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*This chapter advises community college leaders how to achieve mission balance by using strategic planning to make mission-critical decisions and take decisive action.*

## Meeting the Challenges of Expanding Missions Through Strategic Planning

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Defining critical missions has been an ongoing process at most community colleges for approximately 50 years. Over time, with one budget crisis followed by another and another, with one external mandate followed by another and another, most of these colleges have settled into defined, usually revered, missions. Yes, colleges periodically revise their mission statements, mostly to avoid trouble with the regional accrediting agency. Do the revised mission statements alter the critical missions of the college? Almost never. Yes, colleges create and periodically revise strategic plans, again, mostly to appease the regional accrediting agency and because “it is what forward-thinking organizations do.” Are these strategic plans strategic? Typically not.

In practice, community college leaders have moved their considerations from defining critical missions to the pragmatics of how to balance these missions with ever-fewer resources and ever-greater external demands. Institutional success—and the corresponding success of senior leadership—depends on balancing critical missions and evolving the college culture so students, staff, faculty, trustees, alumni, and the community citizenry understand and embrace this balance.

How leaders achieve critical mission balance and how they evolve college culture are questions best answered within the context of the institution’s strategic planning process. Strategic planning too often begins and ends with operational planning. Although important, operational planning is not strategic planning. The goal of operational planning is to improve current operations, for example, changing to a new learning management system to meet faculty and student online needs. The goal of strategic planning is to realign institutional resources, in particular human resources, in a calculated manner to change the college, for example, adding personnel

to the college's foundation to develop alternative revenue sources. A completed strategic plan is not strategic if it has a myriad of goals and objectives connected to all of the functional areas of the college. If leaders are to be successful in the ongoing balancing of critical missions and evolving of the college culture, they must implement effective strategic planning.

Even when committed to changing their institutions, leaders must overcome the three plagues of strategic planning: the deeply rooted cultural expectation that strategic planning will be much ado about very little; the pervasive fear that if, by chance, there is meaningful change as a result of strategic planning, this change will conflict with entrenched institutional values; and the institutional inertia that will fight change long after the need for and the path to change have been decided. We offer the following four points of emphasis, born from our combined 45 years of experience at five community colleges in four states, to assist leaders as they attempt to implement successful strategic planning: identifying key institutional players and getting their support, giving voice to these key players as well as internal and external constituents, reflecting on core institutional values when making the critical mission-balancing decisions, and acting decisively after critical mission balance has been determined.

We anchor our points of emphasis with McPhail and McPhail's strategic planning framework (2006). Many frameworks exist, and our points of emphasis can find a home in most planning frameworks. We use McPhail and McPhail because they describe a thoughtful, step-by-step process. McPhail and McPhail begin with scoping out current mission priorities, followed by clarifying the focus and importance of each mission, establishing broad expectations, establishing evidence-based assessment criteria and mission priorities, and developing an implementation and results management plan. The authors use Cohen and Brawer's fivefold description of community college missions (student services, career education, developmental education, community education, and the collegiate function) and assert that by using their framework, a college will land on its prioritized mission or missions. In so doing, "some colleges may choose to support one high-quality mission; others may sustain four or five missions" (McPhail & McPhail, 2006, p. 98).

We take some exception to McPhail and McPhail. Not only do we see the student services mission as being foundational to all other missions and irrelevant without one or more of these other missions (thus, a college never would choose to support only one high-quality mission), but also we contend that if a college were to choose to support fewer missions, it likely would have had to make this choice during previous financial crises. More to the point, leaders are struggling with how to balance existing missions; they are struggling with how to preserve these missions while keeping the doors open.

Our first two points of emphasis (identifying key institutional players and getting their support and giving voice to these key players as well as

internal and external constituents) should be considered before embarking on strategic planning. Without the support of key players, strategic planning is the waste of time everyone expects it to be. Our next point of emphasis (reflecting on core institutional values driving the critical mission-balancing decisions) should be considered when establishing evidence-based mission priorities. Finally, leaders must act decisively while developing the implementation and results management plan.

## Identifying Functional Leaders and Getting Their Support

Before launching the latest strategic plan, leaders must identify the institution's functional leaders and get their support. In practice, functional leaders are the influential players in the work of the college. They are the ring leaders and the in-the-know personnel who may be found in any structural role. Whether they hold formal leadership positions is unimportant. Functional leaders are influential in a more powerful way—by practice. Accordingly, three pragmatic ways leaders can identify functional leaders are by considering interpersonal communication skills, listening skills, and informal organizational structures.

Interpersonal communication expertise is a significant trait of most functional leaders. Their ability to use interpersonal skills to build and maintain strong relationships strengthens information flow and leads to greater college success. Designated authority and/or titles work only to the extent of the person's skill set, which is often illustrated when colleges have multiple people at a particular level, for example, vice president and dean. Although two colleagues have a similar title and rank, the differences in their level of influence are often reflective of their competence in interpersonal communication. Leaders with relationship skills are typically more influential; they show themselves to be key players in the life of the college.

In discussing the second variable in identifying functional leaders, we narrow our communication focus to listening. Essentially, listening is about assigning meaning. Skilled listening provides the opportunity to gain insight not only into an individual's perspective but also into the greater social tone related to an issue and the organization. The better the understanding of the breadth and depth of this process, the better the ability to assess how individuals respond to both topics and others, thus strengthening the ability to recognize key players in the context of the topic.

Good listeners often emerge as functional leaders because individuals gravitate toward them. Functional leaders listen and act inclusively. They care about the perspectives of others, and their focus and decisions are information based. Listening in our modern environment encompasses everything from face-to-face interactions to social media. It is an active and intentional process. The strength of this process is exemplified by Llopis (2013):

As a leader, it's difficult to really know what your employees are thinking about, what's troubling them or how to help them get out of a performance slump—unless you take the time to listen to them. Listening goes well beyond being quiet and giving someone your full attention. It requires you to be aware of body language, facial expressions, mood, and natural behavioral tendencies. Listening should be a full-time job when you consider the uncertainty embedded in the workplace and the on-going changes taking place. (p. 2)

Llopis recognizes the contextual nature of listening. The impact builds on itself: effective listening creates a positive work climate by increasing the understanding of individual and organizational ideas and challenges. This, in turn, increases communication from individuals to organizational leaders. Functional leaders are naturally revealed through this process of active listening.

The third component of identifying functional leadership is giving attention to both formal and informal organizational structures. Institutional activities are shaped by both structures. Formal structures are defined and publicized by the college; the understanding of informal structures is more nuanced and dependent on the general relationships within the college and community. This understanding builds on the interpersonal and listening communication variables because informal structures are generally based on camaraderie. Further, the stronger a person's relationships with those in the college, the better is his or her understanding of the informal structures. As these structures are often viewed as gossip channels, a waste of time or distractions, informal structures make some nervous. Lunenburg (2010) stated, "Although leaders may be reluctant to use the grapevine, they should always listen to it. The grapevine is a natural phenomenon that serves as a means of emotional release for staff members and provides the administrator with significant information concerning the attitudes and feelings of staff members" (p. 5). The significance of informal channels is contingent on a leader's savvy in understanding and using them. Further, functional leaders are often at the center of these structures. The better a leader's understanding of the informal organizational structures within a college, the better that person's ability to identify functional leaders, as they are often one and the same. This understanding requires keen insight into the pragmatic communication flow rather than focusing solely on the formal structure.

When learning about the development of a new strategic plan, the college community first will look to see if its functional leaders are connected to the plan's development. Leaders will be able to identify these functional leaders through examining interpersonal communication skills, listening skills, and formal and informal organizational structures and will be able to reach out to them for their involvement. Next, the college community will ask its functional leaders if this process is worth its time. The answer to that question is contingent upon the functional leaders perceiving they and others will have meaningful voices in the strategic plan.

## Giving Voice

Giving voice to functional leaders and internal and external constituents relates to more than asking for input. Leaders must recognize the complexity in giving others voice. The more they understand this complexity, the more they can create a culture where others are willing to share information and some are eager to take the lead in initiating information sharing.

A lesson for individuals when they step into leadership is the realization that perceived power often leads to others pandering and playing the game to politic and to stay in good graces. Some leaders may think they are different from others, that those they work with see them more as a colleague than a boss. The reality is others often see a title more than the individual. To battle this reality, a leader must steadily work to create a reputation as someone who values all perspectives. Although this can be a challenge, the foundation is others having voice. The stronger this foundation the more likely leaders are to receive valuable information from both visible functional leaders and those yet to be revealed. Three foundational steps to giving others voice are asking authentic questions, being mindful of one's own perspective, and being mindful of others' agendas.

Authentic questions reinforce a culture of inclusion where individuals feel valued; this culture is demonstrated in practice more than words. Authentic questions seek other perspectives and incorporate those perspectives within decision making. Thus, what makes questions authentic relies more on what is done with the answers than on the questions themselves. The antithesis is counterfeit questions that, intentional or not, are asked to create the illusion of inclusion. This ruse may lead to perceived short-term efficiencies, but the practice creates a negative environment that weakens voice. The perception that a question is counterfeit may have nothing to do with what was asked but with the perception that previous feedback was ignored. Leaders demonstrate authenticity by how they identify the inclusiveness of input, which does not mean vocal people always get what they want. It distinctly means leaders validate the ultimate decision in the context of feedback. Doing so makes it less likely for others to perceive their input was ignored. Effective leaders articulate the input process and make transparent how competing perspectives are evaluated. Authentic questions are the foundation of giving voice.

Another important aspect to giving voice is leaders having awareness of their own goals and biases and their ability to manage them. Inclusive leaders are mindful of personal motivations and transparent in relation to their own goals. They set aside their answers and focus on understanding others' perspectives. Like effective listening, this is an active and intentional process. Simple questions that illustrate whether a leader is focusing on understanding others' perspectives include the following: How strongly does the leader have a result in mind? How open is the leader to other conclusions? Is the leader willing to support the success of other

conclusions? Answers to these questions indicate whether a leader is prepared to ask authentic questions.

Colleagues can produce a commonly overlooked challenge to creating a culture of inclusion. Thus, leaders must be mindful of how others' agendas might impede voice. A common challenge is others working to limit discussion. The classic example is someone so focused on getting agreement or disagreement the person works to get to his or her desired result with minimal discussion. The complexity of providing voice is further demonstrated when others are not as motivated by the college's success as they are by their individual achievement. A typical example is someone being so focused on defining a pet project as successful that contradicting data and messages are ignored. The damage of such situations goes beyond the particular project to the downward spiral of challenging voice and damaging organizational climate.

Asking authentic questions, being mindful of one's own biases, and being mindful of others' agendas strengthen voice. These foundational tools help create a culture that promotes active and ongoing dialogue. Such a culture is a prerequisite to beginning strategic planning.

## Reflecting on Core Institutional Values

Now that the institution's functional leaders have been identified and support the strategic planning process because they are convinced their own and others' voices will contribute to shaping the process, we move to the point in McPhail and McPhail's framework when critical mission-balancing decisions are made. It is here the strategic part of strategic planning becomes problematic. It is here even the most committed college and community members may fear that considered changes will conflict with their deep-seated views of what is most valued at the college. An approach for mollifying this fear is to reflect openly on core institutional values when making the critical mission-balancing decisions. Turning to the ethics of critique and local community can assist with this reflection.

Wood and Hilton (2012) discuss the ethics of critique and local community as two of five ethical paradigms for community college leaders. The ethic of critique "is a morally based paradigm . . . employed by individuals who strive to create parity for others who have been disadvantaged by society" (p. 202). The ethic of local community "situates the best interests of the local community as a cardinal principle in decision making" (p. 206). Considering these ethics at that supremely important moment in the strategic planning process when evidence-based mission priorities are established reminds everyone of the core community college values of providing access to those most in need of access and meeting community social, cultural, and economic needs.

Applying these ethics is illustrated in the following scenario when two programs, one within the developmental education mission and the other within the career education mission, are considered for elimination.

The college's leadership team has to cut \$750,000 from next fiscal year's \$20 million budget. Team members have thoughtfully gone through steps 1–4 of McPhail and McPhail's framework: they have scoped out current mission priorities, they have clarified the focus and importance of each mission, they have established broad expectations, and they have established evidence-based assessment criteria.

First, do they cut the adult education program, which importantly is placed within the developmental education mission, not the community education mission, because adult education curricula anchor the low end of the math, reading, English continuum? Adult education is at the top of the list of possible programs to cut, partly because it is funded separately by state and federal dollars, which in this scenario the college likely will not get, resulting in the deficit increasing from \$750,000 to \$900,000 if adult education is kept. Easy decision, yes? Cut adult education, yes?

This is the moment to consider the ethic of critique, to be mindful of the "barriers of fairness . . . [and investigate] how rules [possibly the college's own practices] have served to disaffect and disadvantage [among others] . . . low income communities" like those served by adult education (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 202). In this scenario, there are no other local providers of adult education.

Of course, this example presents only the smallest sliver of the invaluable information that would be generated through McPhail and McPhail's framework. Even so, in fact, adult education programs are often the first to be cut because they are associated with the community education mission, an early critical mission to be cut, and because they are typically grant funded, they are presumed peripheral to the college's mission. Pausing to consider the ethic of critique helps frame adult education as critical to the college's core mission of providing access for populations most in need of a community college education. Eliminating adult education, therefore, conflicts with a deep-seated view of what is most valued at the college.

Second, does the leadership team cut the high-cost industrial maintenance program? Most general education faculty are hard pressed to embrace the value of such a program, especially if they see retaining it may result in tightened class schedules, meaning they would teach fewer of their favorite 200-level classes, let alone if full-time general education faculty may lose their jobs. This is the moment to consider the ethic of local community, whereby "chief concern is given to local needs (i.e., social, cultural, and economic), workforce development, as well as the advancement of human and intellectual capital" (Wood & Hilton, 2012, p. 207).

In this scenario, manufacturers do not have other colleges to train their critical workforce, and these manufacturers provide good

twenty-first-century jobs for local men and women. Again, this example presents only skeletal information, but pausing to consider the ethic of local community helps frame the industrial maintenance program as critical to the college's core mission of meeting community economic needs.

Of note, of course, is this dilemma: the proposal that the two programs in this scenario should be saved seemingly undermines the legitimacy of the strategic planning process because the goal of strategic planning is to realign institutional resources, in particular human resources, in a calculated manner to change the college. Resources cannot be realigned if hard decisions like closing adult education and manufacturing programs are avoided.

Yes, the examples of saving these programs because of their value when examined through ethical lenses challenge leaders to look beyond what may seem most obvious: to return to core institutional values and to have these values play a significant role in strategic planning. Even so, the \$750,000 to \$900,000 in cuts from the scenario remain. Where does leadership turn when every considered cut will be argued? Only hard decisions remain.

Although every college is different, our experiences are that colleges can decrease operational and personnel costs, for example, by reducing associate-degree majors; by creating a dramatically more efficient course schedule through reducing sections generally and 200-level transfer sections specifically; by creating an affordable staffing plan and realizing this plan through a hiring freeze; by closing low-wage technical programs that have nominal community support; and by holding all faculty and staff to high standards, which, accordingly, means low achievers need to exit the college, even if doing so means closing programs where weak faculty performance condemns the program to poor outcomes. Leaders also must become more entrepreneurial to develop alternate revenue sources, most importantly through the college's foundation where loss-leader investments may be needed.

## Acting Decisively

With evidence-based mission priorities established, which include addressing fiscal realities like the \$750,000 deficit in the previous scenario, the final point in McPhail and McPhail's strategic planning framework is developing the implementation and results management plan. Its development is akin to the denouement in a work of fiction: it is the wrapping up of loose ends after the plot's climax; it is the proverbial dotting of the *i*'s and crossing of the *t*'s. It is also when the good work of identifying functional leaders and getting their support, giving voice, and reflecting on core institutional values can be lost if leaders do not act decisively. The plague of institutional inertia will fight change even after evidence-based mission priorities have been established and the implementation and results management plan is being written. Well meaning, and not so well meaning, college and community members will create roadblocks to change and will attack supporters of

change. They will argue the process was inadequate and will express genuine surprise the college is changing as a result of the newly formed priorities. Hesitation to implement these priorities will embolden critics and will disillusion supporters who had suspended their cynicism about strategic planning.

No, this is not the and-they-all-lived-happily-ever-after point of the strategic planning process. It is the point when leadership is most critical. “The highest expression of leadership,” assert Zenger and Folkman (2009), “involves change . . . . leaders are demanded if the organization is to pursue a new path or rise to a significantly higher level of performance” (p. 14).

Leaders who have successfully guided their institutions to this point in the strategic planning process may be confident in the authentic and thoughtful nature of the process. Although always open to new information, especially that indicting unintended consequences, leaders must remain champions of this process by acting resolutely to make real each critical mission-balancing decision.

Boggs and McPhail (2016) argue, “Leaders interested in facilitating organizational change must understand the critical link between the employee’s pride in the institution and willingness to support organizational change” (p. 144). The strategic planning process, as described, will have generated this link for many involved because of the role they played in balancing critical missions and evolving the college culture.

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