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2006 SERIES: "CREATING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE"

– ESSAY 2 –

The Importance of a Strategic Plan

“I believe a strategic plan must be a living document, evolving with the campus from generation to generation and administration to administration.”

DR. ROBERT L. CARET  
*President, Towson University*

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Why do you and your institution need a plan? The obvious answer is we all need to know where we are going. Stephen Covey in his book “First Things First” puts it this way: “Rather than offer you another clock . . . [this book] . . . offers you a compass because it is more important to know where you are headed than how fast you are going.” In a humorous vein, V. in the book “The Mafia Manager” puts it this way: “If you don’t know where you are going, you won’t get there or anyplace else.” It is a challenge to move an organization, particularly a large organization, and if there isn’t a sense of common direction, one will find a lack of focus. As time passes, there will be movement in no particular direction or worse, different segments of the organization will be moving in different directions. It is, therefore, important to set a common, albeit general, direction for the organization, and a plan is at the core of the achievement of that goal. The plan is the compass.

Plans, sometimes referred to as strategic plans, are often associated with transitions in leadership or the attainment of certain milestones. My most recent planning overlapped with my presidential transition from one university to another. A presidential transition always provides challenges both to the incoming leader, as well as to the campus he or she is about to lead. Some of these challenges are common in many transitions, while others are unique, but regardless of the situation, the more that can be done to establish a sense of common purpose, trust, and an understanding and a sense of a common vision for the future, the more smoothly a transition can be effected. My 2003 move to Towson University involved previous transition experience and a unique situation. I was returning to a campus that I had been part of for 21 years as a faculty member, dean, Associate Vice President, Provost, Vice President, and Executive Vice President. I had also been away from the campus for almost nine years. As an incoming president, I was in a unique situation; I had knowledge that would not be available to another incoming president. However, regardless of the venue or situation, a plan is needed.

In my case, I embraced the existing campus strategic plan and began a process of blending it into a new plan built on the past but looking to the future. I believe a strategic plan must be a living document, evolving with the campus from generation to generation and administration to administration. Often this outcome is not the norm. Plans come and go with new presidents, new provosts, and other campus leaders. As a result, strategic plans are often viewed as suspect. The term strategic plan has been used and abused for so many years that it often has a stigma associated with it. At times the stigma is the result of past failures. A plan may be viewed as using time in its preparation, planning for planning’s sake, or the creation of a document that sits on a shelf, with no real change ever occurring. That view is unfortunate and is a hurdle that must be overcome. Perception of strategic plans aside, the

development of a new plan presents great opportunities. So pick a point in time and set your institutional compass. And when you do that, build a framework that will allow the plan to evolve and keep pace with institutional change.

## Assessing Your Situation

As you begin to plan, it is important to assess your situation. Is there anything unique about your institution and will that uniqueness be a factor in the future? Ask what preparation is necessary before beginning the planning? And, most importantly, how can you use your plan to establish your institution's goals for the short-, medium-, and long-term future? There are many organizational dynamics that work not only against the establishment of a plan and a common vision, but also against developing an agreement on a common direction. Campus culture can be the greatest hurdle to overcome. The culture of a campus is built over many years and may not be disciplined as it relates to planning. If organizational communication has not been strong, you can be assured that you will encounter numerous visions of what the institution's future should look like, an equal number of opinions as to institutional priorities, and many opinions as to the direction you should be following. An important element of preparing an effective plan is recognizing that institutional culture has a great deal of inertia associated with it—inertia that will be difficult to overcome, harness, and redirect.

## Communication

Back to the challenge of communication. One of my rules has always been that when you think you are communicating well, you are about ten percent of where you need to be. Communication across an organization often resembles the outcome of the old telephone game—a message is passed on by telephone from one individual to the next, and the next, until the message coming out the other end of the phone line bears no resemblance to the original message. To bring a plan to life, one needs to put a

great deal of energy into a communication strategy, one that gets the message out, solicits input, sets directions and goals, and tells the story in a way that the organization can see it and embrace it.

The culture of the organization also has a certain value system associated with it. The values may be broadly accepted or there may be alternative views held by different cohorts within the campus. Regardless, as the new plan is formulated, it needs to be based on the campus' history and a common value system: characteristics, beliefs, shared history, and assumptions that are the foundation of the organization culture.

## Focus On What You Do Best

An organization also needs focus—it must know what it is best at doing. At colleges and universities, that primary *raison d'être* is the teaching and learning coupled with the scholarly endeavors that go on within or outside of our walls. It goes without saying that our plan must focus first and foremost on the academic enterprise. In our most recent strategic plan at Towson University, *Towson University 2010: Mapping the Future*, the academic focus was clear. Of the plan's five core themes, two are directly related to the student and the academic enterprise. Those themes are "Student Experience and Success" and "Enrollment Management, Growth, Size, and Mix." The plan must also recognize that we can only be successful as an academic institution if all of what we do, including both the academic efforts and the support structures that underlie them, are working together, leveraging each other, to achieve common goals. For example, the theme "Student Experience and Success" has many action items related to what goes on in the classroom. We say that we will maintain a high percentage of small classes taught by core faculty and we will provide our students with experiential learning activities such as internships, service learning opportunities, and the ability to travel abroad as part of a study abroad program. We also know that the student experience and student success is also related to the physical environment of the campus. We therefore

need to ensure that the Facilities Master Plan is aligned with our enrollment growth and mix. We also want the campus to be a safe place for students and ensure that students are provided with the support services they need such as tutoring, counseling, and health care to guarantee their physical and mental well-being. A campus plan must be just that—a plan that involves the entire campus, intermeshes all that is going on at the institution, and creates a tapestry that depicts a common future. The more you can align all that you do, the better off and more successful you all will be.

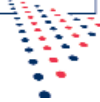
Development of a successful plan requires several core tenets. The message must be clear when viewed from many different perspectives. It must be reinforced over and over again in everything that you do and say—by your actions. A communication strategy is vital, as is a marketing strategy. The message must be articulated to all of your audiences as often as possible and it must be clear, it must be understood, and it must be embraced.

Do you need a plan? Yes, we all do. And that plan must be our plan, not your plan. The entire institution must be involved in developing the plan, understanding the plan, and implementing it. The president plays a vital role, but if the organization is going to be successful, the plan belongs to the campus with the president leading and shepherding as necessary to move the campus from today to tomorrow.

*Robert L. Caret became the 12th president of Towson University on July 1, 2003. He previously served Towson for 21 years in a number of academic and administrative positions before assuming the presidency of San Jose State University of the California State University System in 1995. Caret has been credited with raising the profile of one of the largest universities in the California Council. He has made numerous presentations and published professionally in the fields of chemistry, chemical education, and higher education. He was elected*

*for a three-year term to the Board of Directors of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and will also serve as the AASCU representative to the American Council on Education (ACE) Board during the same time period. Caret serves as Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer for the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). He has recently been appointed to the NCAA Presidential Task Force on the Future of Intercollegiate Athletics. He holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from the University of New Hampshire and a bachelor's degree in chemistry and mathematics from Suffolk University.*

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