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ABSTRACT
        This paper reports on the first phase of an ongoing study of
strategic planning in U.S. higher education. In this phase, the chief planner
at each of four private higher education institutions was interviewed,
focusing on participation in planning, communication, and success. Themes
related to these three topics were identified. The preliminary findings
suggest that further inquiry into the roles of technology, control, champions
of planning, and the reciprocal nature of communication and participation
will shed light on the roles of communication and participation and their
relative importance in the strategic planning process. Phase 2 will be a
comparative case study with 10 60-minute interviews (5 faculty and 5 staff)
at each of the institutions. This phase will also include a structural
analysis comparing the roles of communication and participation by
organizational and governance structures and a deeper examination of the
nature of communication, participation, and success. (SLD)

Communication and Participation: Initial Findings Regarding Their Roles in the Strategic Planning Process in Higher Education[1]

Poster Session presentation by
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Educational Policy and Administration
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

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Overview

The current challenges facing institutions of higher education in the U.S. are numerous and complex. Institutions wrestle with providing access, increasing diversity, increasing costs without the necessary increases in federal and state aid, and determining how to incorporate the explosion of information technology into the world of academia, to name a few. Higher education's boundaries have become more permeable as well, and more external constituents have become stakeholders in the success of higher education.

These challenges have resulted in a search by higher education administrators for a more effective way to manage higher education's multiple purposes and needs and to provide tangible evidence to constituents that their confidence and support are well invested. Strategic planning, however, has endured much criticism of late.

Questions have arisen regarding how to make strategic planning more effective in higher education institutions. Much of the criticism of strategic planning revolves around the differences between higher education and business (Hearn, 1988) from which strategic planning was imported. In particular, the notion of shared governance in higher education reflects a long-held practice of widespread participation in many organizational activities.

A conceptual paradox exists, however, that has not been addressed adequately in the literature. Widespread participation in a strategic planning process, though widely advocated in the literature, can also be strategic planning's demise. Through endless meetings, committees, and conversations, a strategic planning process can actually be derailed by well-intentioned efforts to seek widespread participation. This potentially negative side of participation is seldom recognized in the literature.

A great deal of energy has been expended in higher education institutions on the implementation of strategic planning processes and resultant plans. Birnbaum (2000) claims that this investment of energy has not always produced an acceptable level of return. Higher education institutions continue to grapple with the demand for demonstrable effectiveness and efficiency, as well as with the financial challenges that lie before them now and in the future. Strategic planning has been well-developed as a tool and used by so many in higher education that simply to discard it is neither reasonable nor feasible. A greater understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of current planning efforts could assist planners, administrators, and scholars in knowing how strategic planning might need to be modified for higher education in order to achieve a more successful process. Almost nowhere in the literature on strategic planning can one find the idea raised that widespread participation might be counterproductive to an effective strategic planning process in higher education . This dissertation will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and roles of these two variables in the strategic planning process.

Research Question

This study addresses the following questions: (1) what roles do communication and participation play in the success of strategic planning in higher education?, (2) how might communication serve as a proxy for participation in a strategic planning process? and (3) what are the key features of communication and participation that lead to a successful strategic planning process? Answers to these questions may suggest how an institution's strategic planning efforts could produce not only a successful process through the free flow of communication, but also a more efficient and responsive process due to the decreased need for participation.

Methodology

Private institutions were chosen for this study due to their similarities in organizational and governance structure, level of tuition dependence, and revenue streams. The study has two phases. To investigate a range of recent planning efforts, a recently completed Phase One involved interviewing the chief planner at each of four institutions regarding his or her institution's strategic planning process. The interview focused on three factors: participation, communication, and success. To explore the use of communication and participation in strategic planning, Phase Two will involve an in-depth, comparative case study at each institution, consisting of interviews with five faculty members and five staff members from a broad range of institutional areas at each institution. All audio-taped interviews will be transcribed and analyzed . In addition, a structural analysis of each institution's organization will be done to compare approaches to strategic planning and specifically the roles of communication and

participation across structural types. Finally, an analysis of relevant documents to enrich the understanding of the strategic planning process at each participant institution will be completed.

Results

Themes have been identified from Phase One of the research and will guide the Phase Two comparative case study. Themes that have been identified include:

Communication:

- Failure of technology to effectively communicate information.
- Iterative nature of communication.
- Role of politics in how, when, and what information is communicated.
- Differences in methods for facilitating communication.
- Impact of egalitarian versus hierarchical approaches on communication.
- Reciprocal nature of communication and participation.
- Role and impact of formal versus informal communication.

Participation:

- Failure of technology to effectively involve participants.
- Commitment to widespread participation.
- Difficulties facilitating participation.
- Role of politics in who participates and at what point in the process.
- Differences in methods for gaining participation.
- Impact of egalitarian versus hierarchical approaches on participation.
- Reciprocal nature of participation and communication.
- Level of control of participation.

Success:

- Role of politics.
- Connection of strategic planning to other organizational functions such as budgeting, program planning, human resources, etc.
- Impact of institutional history with strategic planning.
- Focus: Tangible outputs versus abstract vision.
- Role of individual ownership of process and results.
- Role of champion—one versus multiple; positional influence.

The study's preliminary findings suggest that further inquiry into the roles of technology, control, goals, champions, and the reciprocal nature of communication and participation will not only shed light on the respective roles of these two variables but also on their relative importance and place in the strategic planning process.

Next Steps

Phase Two will be a comparative case study, conducting ten 60-minute interviews at each institution. At each institution, five faculty and five staff will be interviewed. The interviews will include:

- President
- Chief Student Affairs Officer
- Chief Enrollment Officer
- Chief Development Officer
- Faculty in disciplines including: Economics, Psychology, English, Linguistics, Nursing, Biology, Communication Studies, Modern Languages, Business, Natural Sciences, and Mathematics.

The second phase will also include a structural analysis comparing the roles of communication and participation by organizational and governance structures and a deeper examination of the nature of communication, participation and success.

It is hoped that the lessons learned from this study will contribute to colleges' and universities' ability to take the best features of strategic planning and adapt them to the unique culture of higher education in order to respond to current and future challenges successfully. This study will address a current gap in the empirical literature regarding the features of an effective strategic planning process, specifically the roles of communication and participation in the success of a strategic planning process. Also explored will be the extent to which communication may serve as a proxy for widespread participation.

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