

– CHAPTER FIVE –



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Strategic Planning and Boards Of Trustees

The Essential Partnership

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Strategic planning is endemic to college and university campuses. Committees representing various constituencies meet regularly in quest for the perfect plan for the future of the institution. Ultimately, the plan is approved or adopted by the Board of Trustees. But does the Board really understand the details of the plan? Do all of the trustees own the plan, so that they are fully invested in the successful implementation of the plan? While support from faculty, staff, students, and alumni/ae is critical, the full engagement of the Board of Trustees is the essential partnership for the realization of a strategic plan for the institution. What follows is an approach that works for the college and works for the Trustees.

Three Key Beliefs about Strategic Planning

1. Strategic planning is a critical element to the growth and development of a college or university.

Higher education is in the midst of a time of extraordinary change and challenges. Colleges and universities—whether private or public, large or small—face changing student demographics, the impact of the information age, decreasing resources and increasing demands, greater visibility within an environment of increasing accountability, and

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uncertainty related to economic and global issues. While colleges and universities have always engaged in some form of planning, the current environment calls for the movement from traditional planning to strategic planning. Strategic planning is essential to both reactive and proactive leadership in higher education.

There is no lack of resources, research, and consultants available to assist with strategic planning. Strategic planning is defined and described by many authors and consultants both within higher education and throughout the business world. One of the more helpful definitions is found in *Strategic Change in Colleges and Universities: Planning to Survive and Prosper*, by Daniel James Rowley, Herman D. Lujan, and Michael G. Dolence. The authors define strategic planning as “a formal process designed to help an organization identify and maintain an optimal alignment with the most important elements of its environment.”

Strategic planning always needs to be mission driven. In this understanding, strategic planning (versus traditional planning) focuses on the nature of issues and an appropriate response rather than looking at problems or current understanding (an “outside-in” vs. an “inside-out” mindset). Strategic planning is less specific, focusing on directions and states of being rather than specific items. Strategic planning also provides a different area of focus, “aligning the organization with the environment in order to help assure long-term stability and survival.” Finally, strategic planning is “an ongoing process rather than a time-specific, single event.”

2. To be successful, strategic planning needs to involve all constituencies, especially the Board of Trustees.

According to author John M. Bryson in *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, the key to successful strategic planning is “the satisfaction of key stakeholders.” Effective planning must take into account the institution’s mission, history, values, traditions, culture, and circumstances as they relate to students, faculty, staff, alumni/ae, the Board, and its various external communities. Participative planning is absolutely critical, not only for developing the plan, but also for implementing it. This is especially true for those who have the power, authority, and influence to see that the plan moves from rhetoric to reality.

According to the Association of Governing Boards (AGB), “insisting on strategic planning” is one of the central responsibilities of the Board of Trustees. AGB defines this as ensuring that planning takes place and insisting that plans are used regularly for decision making. More specifically, the role of the Board involves the recognition, promotion, and support of planning; the review and approval of the planning process; and participation in some steps of the process.

What is left unclear in the guidance provided by the AGB, however, is the level and depth of the Board's involvement in planning. It raises questions about how and to what degree involvement should take place, accepting the realistic challenges of available time, knowledge, commitment, and expertise of the trustees. This leads to the third and most important underlying principle of strategic planning.

3. The success of the implementation of the college's strategic plan will correlate with the degree of ownership of and engagement in the plan by the Board of Trustees.

There are natural and political impediments to deeply engaging boards in strategic planning. It takes a good deal of time and energy, both for the administration and the individual trustees. Extraordinary and elongated meetings are difficult to schedule and a challenge for attendance and active participation. The meetings require additional preparation and a commitment to reading/reviewing materials, study, dialogue, and engagement. These are the natural impediments.

Additionally, such processes bring the Board more deeply into the operations of the college. While strategic planning calls for a level of understanding and discussion that focuses on mission, values, issues, direction, and the environment, it is impossible to avoid the application of the plan to specific activities, personnel, and the administration of the institution. Inviting the Board to function more closely to the line between policy-making and administration may be a political issue.

However, if one accepts the essential value and critical importance of strategic planning, fostering a high degree of ownership and engagement by all constituencies and stakeholders will be a necessary prerequisite to successful implementation. Furthermore, because of the governance responsibility of the Board, its level of engagement and ownership will contribute to effective leadership, more pervasive external representation of the institution throughout the community, greater support for the president, more active recruitment of new trustees and resources for the institution, and increased involvement in fundraising.

With these underlying principles in mind, what follows is a description of specific processes developed and implemented to successfully and more pervasively engage the entire Board of Trustees, and establish the essential partnership.

Getting the Board to “Own” the Strategic Plan: The Board Retreat

The Board of Trustees needs extensive time for discussion and debate of the plan. It is difficult to incorporate this into a regular meeting with a myriad of other important and time-consuming agenda items. In order to engender ownership of the strategic plan, the Board needs to spend sufficient time and engage in serious dialogue, debate, and reflection. The model for this is a strategic planning retreat.

Retreats are not intended as sessions to develop the strategic plan. This can occur within the normal activities and schedule of the Board. Rather, once the plan is approved, retreats provide the opportunity for trustees to better understand the plan; more fully analyze the issues underlying the plan; and better develop an appreciation for the implications of strategic actions. These retreats move the Board toward a high level of ownership and engagement and establish the partnership bond essential for successful implementation of the plan.

These retreats are typically and most effectively planned six months to a year in advance, scheduled in the fall (at the start of the academic year), and preceded by a good deal of work by the senior administration of the college and the Executive Committee of the Board. Assigning specific duties to senior administrators related to preparation for the retreat is straightforward. Usually, most of this work takes place during the summer months when the day-to-day pace on campus is somewhat slower.

This process does require a high level of commitment by the members of the Executive Committee of the Board. The Executive Committee needs to meet more frequently to oversee the development of the retreat agenda and schedule, the retreat process, and the resource materials. Often, success is more likely if several member of the Executive Committee volunteer to assist more actively with the actual details of the retreat planning.

The retreats are typically scheduled over a two-day period and preceded by a social event (reception and dinner) to foster community building between trustees and with senior administrators. Since new trustees typically begin their service on the Board at the beginning of the academic year as well, the social event, which may serve as a follow-up to a new trustee orientation session, helps the new trustees to become sufficiently comfortable to actively participate in the discussions to follow. The existing strategic plan is typically a central part of a new trustee orientation program, and it connects well with the subsequent retreat.

The evening session following the dinner or reception provides a good opportunity to focus on the mission of the college and its history, traditions, and values. The mission is the prism through which all planning and decision making needs to be seen. This session is an ideal foundation to prepare the Board for the discussions and dialogue that will take place throughout the retreat. Additionally, the session will contextualize all discussions within a reaffirmed commitment to the mission.

There are several key components to a successful Board retreat:

Briefing Papers

Trustees receive significant documentation prior to the retreat. Based on the focus of the retreat, the documentation typically takes the form of briefing papers. These papers are prepared by the various senior administrators under the supervision and guidance of the president and the final review of the chairperson of the board and/or the Executive Committee. The topics for the briefing papers might include Enrollment and Retention, Academic and Student Development, Finance and Facilities, and Advancement and Fund Raising.

Briefing papers contain background information about a topic, issue, and/or area of the college. This background information provides a summary of information drawn from the literature and best practices, and provides the trustees with a cogent and succinct update on the issue as it applies to higher education, the institution, and similar colleges or universities. It provides both a summary of the issue and the implications for the future.

The briefing papers also include an assessment of the issue as it applies directly to the individual institution. This assessment relates the issue to the institution's strategic plan, its performance since the last retreat, the issues confronting the institution in the near future, and environmental issues and changes. Finally, the briefing papers provide data rather than opinions. This data provides the context for any proposals and recommendations for changes or actions in the plan.

The data in the papers might be national or regional data (such as number of college-bound students in each of the subsequent five years; demographic trends of traditional and non-traditional students; or pending changes in legislation). More often, the data is a factual representation in graphs and tables of the issue at the college (such as five-year enrollment data in all categories, including inquiries, applications, and retention rates).

Key Issues

Each retreat focuses on key issues related to the institution and its ability to move forward with its strategic plan. Even within this timeframe, it is impossible to discuss every issue at the requisite levels of depth and detail. The delineation of these issues is determined by the Executive Committee of the Board and the president, and it forms the basis for the retreat's agenda.

In a retreat of this length, the breadth of information in the briefing papers might lead to a wide-ranging and inconclusive discussion. Identification of key issues helps to frame the discussion, and, without limiting Trustees, keeps the retreat in focus.

Relevant to each of the briefing papers, key issues are defined by a series of questions and statements that will be discussed, debated, and analyzed by the Trustees during the retreat. Examples of these might include:

- What should be the Board's role and responsibility in the reaccreditation process?
- In the post 9/11 environment, what are the implications of a reduced number of international students and partnerships?
- The following institutions in our region will launch major campaigns in the next year (list included). What are the ramifications for our institution and community?
- How do we address diversity issues from a policy perspective?

Small Group Discussion

Assuming that the trustees have read the materials, an attempt is made to limit the didactic nature of the retreat. Peer pressure and the positive experience from prior retreats often result in very high levels of preparation. More often than not, a vast majority of the trustees thoroughly review the materials that they should receive at least three weeks before the retreat. Trustees arrive ready to discuss, debate, and decide.

The primary format is small group discussion that occurs in a series of sessions, each focusing on a key issue. The key issues are inter-connected and embedded in the briefing papers. In one session, for example, the focus might be review and reform of the curriculum. Another might focus on the relationship between enrollments goals and trends, as well as physical plant needs. A third might address issues and challenges related to launching a successful capital campaign.

Trustees are assigned to small groups for each session to ensure that all trustees interact with the entire membership, and stronger “voices” are spread throughout the groups over the course of the retreat. The assignment of small groups is as important as the seating arrangement at an important dinner party. Knowledge of trustees and assignments that provide a balance of voices and a breadth of perspectives enriches the quality of the discussion.

Each small group is facilitated by a member of the Executive Committee. Because she or he was involved in the planning of the retreat, she or he is able to help the group remain focused on the issue and to engage all trustees in the discussion. A member of the senior administration serves as a recorder. Senior administrators also serve as resource persons if the discussion requires information beyond the scope, depth, and detail of the briefing papers.

A series of discussion questions are provided to encourage but not delimit discussion. The president and the Chairperson of the Board move from group to group during each session and serve as overall resource persons. The president and the chairperson also assist the Executive Committee members if they are having difficulty moderating the discussion and leading the group through the various questions and issues. The president and the chairperson only participate when asked or if it is clearly necessary. This is true for senior administrators as well. The goal is for each and every trustee to speak to each other and to engage.

At the end of the small group session, a debriefing session provides for a report of major questions, areas of concern, and areas of agreement and/or proposed action steps. The report is recorded in real time and immediately appears as part of a PowerPoint summary. Hard copies are made and distributed while the subsequent small group session is in progress. This provides the trustees with an additional resource and a point of reference as they continue to work through the issues and develop links and connections between topics and issues. These individual group reports ultimately become the basis for a holistic summary of the retreat.

Summary/Board Plan

By the end of the retreat, a complete summary is generated listing the key issues raised by the trustees. Because of this more in-depth understanding of issues and the necessary actions related to implementing the college's plan, the summary provides a clear roadmap for both the administration and the Board (and its committees). Since the retreat takes place at the beginning of the year, subsequent Board meetings can include the necessary follow-up and ongoing discussion. Therefore, the Executive Committee translates the summary into a series of strategic intentions for each Board committee and the full Board. This summary provides the basis for future agendas and a benchmark for assessing progress towards implementation of the strategic plan.

Conclusion

Strategic planning is critical for all colleges and universities. With the constant changes and pressures of enrollment management, fundraising, financial aid, and curricular reform, successful institutions will be guided by well-developed strategic plans that serve as an integral part of day-to-day leadership and future activities.

The strategic plan cannot be solely the president's vision. It will only be a true guiding force and find reality in the life of the college or university if it is fully owned by the Board of Trustees, as well. The process described in this essay has proven to be successful for the institutions I have led as well as a large number of other institutions that have adopted this model. While some colleagues have modified the process slightly to fit the culture and needs of their Boards, institutions, and organizational structures, the results have been the same. Ownership of the strategic plan is high, and the impact on the college or university is significant.

In the end, if members of the Board of Trustees fully understand and own the strategic plan, they will better understand their role and responsibility in helping to implement the plan. The results may be higher giving levels, increased assistance in external relations, or better oversight of fiscal matters. What is certain is that trustees and senior administrators will work better together and be more effective in leading the college. The essential partnership will be in place.



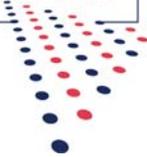
About the Author

Dr. Jack P. Calareso assumed his duties as the 10th president of Anna Maria College in Paxton on July 1, 2007, and he was officially installed on October 4, 2007. The Anna Maria College presidency is his third, having served most recently as the president of Ohio Dominican University in Columbus and previously at Briar Cliff University in Sioux City, Iowa. With a career in higher education that spans more than two decades, Dr. Calareso has served as the chief academic officer at Merrimack College in North Andover and the College of Saint Rose in Albany, N.Y. He also has had a distinguished career as a professor of theology and educational leadership, and as a school superintendent, principal, and teacher.

Dr. Calareso is a frequent speaker at international, national, regional, and local conferences; workshops; and symposia on topics related to leadership, higher education, strategic planning, ethics, civic engagement, theology, and social issues. He is the author of numerous articles and books. His byline has appeared frequently on the editorial pages of numerous newspapers.

Dr. Calareso earned his undergraduate degree at Boston College, his master's degree at St. Bernard's School of Theology in Rochester, N.Y., and his doctorate at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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