

DOES IT PAY TO PLAN?

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A BIG TEN UNIVERSITY

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For the first time, we have data on strategic planning practices that correlate with successful planning in higher education. Campus administrators, deans, directors and department chairs shared their planning practices and their views of the outcomes.

“We have more research on 4-H leadership than we do on leadership in higher education!” a colleague remarked in support of our proposal to study strategic planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As one who has facilitated scores of planning events for schools and colleges, departments and units on campus, I saw *A Study of Strategic Planning on the UW-Madison Campus* as potentially very useful, but also risky. I and my fellow consultants in the Office of Quality Improvement know that planning can bring a college or department or office together by focusing on a limited number of important aims. We enjoy success stories of groups that had an inspiring planning retreat, identified clear goals for themselves and then accomplished what they set out to do and even more.

We also knew there was the possibility of disappointing news if we asked about the impact of planning. Leaders have a lot of things going on. Would they remember that we have a campus plan? Are our views of success the same as those with whom we work? Do others get as excited as we do about elegant plans well defined and executed? Would campus colleagues wonder if we were “auditing” their efforts?

We decided to survey a large group of campus leaders, some of whom had used facilitators from the Office of Quality Improvement and some who had done planning on their own with or without professional facilitation. In that way, the research could focus on the state of planning on the campus, apart from the services offered by one office.

We asked the Wisconsin Center for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education (WISCAPE) to conduct the study in order to maintain as much objectivity as possible.

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■ The Context

Strategic planning has become part of the institutional culture at UW-Madison. The campus is in its second ten-year cycle of a campus plan based on institutional reaccreditation. The campus plan identifies five priorities: promote research, advance learning, amplify the Wisconsin Idea, accelerate internationalization, and nurture human resources. These priority themes emerged from the last NCA reaccreditation report. The third cycle will begin again with the 2008 NCA reaccreditation process.

“Negative stereotypes about strategic planning are not supported by the data.”

Each campus plan priority has at least one point person who watches over the priority (and some sub-priorities), giving extra support when needed, linking people and initiatives, reporting on progress and serving as the lynch-pin. The plan attempts to harness the power of horizontality. Rather than relying solely on traditional vertical structures, the campus plan at UW-Madison creates and

encourages horizontal linkages among schools, colleges, departments, administrative units and individuals.

Associate Vice Chancellors drawn from the faculty and serving limited terms, act as “point people” for several of the priorities. Annual reports offer data that show progress in priority areas identified in the campus strategic plan. (See *Return on Your Investment*, 2003-2004).

Annual reports for all schools and colleges, and many departments and administrative units are organized according the priorities in the campus plan. The priorities are being used to guide budget reductions and reallocations. The campus priorities also provide motivation for planned giving and donations.

The Deans’ Council holds an annual retreat to review progress on the campus plan and identify issues that require their leadership. Those issues then drive meeting agendas for the rest of the year. In the current plan, UW-Madison Chancellor John Wiley says that strategic planning is critical for the University to maintain its historical excellence.

“How do we build on this legacy, to sustain our status at the forefront of higher education and at the leading edge of creating and disseminating new knowledge?”

The answer, I believe, lies within our strategic planning process, which for the past decade has been a key component of the university’s progress. Strategic planning is an invaluable process for identifying strengths and weaknesses, pointing out critical needs, and helping determine how best to meet those needs. In the past, solid planning has helped us overcome many obstacles and given us the tools to protect and enhance the valuable resources of the university. Now, as we face new opportunities for growth, it remains crucial to our future success.”

In short, the study was conducted in a leadership culture that puts a high priority on planning.

■ The Research Project

Brent Ruben, Professor of Communication and Organizational Psychology and Executive Director of the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University, and the WISCAPE research team which included Justin Ronca, Beth Stransky and the author identified four questions of interest:

1. What is the impact of a campus-wide strategic planning process with clear priorities?
2. What factors most contribute to effective implementation of the campus-wide strategic plan?
3. What is the impact of strategic planning processes at the level of schools, colleges, administrative units and academic departments?
4. What factors most contribute to success of effective strategic planning implementation in schools, colleges, administrative units and academic departments?

Strategic planning was defined as “an organized process through which

“Respondents took a participatory approach to planning.”

members of an organization reflect upon the challenges, opportunities, capabilities and resources of their unit, and the needs of their constituents, and identify priorities, future-oriented plans, goals, and action steps.”

An on-line survey was designed as the first of a two-part research process. (The survey was to be followed with in-depth interviews with selected leaders and/or

groups.) A focus group of campus leaders reviewed the first draft and another group completed the resulting field test version. The Provost launched the survey with an invitation to 283 campus leaders including campus-wide administrators, deans, directors and department chairs. Sixty-seven responses were received for a response rate of 24%. The largest groups responding were department chairs (39%) and deans, associate deans, or assistant deans (39%), so the responding leaders were far more academic than administrative.

The main limitation was the fact that our respondents are not a random sample and with the 24% response, we cannot generalize to the whole population of leaders on campus. In addition, we relied on leaders' perceptions of the benefits of planning without any requirement for supporting data. Finally, the correlational analyses indicate relationships, but cannot definitely establish cause-and-effect.

The study has, however, provided us with a detailed description of the strategic planning experiences of close to 70 leaders on the UW-Madison campus. For the most part, these leaders are experienced planners. All statistically significant associations reported were significant at the level of 95%.

■ **The Campus Plan**

The majority agreed that the campus plan

- Set clear goals (61%)
- Sharpened focus and prioritized needs (58%)

This is a huge accomplishment for a campus strategic plan. It is not uncommon to see campus plans that are more like catalogues of what's going on in all the schools, colleges and units. Such compendiums are much easier to create than plans with clear intentionality, but they are not useful for focused action or budget allocation.

For the most part, these leaders are experienced planners.

The question that inquired about the impact of the campus plan also included unintended negative consequences that could result from poor planning processes. Some of the more notorious unintended consequences of poorly designed strategic planning such as "Wasted time" or "Served as an academic exercise only" were seldom seen in the responses.

Over half (56%) rated the impact of the campus plan as a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale where 1 was "to no extent" and 5 was "to a great extent." Of note was the absence of low impact scores (1 or 2). So the majority of the scores are on the end of the scale any planner would hope they would be.

We found out something about the campus plan that will be important for the future. About one third (36%) felt that the campus plan fostered collaboration among groups. This is an area that can be examined more closely by the campus point people and campus leaders. The power of horizontality is a strength of a campus-wide planning process. This study suggests that using the plan more effectively to encourage collaboration is an opportunity for improvement.

■ **Planning at the Local Level**

The data reinforced the belief that planning is a common activity for these leaders:

- 94% have engaged in strategic planning in the past five years
- 89% have a strategic plan
- 63% have updated their initial plan

A majority (59%) rated their "local" planning process (school, college,

department administrative unit) as beneficial, rating it as a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale.

The majority rated their planning processes as a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale in these areas:

- Set clear goals (74%)
- Sharpened focus and prioritized needs (71%)
- Fostered collaboration and teamwork (61%)
- Expanded awareness of external trends, challenges, opportunities (61%)
- Aligned goals and resources (56%)
- Achieved important outcomes (53%)
- Created commitment to action (52%)

This suggests that the leaders who answered our survey are having good success with plans that really provide a focus for action. Sixty-one percent said that planning fostered collaboration and teamwork. Although collaboration was not as strongly identified as an outcome of the campus plan, it was identified at the sub-campus level as a significant impact of planning.

Collaboration was seen as an outcome of planning at the sub-campus levels.

There was an opportunity for participants to identify undesirable outcomes of local planning such as wasted time, ignored resource and policy constraints, served as an academic exercise only. These negative outcomes were cited by only a small minority. The low incidence of poor planning experiences is noteworthy. Negative stereotypes about strategic planning are not supported in this study.

The researchers used two survey questions as shorthand for planning success:

- To what extent did your unit or area of responsibility achieve the goals set forth in your strategic plan?
- Overall, how beneficial was your strategic planning effort?

Respondents who reported successful planning experiences also saw benefits above and beyond those strictly associated with planning (goals, measures, commitment to action, focus, etc.) These collateral benefits included:

- Improved organizational climate (morale, trust, collaboration)
- Stronger external connections, relationships, and views
- More effective resource allocation
- Process improvement
- Enhanced leadership capacity

For these leaders, it did pay to plan.

■ Planning Practices

We were able to get a picture of the kinds of activities that are commonly part of local planning processes. These are shown in Figure 1 on the following page.

More respondents (two thirds) utilized outside facilitation assistance than did not. Of those who used facilitation, 43% used the campus Office of Quality Improvement (OQI) facilitators. Those using campus facilitators were more likely to report higher levels of benefits from their strategic planning process than those using other facilitators or no facilitation.

The study highlights particular planning activities that are associated with successful

PLANNING ACTIVITY	PERCENT REPORTING
Identified a vision or clear priorities for the future	92
Wrote, revised or reaffirmed mission (purpose)	88
Held meetings to get feedback on proposed plan to increase understanding	78
Identified annual or short-term goals	76
Held meetings to get input before planning	75
Identified measures of success	68
Engaged in collective review of existing data	67
Held periodic checks to monitor progress	63
Involved stakeholders in planning	61
Used student assessment data	52
Assigned a point person for each goal	48
Conducted SWOT to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats	46
Conducted special surveys or research	42

Figure 1. Planning Activities Reported

planning outcomes. Those who reported high levels of goal achievement and/or benefits from strategic planning, also tended to:

- Hold meeting(s) to get input before planning
- Hold meetings to get feedback on proposed plan to increase understanding
- Engage in collective review of data
- Identify measures of success
- Identify annual or short-term goals
- Hold periodic checks to monitor progress

To our knowledge, it is the first time that we have data to support these practices in higher education. The list suggests that

respondents take a participatory approach to planning and further that there is a relationship between participation and success. Being explicit about collective intentions by having annual goals, measures of success, and periodic checks to monitor progress are also associated with successful efforts. This is powerful information.

■ Next Steps

One question of interest was not addressed by the on-line survey: What factors most contribute to effective implementation of the campus-wide strategic plan? Interviews of the campus plan point people are a logical next step

for answering questions around successful campus plan implementation and particularly how greater levels of cross campus collaboration can be stimulated. Interviewing selected campus leaders and/or groups about their planning experiences is a logical next step. (Human subjects concerns precluded follow-up interviews with respondents as originally planned.)

Additional questions of interest for future research include these: How do individual leaders define planning success? What quantifiable impacts has planning had on teaching, research, and outreach? How is accountability maintained for implementation? How does leadership style and/or training affect approaches to planning in higher education? How do leaders link their plans to budgets?

Finally, repeating the study in 3 to 5 years would provide comparison data of the impact of planning on the campus over time.

Resources

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