Strategic Thinking and Planning in Higher Education

A Focus on the Future

by Larry D. Shinn

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PREFACE

My interest in strategic planning stems from my early days as an academic dean, when suddenly my familiar world of teaching, scholarship, and working closely with students and faculty colleagues in a strong liberal-arts college expanded to a much wider university context. Instead of focusing on my classes within a single academic department, my new responsibilities as dean encompassed 30 academic departments in a college of arts and sciences that competed for resources with five others in the college of engineering, as well as with student admissions, student-support services, the development office, facilities management, and many other nonacademic departments.

Early on, I realized that I knew very little about the interdependence of the competing elements that made up institutional planning and budgeting. Furthermore, while faculty set the curricula, budgets derived from administrative processes determined how many faculty positions an academic department could have and what salaries would be. I also learned that shared governance involving committees populated with faculty, administrators, and sometimes students had a parallel administrative decision-making structure in which faculty are seldom involved. And, of course, I came to understand in new ways what it meant to say that a college or university's governing board had the final authority over tenure, investments, and, ultimately, all programs and budgets of an institution. I learned that it really does matter who sets the budget and, de facto, institutional priorities.

I understood that the new faculty positions that academic departments requested and I recommended as an academic dean were in competition with positions from the rest of the university, but I quickly discovered that all the vice presidents were making good cases for their requests. I was being asked to think in broader ways about the complexity of student success and institutional decision making, which included not only the core activity of teaching and learning, but the stiff competition for students in admissions, the quality and attractiveness of their living spaces, and the sources of funding to support the village-wide network of residential, dining, security, and other services. In short, I had to learn to think institutionally and within a larger set of institutional priorities that supported the teaching and learning process. But who sets those priorities?

This interest in how colleges and universities can and do set their long-range priorities led me to focus on strategic planning and attend a two-day business roundtable on the topic in New York City in the mid-1980s. As I listened to CEOs from many of the world's top companies talk about how they created their business strategies, I was particularly struck by the Royal Dutch Shell presenter who talked

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at some length about why and how this global corporation spent millions of dollars every 10 years creating two-to-four likely scenarios in which all institutions would prosper—or decline. After this first exposure to scenario planning as strategic thinking, I attended two summer workshops run by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems that sought to apply principles of strategic thinking from beyond the academy to higher education. Most attendees were from regional state universities or community colleges; I was the only liberal-arts university attendee.

Concepts of strategic thinking and strategic planning that originated in the broader world have transformed many higher education institutions.

Over the next several decades, I worked with committed faculty, administrators, and board members at two private institutions, thinking and planning together at the departmental, college, and university-wide levels. In a real sense, this book builds on those experiences to suggest how concepts of strategic thinking and strategic planning that originated in the broader world have transformed many higher education institutions. As described in Chapter 5, transformational change in colleges and universities can engender both enthusiasm and resistance—sometimes simultaneously. Strategic thinking and planning are not only hard work. They can be messy, too.

Numerous books provide step-by-step models for engaging strategic planning in higher education. But scholars of strategic planning warn that template-style processes too often produce what author and management guru Richard Rumelt calls "bad strategies" because they can move through the planning stages superficially and without serious and sustained reflection on how the particular institution is situated within its broader context (*see Chapter 5*). Instead of providing a single strategic planning template, this book describes how strategic thinking and strategic planning are not synonymous and why remarkable results occur when the two are combined—regardless of the process used. Strategic thinking differs from its relatives, including best practices and ideological aspirations, and it can appear in many different planning guises: design thinking, scenario thinking, top-down leadership, and bottom up-planning

Strategic thinking and strategic planning are not synonymous, and…remarkable results occur when the two are combined—regardless of the process used.

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processes. A whole book could be written about strategic thinking as a holistic, integrative, and synergistic type of critical thinking that can and should be used in many college and university settings, from the boardroom to the classroom. This book, however, purposely focuses on the relationship of strategic thinking to strategic planning and how higher education institutions benefit most when board members, administrators, and faculty think institutionally as they set long-term vision and priorities.

This book is written primarily for the core constituencies who engage in strategic thinking and planning. Because board members and presidents usually initiate planning, ideas are presented to help these leaders devise effective processes. This book also encourages faculty and staff to be not only participants, but collaborative leaders and institutional thinkers in strategic thinking and planning. As such, this book combines theories and interpretations of strategic thinking and planning with practical ways those ideas can be, and have been, implemented in colleges and universities as they focus on the future.

Chapter 1 describes some of the major and persistent challenges for all higher education institutions while suggesting that every college and university experiences and interprets the urgency and applicability of these challenges differently. Board members, administrators, and faculty have a central responsibility to respond to these external and internal demands with both strategic and generative modes of reflection and action.

Chapter 2 explores different ways scholars and practitioners have conceived of strategy, strategic thinking, and strategic planning. Often, these terms are considered synonymous, but this chapter offers a different perspective. As a comprehensive, forward-looking mode of thinking, strategic thinking is useful in many kinds of decision making and is not wed to one strategic planning model or governance mode.

Board members, administrators, and faculty have a central responsibility to respond to these external and internal demands with both strategic and generative modes of reflection and action.

Chapter 3 links strategic thinking with several types of strategic planning models with the understanding that no single planning process represents the definitive way to promote sustainable institutional change. Nonetheless, strategic planning steering committees should find useful this chapter's suggested sequential planning model (*see Exhibit 7*) that incorporates strategic thinking into every step.

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