

– CHAPTER TEN –



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2008/2009 SERIES: Best Practices in Higher Education
Mastering the Idea of a Master Plan

Mastering the Idea of a Master Plan

Dr. William L. Fox: President, Culver-Stockton College

In his or her first days on the job, a college president begins a search for the campus “sense of place” while also taking the measure of its space and aesthetics. As one soon discovers, that essential exercise holds its own hidden perils of unknowing. Because the office of college president is so elastic, most presidents have a hard-to-admit limitation in the essential effort to assess the condition and potential of the campus. College presidents’ training and experience is unlikely to be in civil engineering, city planning, or landscape architecture. After a year as president of Culver-Stockton College, I had become very self-conscious of this deficiency when I met David Frohnmayr, president of the University of Oregon, who had been in office more than a decade (following a long tenure in the deanship of the law school). I assumed he had seen it all and would suggest ways to close the gap in my qualifications. When I sought his wisdom about the nature of the presidency, he simply offered the reassuring words, “I still have my training wheels on.”

Except for a few home remodeling projects and several substantial campus endeavors involving new construction, repair, and restoration, my knowledge of architecture, engineering, and construction was no better than a dilettante’s perspective, mostly drawn from shovel-in-hand jobs during the summers I was in college. So, two years into our strategic plan at Culver-Stockton, we had reached the critical juncture on the roadmap of goals, the one that called for the development of a master plan for campus facilities.

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Even though the campus grew and improved over the four decades since the last comprehensive plan was drawn, the vision of how a college should look and how its campus should function in the Twenty-First Century was not articulated in the recent history. For years, it was one of those “we’ll get around to it someday” topics assigned to the realm of the abstract, at best, because much of the newer work to upgrade campus facilities was driven by a right-now kind of pragmatism. I hasten to note that in my first 13 months at Culver-Stockton, we built four new structures and did major repairs on four other buildings owing to the 30 seconds a tornado required to undo 150 years of existence on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.

Nevertheless, we had reached a moment at Culver-Stockton when it was time to dream again. My initial naiveté about producing a master plan for the Twenty-First Century was not simply to dismiss fundamental misgivings among a few in the community who thought it was an exercise in wasted time, but it was also to assume that the main task was hiring the right expert to do the work. This was not my field (I’m a historian), so I thought we would conveniently turn it over to the people who were professional “developers.” I began with the belief that if the skills are missing in house, it is best to outsource the project. Just get the architectural specialists to do it all. I was eager to see the helicopter images; the pretty, water-colored elevations; and the PowerPoint virtual tour of futuristic features. And that assumption about the process was dead wrong.

Now I’d like to reflect on how a near misstep on my part was corrected and a better way was discovered to produce a plan—a living, relevant document that now has both strategic utility and artistic inspiration. The new Culver-Stockton Master Campus Plan ought to inspire possibilities for many years. My first assumptions about the methods of the project and my own limitations in approaching it were, however, reversed in two ways. I began to remember a couple of design principles, or tips, that I had picked up over the years. A family friend, who is a former neighbor and the mother of one of our daughter’s frequent sleepover guests from those special wonder years, had attended design school 30 years ago. She was returning to her architectural practice after a stay-at-home interlude. She had helped us with a home remodeling project, which I had initially sketched myself on the back of a paper placemat. She instantly spotted all the flaws in my amateur lines and issued the deflating observation, “Men of our generation think only of results and how the outside should look.” (Remember, she was an architectural student when women were first expanding their career choices.) She further pointed out that women in her pioneering architectural days saw problems differently and their premise was always “design from the inside out.” She arranged the furniture in her mind before she ever drew the walls and windows. This is a good rule for a campus master plan, too. What needs to happen on the inside? It’s a question only the insiders can address; otherwise, the hired architects will design a work of beauty, which quite possibly is poor in both fit and function.

The second instance of gaining confidence in the more participative approach of the master planning process was to recall that my own discipline (history—really, church history) was enough to qualify me professionally and philosophically as an equal partner with the design experts. I was in the garage one day going through a box of books when I saw one of my favorite take-to-class titles. Because the illustrations were so powerful, it was a natural way for me to convey to students the order and life of a monastic community. The large folio-sized book featured reproduced drawings from the Swiss monastery of St. Gall. The famous *Plan of St. Gall*, still extant on medieval parchment, is more than 1,000 years old. It is, in fact, a campus master plan, and I had been teaching that story for many years. It is all there, the incipient ideas of a college campus—residential spaces, gardens, chapel, dining services, assembly halls, guest quarters, and even the bathhouse at St. Gall (which resembles locker facilities). The monastic brewery, however, probably has no campus analog. Alas, I had affinity and continuity with a subject that seemed otherwise beyond my skills. I also had an informed perspective that connected me to a significant forerunner explaining how and why campuses are the way they appear today. A second rule seems obvious: Your own knowledge field probably adds substance and sufficiency.

There is, as there was in *The Plan of St. Gall*, an order and sequence in developing a master plan large enough to accommodate a college's vision, necessity, and priorities. Whether this is the right checklist for other colleges contemplating a new or revised master plan, here is the logic of the Culver-Stockton effort:

1. A master plan begins with a **prior strategic plan** with the clear language of mission and purpose driving the agenda. Whether the core strategic imperative is enrollment growth, academic reinvention, or environmental sustainability, the master plan must always tie back to and serve the main goals.
2. **Educate the Board of Trustees** about the value of master planning. We offered a major presentation from a panel of architects and college administrators from other campuses at our annual planning retreat. The Board also needs to know the cost and scope. In our case, the budget was \$250,000. (The actual cost was slightly under \$200,000.)

3. **Develop a selection process** for contracting a consulting firm and assign the project to a team of three or four top administrators. Our team worked over the summer. Their responsibility should have been to write a college-specific RFP. In our case, we invited 40 firms to consider our project. After the expression of initial interest and a period of idea exchanges, we had six national finalists who agreed to submit more extensive proposals. Our selection team visited the offices of these firms, which we learned was unusual. The “reverse site visit” told us important things about the prospective consulting practices. Our team also visited campuses that had engaged the firms for similar work.
4. Once a firm has been selected, **a campus committee** needs to be appointed, which ought to be a cross-section of the community. We did not include trustees, as the Board had its own *ad hoc* oversight group that offered advice and reactions along the way. We also wanted to make sure the final version of the plan would be ready in time for the spring Board meeting. This meant the timeline had to be mutually reasonable for the capacities of the consulting architects and the campus committee.
5. **Gather the data.** There can be no shortcuts or dull pencils to do this properly. Not only will the architects need the measurements of every room on campus, they will gather considerable amounts of qualitative information from their initial campus visits. They will want to know from students, faculty, trustees, staff members, and the local community the campus sites that are important, meaningful in association, and implicitly regarded as defining the college. What on the campus should change?
6. We also added a **space utilization study** to our process because we needed some objectivity concerning how all the real estate was configured. Is the square footage of a student’s room better or worse than the industry standard? Are faculty offices adequate? Are there times in the day that classrooms are in low, inefficient demand but perhaps shouldn’t be? We had the paradoxical reality of feeling simultaneously crowded in certain campus areas while having under-used and abandoned space nearby.

7. **Identify the goals** of the plan by generating lists from town hall meetings and focus groups. We had dozens of ideas in circulation for a time, and we ranked them the old-fashioned, democratic way of voting with Post-it note ballots. Among the many items attracting support, we identified the library, green spaces, the campus “front door,” and residential living areas as needing attention.
8. **Develop a program of needs.** We found the Board perspective and the student perspective were well-matched as the input was collected. Both groups expressed the desire to eliminate interior campus roads and create a more pedestrian-friendly atmosphere. While the Board said there is a need to improve student housing, the students did not. Rather, the students emphasized a desire for improved athletic facilities and a new campus center.
9. A period of **exploring options** ensued—without precluding any idea because of perceived or prohibitive costs—with a set of drawings and multiple permutations. We spent weeks working on this puzzle, but with all the pleasure of the old SimCity games that were once derived from simulated city planning exercises. Our architects pushed us to rank in importance the immediacy of the dozens of possibilities in front of us.
10. Finally, we saw the plan—which began in September—materialize with recommendations by April. The **sequencing of options** was “gamed out” into several phases, roughly in five-year intervals. If, for instance, we were to move the student center to a new location, retrofitting a historic building, a different road pattern would be required and that would have to be implemented first. It’s important to know all of this. This is where the expertise of the architects was particularly impressive—that is, their understanding of staging and doing so over a long period of time, while also building in necessary flexibility as needs and times change. Their expertise placed the Culver-Stockton plan ultimately on a solid and rational foundation. The architectural firm also developed project cost estimates that were expressed in ranges that allowed for inflation and other variables. It is not an all-or-nothing package, but rather its final presentation is layered with many menu options and combinations.

The Culver-Stockton campus evolved both methodically and haphazardly over 150 years, as did many institutions just like it on the American frontier, from a primitive beginning of two or three buildings fronted by a cow pasture, to 25 surrounded by parking lots and lawns. I find it helpful to think of a college campus as akin to a horizontal cathedral. With that metaphor in mind, it is wise to remember that the great cathedrals of Europe took centuries to build. The campus I have walked daily for six years is an eclectic mix of excellent red brick buildings from different periods of history, though they were not always placed on the best sites or with a controlling thematic coherence. Form was usually trumped by function, though we do enjoy and use powerful architectural symbols such as a silver dome upon “old Main” and the accent of colonnaded porches on many buildings. A new master plan, however, sees the college whole, as the historic poet, cultural critic, and inspector of schools Matthew Arnold prescribed, and makes the connections between a heritage and a future that tie all the lines together from the inside out.

Campus planning in America has a significant history, which I am now pleased to join as a participant and not just a student. My divinity school professor, the church historian George H. Williams, wrote a wonderful book (actually once cited by former Yale president and Major League Baseball Commissioner Bartlett Giamatti in his literary paean to baseball) called *Wilderness and Paradise* (1962), which I rediscovered after our master plan was completed. It affirms what I had recently learned from our community of builders, “Everyman” architects, and perhaps what I knew all along. The American campus was imagined by the people who first built them as garden places in the wilderness—Eden in the Sinai. Professor Williams explores the “Paradise Cycle” in his study with particular attention to the history of higher education on the American frontier, even when that frontier was the western edge of New England. The theme he outlines is now even more familiar: “The college or university has at its center a *green*, symbol of Paradise restored amidst the wilderness; its *campus* for the training of the spiritual militia [of students]... and its *wall*, library, and commons the practical means and the symbols too of the autonomy of the university in the transfer of its law, its learning, and its lore.” (211) I first read those lines 30 years ago with passing interest, but now they bear a greater weight of meaning and reward.



A master plan will not exempt a president from the mundane of roads and conduits, but along with the learning process, there is a feeling of solidarity with those who first broke the ground and those who have not yet walked its paths.



About the Author

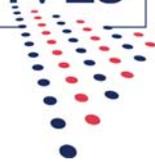
Dr. William L. Fox brings a distinctive background, perspective, and vision to Culver-Stockton College as its 24th president. He began his duties in May 2003.

Dr. Fox entered college administration from his dual careers in the academy and the church. From 1999 to 2003, he was a senior administrator at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland. In addition to supporting three presidents as special assistant, Dr. Fox functioned as a senior advancement officer, worked in academic affairs as associate dean for graduate and professional programs, and led the enrollment management division to two record-setting years. During his years at Goucher, he coordinated college strategic planning, was the administrative liaison to the Board of Trustees, and established a 40-member national board of visitors.

Dr. Fox received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from St. Lawrence University, a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. degree in American Religious History from George Washington University. He is an ordained minister and has led churches in Boston; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles.

On November 20, 2008, Dr. Fox was named the 18th president of St. Lawrence University, Canton, N.Y. He will leave Culver-Stockton on June 30, 2009, the end of the academic year.

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