who follow information technology careers to stay in Wisconsin and at the university.

The first wave of students are putting together their e-portfolios and working on community projects such as building Web sites for community organizations. Such endeavors have the dual benefits of helping students gain work experience and providing organizations with assistance they otherwise couldn’t afford. The program hopes to close the digital divide by giving students computers, printers, and scanners to use during their four years in the program in addition to dial-up connections, software, and manuals for home use. Program leaders are aiming for a 70–80 percent college acceptance rate among the program’s participants.

How did UW stay on track when so many strategic plans devolve into endless debate and discussion? It did it by keeping its vision statement at the forefront. Said UW’s Carol
Turner, “We asked ourselves big-picture questions such as, Are we addressing the divide? and, How do we level the playing field?”

**Dynamic, Opportunistic Planning Processes**

Like many institutions of higher education, the Maricopa Community College District (http://www.maricopa.edu/) has defined its high-priority strategic initiatives, which address, among other things, maximizing stakeholder access to learning and expanding dynamic learning environments. (See http://www.maricopa.edu/stratplan/) In the company of a much smaller subset of institutions, the district sought to bring individual college plans, financial decisions, and budget allocations into alignment with the district’s plan by adhering to an ongoing, dynamic, and integrative planning process that is both consistent and transparent. The process appears to be working. Funding opportunities, such as a 2004 bond program, are making it possible for the district to expand its programs and improve its technology infrastructure.

“If you get rid of the complex, rigid, formulized approach to strategic planning, you can be both responsive and open to opportunity,” said Rio Salado Community College’s Carol Scarafiotti. At Rio Salado (http://www.rio.maricopa.edu/), not only must strategic plans be brought into alignment with the institution’s unique culture and distinct goals, but they also must take into account funding and resources. “It’s not just an operational approach to strategic planning; it’s a new way of looking at visioning,” said Scarafiotti.

Rio Salado now uses visioning forums as a planning tool by bringing in experts to talk about what’s going on in higher education. After a presentation, a team sets out to work on setting priorities and creating a path. A recent visioning forum netted a number of planning insights such as the desire for hybrid courses, the need for social spaces for social learning, new approaches to building architecture, horizontal learning markets, modularized learning, and data-driven decision making. Ultimately, the visioning forum generated a handful of planning realities, which led to development of the institution’s

**Collaboration**

In a session titled, “Transformation through Collaboration” (http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0319), both East Carolina University (http://www.ecu.edu/) and the University of North Carolina (http://www.unc.edu/) showcased successful strategic planning initiatives that prove the value of collaboration as a transformation agent. In 1999, UNC developed an information technology plan for addressing a handful of high-priority areas on all 16 of its campuses. Funds were set aside for new programs that were collaborative in nature—particularly those designed to synergistically capitalize on economies of scale and serve all of the campuses. The result is the UNC Teaching and Learning with Technology Collaborative (http://www.unctlt.org/tlt/), the UNC Shared Services Alliance (http://www.northcarolina.edu/content.php/ir/alliance/alliance.htm), and the Office of Coordinated Technology Management (http://www.northcarolina.edu/content.php/ir/procurement/procurement.htm), which ultimately helped enable East Carolina University to transform a traditional site-based continuing studies model into an Internet-based enterprise that supports more than 20 degree/certificate programs generating approximately 100 faculty positions and a $17-million budget.

The ECU effort began with a vision statement that outlined the university’s desire to deliver complete programs online—as opposed to random courses—and to be more strategic when it decides which programs get offered to its off-campus markets. The Strategic Directions Subcommittee was formed to identify the desired programmatic outcomes, such as expanded enrollment of student populations that could not otherwise access university-level educational programs, educational programs that address critical
societal needs, outstanding quality in all programs, and academic programs that are enhanced through innovation.

What made the ECU planning process so successful? For one, its faculty are actively committed to serving distance learners. In addition, the institution has developed a distributed, decentralized funding model that enables academic units to support their distance education programs. And technological advancements offer opportunities to improve delivery of and access to educational programs. But it was partnerships that enabled all of the programs to come to fruition. According to ECU’s Darryl Davis: “In order to accomplish anything, institutions of higher education are going to have to collaborate with each other. It is one of the keystones of ECU’s [information technology] strategy.”

At Brigham Young University (http://www.byu.edu/index.html), localized technology planning and support units were formed into one organizational structure for enterprise technology planning. BYU officials at the NLII annual meeting made the case that in order to achieve scalable, sustainable, enterprisewide change, planning must encourage and support collaboration across an entire campus. “By creating one structure across colleges, the library and academic programs were able to focus on teaching and learning support,” said BYU’s Stephen Jones.

Centralizing its services also meant that BYU could centralize its support policies. BYU moved instructional design from production for some to service for all. Directors of all campus units under the teaching and learning support umbrella now sit on a campus council that makes decisions about sharing budgets and resources. For example, the council might decide to give a funded full-time equivalent either to another area or temporarily to a project. To reinforce that effort, a project-priority management team ranks projects according to strategic alignment criteria, which gives priority projects access to resources throughout the university. “Common vision determines common