

July 17, 2011

The Strategic Plan: Neither Strategy Nor Plan, but a Waste of Time



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

*In his new book, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, Benjamin Ginsberg argues that the explosive growth in administration, the decline in faculty influence, and the institutional corporatization of American universities contributes to a loss of intellectual rigor. Here is an excerpt.*

Until recent years, colleges engaged in little formal planning. Today, however, virtually every college and university in the nation has an elaborate strategic plan. Indeed, whenever a college hires a new president, his or her first priority is usually the crafting of a new strategic plan. As in Orwell's *1984*, all mention of the previous administration's plan, which probably had been introduced with great fanfare only a few years earlier, is instantly erased from all college publications and Web sites. The college president's first commandment seems to be, "Thou shall have no other plan before mine."

The strategic plan is a lengthy document—some are one hundred pages long or more—that purports to articulate the college's mission, its leadership's vision of the future, and the various steps that are needed to achieve its goals. The typical plan takes six months to two years to write and is often subject to annual revision to take account of changing circumstances. A variety of constituencies are usually involved in the planning process—administrators, faculty members, staffers, trustees, alumni, even students. Most of the work, though, falls to senior administrators and their staffs, as well as to outside consultants who may assist in the planning process. The final document is usually submitted to the trustees or regents for their approval. A flurry of news releases and articles in college publications herald the new plan as a guide to an ever brighter

future. Hence, as one journalist noted, most strategic plans could be titled "Vision for Excellence."

The growth of planning has a number of origins. University trustees are generally drawn from a business background and are accustomed to corporate plans. Accreditors and government agencies, for their part, are enamored of planning, which they associate with transparency and accountability. Florida, in fact, requires its publicly supported colleges to develop strategic plans. More generally, though, the growth of planning is closely tied to the expansion of college and university administrations. Their growing administrative and staff resources have given them the capacity to devote the thousands of person-hours generally required to develop and formulate strategic plans. Before 1955, only 10 of the very largest universities could afford to allocate staff time to institutional research and planning. But by the late 1960s, several hundred colleges possessed staff resources adequate for that purpose.

The strategic plan serves several important purposes for administrators. First, when they organize a planning process and later trumpet their new strategic plan, senior administrators are signaling to the faculty, to the trustees, and to the general community that they are in charge. The plan is an assertion of leadership and a claim to control university resources and priorities. This function of planning helps to explain why new presidents and sometimes new deans usually develop new strategic plans. We would not expect newly elected presidents of the United States simply to affirm their predecessors' inaugural addresses. In order to demonstrate leadership to the nation, they must present their own bold initiatives and vision for the future. For college leaders, the strategic plan serves this purpose.

A second and related purpose served by planning is co-optation. A good deal of evidence suggests that the opportunity to participate in institutional decision-making processes affords many individuals enormous psychic gratification. For this reason, clever administrators see periodic consultation as a means of inducing employees to be more cooperative and to work harder. Virtually everyone has encountered this management technique. Some years ago, a former president of my university called to ask my advice before he appointed a new dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. I was pleased to be consulted, and later neither I nor other senior faculty who felt that the new dean was insufficiently experienced voiced so much as a word of opposition when the president announced his appointment.

In a similar vein, the university planning process entails months of committee meetings, discussions, and deliberations, during which the views of large segments of the faculty and staff are elicited. For the most part, those involved in the process, even if only peripherally, tend to buy into the outcome and, more important, tend to develop a more positive perception of the administration's ideas, priorities, and leadership. I can recall being greeted with hostile silence at

the faculty club when I asserted that our university's strategic plan was a waste of paper. I was completely correct. The plan *was* a waste of paper and within a year was forgotten. Nevertheless, my colleagues who had participated in the planning process were co-opted by it.

Still another way in which strategic planning serves administrators' interests is as a substitute for action. Many senior administrators are smooth and glib, in the manner of politicians. These qualities are sure to impress the corporate headhunters who direct contemporary administrative searches, and to help administrators secure job interviews. But, like some of their counterparts in the realm of electoral politics, university leaders' political dexterity and job-hunting skills are often somewhat stronger than their managerial and administrative capabilities, inevitably leading to disappointment on the campus after they take charge. Indeed, the disparity between their office-seeking savvy and actual leadership ability probably explains why many college and university presidents move frequently from campus to campus. By the time people on the campus have become fully aware of a leader's strengths and weaknesses, he or she has moved on to another college. Thus, for many administrators, 18 months devoted to strategic planning can create a useful impression of feverish activity and progress and may mask the fact that they are frequently away from campus seeking better positions at other colleges.

An individual of my acquaintance was appointed to the position of dean of arts and sciences at an important university. Soon after his appointment, he launched a yearlong strategic-planning process, telling all who would listen that the university's first priority should be the development of a sound plan of action. During this period, the dean delayed undertaking any new programs and initiatives because, he said, all major activities should comport with the soon-to-be-announced strategic plan. After a year, when the plan was ready, the dean announced that he was leaving to become president of a small college. Apparently the university was too engrossed in planning to notice that the dean was sometimes away on job interviews. Not surprisingly, as soon as he arrived on his new campus, this individual announced that he would lead the college in—what else?—the formulation of a strategic plan.

It would be incorrect to assert that strategic plans are never what they purport to be—blueprints for the future. Occasionally a college or university plan does, in fact, present a grand design for the next decade. A plan actually designed to guide an organization's efforts to achieve future objectives, as it might be promulgated by a corporation or a military agency, contains several characteristic elements. Such a plan typically presents concrete objectives, a timetable for their realization, an outline of the tactics that will be employed, a precise assignment of staff responsibilities, and a budget. Some college plans approach this model. The 2007 strategic plan of the University of Illinois, for example, put forward explicit objectives along with precise metrics, bench marks, timetables, and budgets. The leadership hoped to equal or exceed the performance of several other large public institutions in a number of dimensions. Whether one

agreed or disagreed with the goals stated by the plan, there could be little disagreement about the character of the plan, itself. It resembled a corporate plan for expanding market share or a military plan choreographing the movement of troops and supplies.

The documents promulgated by most colleges and universities, however, lack a number of those fundamental elements of planning. Their goals tend to be vague and their means undefined. Often there is no budget based on actual or projected resources. Instead the plan sets out a number of fund-raising goals. These plans are, for the most part, simply expanded "vision statements." One college president said at the culmination of a yearlong planning process that engaged the energies of faculty, administrators, and staffers that the plan was not a specific blueprint, but a set of goals the college hoped to meet.

Obviously what was important was not the plan but the process. The president, a new appointee, asserted his leadership, involved the campus community, and created an impression of feverish activity and forward movement. The ultimate plan itself was indistinguishable from dozens of others and could have been scribbled on the back of an envelope or copied from some other college's planning document. As I noticed while reading dozens of strategic plans, plagiarism in planning is not uncommon. Similar phrases and paragraphs can be found in many plans. In 2006, the chancellor of Southern Illinois University's Carbondale campus was forced to resign after it was discovered that much of its new strategic plan, "Southern at 150," had been copied from Texas A&M University's strategic plan, "Vision 2020." The chancellor had previously served as vice chancellor at Texas A&M, where he had coordinated work on the strategic plan. In a similar vein, the president of Edward Waters College was forced to resign when it was noticed that his new "Quality Enhancement Plan" seemed to have been copied from Alabama A&M University's strategic plan.

This interchangeability of visions for the future underscores the fact that the precise content of most colleges' strategic plans is pretty much irrelevant. Plans are usually forgotten soon after they are promulgated. My university has presented two systemwide strategic plans and one arts-and-sciences strategic plan in the past 15 years. No one can remember much about any of those plans, but another one is in the works. The plan is not a blueprint for the future. It is, instead, a management tool for the present. The ubiquity of planning at America's colleges and universities is another reflection and reinforcement of the continuing growth of administrative power.

*Benjamin Ginsberg is a professor of political science and director of the Washington Center for the Study of American Government at the Johns Hopkins University. Reprinted with permission from *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*. Copyright © 2011, Oxford University Press.*