

Strategic Priorities and Change in Academic Libraries

A Dissertation presented to the

Faculty of the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By Anne Marie Casey

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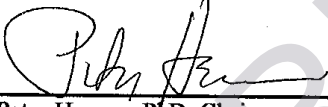

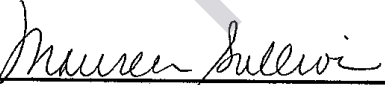
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Strategic Priorities and Change in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Academic libraries exist in an atmosphere of changing resources, stakeholder expectations, technologies, and scholarly publishing. Library directors, such as those investigated for this dissertation, demonstrate effective management and leadership practices that result in the maintenance of organizational core priorities and continuous incremental improvement during periods of turbulence.

Library managers can use strategic priorities as a guide in decision-making and planning in response to external change such as the recession of 2007-2009. During this financial crisis, there was no indication about the ways library directors used strategic priorities as a framework for these decisions. This dissertation addresses that issue through a multiple case study, which examined three public academic libraries in California and Michigan to determine the role of priorities in response to the recession. Analysis of data reveals that directors of these libraries, who practice everyday leadership, use priorities to shape their planning and decision-making. In addition, library personnel understand that the priorities offer a shared framework and focus on the core mission.

Several themes also emerge. One is open communication and transparency that fosters a culture of trust. Strong communication contributes to a confidence that enables personnel to continue performing under difficult circumstances. Another theme in the cases is employee participation. Librarians and staff are empowered to contribute to the management of the organizations through committee, team, and department work.

This study demonstrates the value of effective strategic planning and provides models of the practice of managerial or everyday leadership. It indicates the importance of the alignment of library planning to institutional planning as well as cultures of open communication, employee participation, and adaptive leadership to academic libraries. Academic library senior managers and university administrators will be interested in the results as examples of effective strategic planning, leadership styles, and of the types of library culture that support continuous improvement, even during difficult circumstances.

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My fellow students in the Simmons College Ph.D. in Managerial Leadership in the Information Professions program are the best support group anyone could hope for. My appreciation goes to all of the MLIP students, and especially to those in my cohort. I also wish to thank the staff and faculty of the doctoral programs at Simmons College GSLIS program, who were always there with the answers.

Working on a doctoral degree is challenging under the best of circumstances. Doing it, while handling a full-time job, requires a strong workplace support system. I have been fortunate to have two. I owe much of my success to my colleagues, first at the Central Michigan University Libraries and in the last two years at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, for giving me the gift of time to get the work done, listening when I needed a sympathetic ear, and for being my best cheerleaders.

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PREVIEW

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated in memory of my parents, Edward T. and Mary Mahoney Casey,
who encouraged me to search for the answers to all my questions.

PREVIEW

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning, a formal process through which an organization envisions the future and develops the procedures and operations necessary to achieve it (Goodstein, Nolan, & Pfeiffer, 1993), offers an opportunity to unify management, staff, and stakeholders through a common understanding of where an organization is going, how everyone will work to achieve a common purpose, and how the results will be monitored and reported (Matthews, 2005). Among the reasons institutions engage in strategic planning, are to determine priority areas, increase effectiveness, focus attention on results, demonstrate organizational knowledge of the environment to funding bodies (McClure, 1986), and to introduce organizational change and growth (Stephan, 2010). Strategic planning provides a means by which members of an organization can evaluate and respond in a similar manner to changing situations and opportunities (Goodstein, et al., 1993). Furthermore, it provides a framework for decision-making (Steiner, 1979) and a guide for the organization as it copes with changing demands from its stakeholders (Campbell & Alexander, 1997).

“Strategic planning is often used as a way to introduce a period of change, assessment, and self-identification” (Stephan, 2010, p. 189). Its essence is the allocation of resources to those opportunities most likely to move the organization to its ideal future position instead of across-the-board allocations or cutting support proportionately without regard to how closely an operation aligns with the mission or the ideal future position (Wood, Miller, & Knapp, 2007).

Brief History of Strategic Planning

Formal strategic planning in complex organizations first emerged widely in the mid-nineteenth century. Initially the armed forces adopted this process to prepare troops and supplies for potential military actions. Clausewitz (1976) in his writings on warfare, originally published in 1832, describes strategy as a plan of a war, the aim of which is to determine the steps needed to carry out that plan. After proving successful in the military, government agencies began to use strategic planning. By 1890, the origins of modern strategic planning are evident in the business world where corporations developed long-term plans in order to anticipate market changes and position themselves to take advantage of prospective opportunities. By the 1950s, corporate strategic planning had become the norm in the United States. Furthermore, within a decade, strategic planning was widespread in the for-profit sector and had begun to appear in the administration of nonprofit organizations as well (Pfeiffer, 1986).

Corporate strategic planning focuses on strategies related to building a business and making a profit. The fundamental decision-making criteria in for-profit organizations are generally related to specific economic measures such as return on investment and market share (Steiner, 1979). On the other hand, strategic planning in nonprofit organizations depends on decision-making criteria that are often far less concrete than achieving an economic goal.

The goals of nonprofit strategic planning may be concerned with such issues as contributing to the public good or serving a political interest (Steiner, 1979). Drucker (1990) states that “Nonprofit organizations have no bottom line” (p. 10) and “exist for the sake of their missions” (p. 45). The managers of these organizations have a tendency to think that everything they do is moral, righteous, and serves a cause, so, in the planning process, they may have many goals and but do not consider redirecting resources away from those that do not produce results

(Drucker, 1990). However, strategic planning in nonprofit organizations is important because "... [it] focuses attention on the crucial issues and challenges an organization faces, and it helps key decision makers figure out what they should do about them" (Bryson, 1995, p. 7).

Strategic Plan

Central to the strategic planning process is a written document that describes the strategic focus for the organization, the strategic plan. This plan operates under a preset timetable with structured documentation (Campbell & Alexander, 1997) and deals with the ways in which current choices play out into the future (Steiner, 1979). The plan also is an acknowledgement that an organization cannot accomplish everything and must allocate resources on a priority basis to those activities that lead to the accomplishment of goals (McClure, 1978). Since the widespread emergence of strategic planning in the 1960s, a range of models have developed. Despite the variety, there is consensus on key elements of a basic strategic plan. These are mission, vision, goals, and objectives. Additional elements often included are environmental scans, values, strategies, and priorities (Jacob, 1990, Matthews, 2005, Riggs, 1984).

A mission statement, which is a brief declaration of the reasons the organization exists, sets the purpose of that organization and defines its direction. The central part of a mission tends to be stable over time even though the external environment changes (Hernon & Altman, 2010). The mission succinctly specifies those whom the organization serves, what role the organization plays in the lives of its customers, and what it is trying to accomplish (Matthews, 2005). Through its mission statement an organization establishes a shared understanding with its stakeholders as to what it does and thus, how it prioritizes resources (Pritchard, 2008).

A vision statement expresses what the organization aims to be in the future. A vision is a description of something in the future in terms of the essence of what the organization should

become (Kotter, 1996) or a picture of the future the members seek to create (Senge, 2006). It provides “direction for the future that is desirable, feasible, focused, flexible and is conveyable in five minutes or less” (Kotter, 1996).

“Missions are actualized by goals and objectives” (Hernon & Altman, 2010, p. 26).

Goals are the broad or general statements of the desired accomplishments, while objectives are specific and measurable steps needed to accomplish the goals. Generally, the completion of objectives is linked to a given timeframe, activities, and metrics that demonstrate their achievement.

Many strategic plans also contain environmental scans or situation analyses, which assist the planners to predict what is likely to happen in the future, based on current knowledge (Courtney, Kirkland, & Viguerie, 1997). These scans might include evaluations of the current state of the organization and stakeholder needs, as well as a study of the competition (Jacob, 1990). Values, another common component of a strategic plan, are the guiding principles that represent deeply-held organizational beliefs and are demonstrated regularly by the behaviors of the staff (Matthews, 2005).

Strategic plans also include strategies, often termed, strategic directions or initiatives, which are the choices the organization makes to move itself toward meeting the vision (Matthews, 2005). A strategy provides the means by which the organization will obtain its goals and objectives, and it is implemented through the allocation of resources (Riggs, 1984). Strategy involves making choices on three dimensions: which customers to focus on, which products to offer, and which activities to perform (Markides, 1999). Furthermore, Mintzberg (1994) describes the ideal process for developing strategies as one in which managers learn about

stakeholder needs from all sources, including staff, and synthesize that knowledge into a vision of the direction the organization should pursue.

Priorities are the strategies or goals that an organization deems the most important for the time period encompassed by a particular strategic plan. Establishing priorities within a formal planning process is key because the importance an organization assigns to a strategy or goal assists that organization in deciding the best ways in which to allocate resources so that the top priorities receive more of the funds as needed (Riggs, 1984).

Strategic Planning In Higher Education

Traditionally, a governance structure that is somewhat democratic and where individual concerns may override those of the organization has complicated planning in academic institutions (Doyle & Lynch, 1979). Because the mission of higher education requires its principal employees, the faculty, to have unique expertise, they often claim that they are best qualified to make decisions about the core curriculum. This results in conflicts and difficulties in planning (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Thus, colleges and universities tend to be decentralized and driven by consensus decision-making, so they have not been able to adjust rapidly to changing environments (Goodman, 2009).

Furthermore, institutions of higher education may be reluctant to define priorities or document major problems as part of their planning because they may be forced to refocus resources into new areas that are projected to thrive and away from those that do not (Schmidtlein, 1990). Change in higher education has often been affected through *incrementalism* rather than planning. Keller (1983) defines incrementalism as a consensual process in which change comes about in numerous tiny steps that need to appear as remedies or

responses to great pressure and that take into consideration self-interest and people's territories and often depend on collective bargaining.

As a further complication for the planning process, many institutions of higher education have the dual mission of providing instruction and advancing knowledge through research, each of which may require a different set of strategies. In addition, since the late twentieth century, constant technological innovation has made information available in multiple formats and hybrid instructional methodologies increasingly the norm (Hazen, 2010). These technological changes have resulted in a situation where institutions may be simultaneously conducting their work through new electronic methods while retaining the traditional ways as well. This, in turn, has created a tendency for colleges and universities to plan for a large number of strategic initiatives regardless of whether they have the resources to achieve them. Since institutions of higher education generally lack research and development units to test and implement new initiatives, these multiple strategies are often added to someone's workload, resulting in difficulty implementing them due to lack of time and attention in an overburdened system (Morrill, 2007).

The recession of 2007-2009,¹ which caused a progressive diminishing of state funding to public institutions of higher education as well as shrinking endowment money for many in the private sector, has the potential of ushering in new planning models. Higher education administrators are actively considering changes to traditional governance and financial planning models. These include a framework for transforming colleges and universities (Guskin & Marcy, 2003), a cost-restructuring model that eliminates or consolidates high-cost, low-demand programs in order to realize permanent reductions in core costs (Jones & Wellman, 2010), as

¹ The National Bureau of Economic Research (2010) established the beginning of this recession in December 2007 and the end in June 2009. From this point forward, this economic condition will be referred to as the recession.

well as strategic decision-making that combines reductions to some programs with investments in new growth areas (Cavanaugh & Graves, 2010).

Despite the difficulties that traditional academic governance models can create, many colleges and universities develop and implement strategic plans. Doyle and Lynch (1979) describe the starting point in higher education strategy formulation as the appreciation of the crucial significance of competition among universities. Strategic planning encourages a college or university to think ahead about the fundamental changes taking place in higher education and their implications (Doyle & Lynch, 1979). Drucker (1990) sees strategic planning as a way for the nonprofit organization to define its business, or the way in which it identifies how that organization will secure the funding it needs to operate. Keller (1983) adds that through the analysis of the planning process a college or university is able to ensure it is offering the degrees or supporting the research most important to its mission and stakeholders.

Increasingly, offices of institutional research in many colleges and universities, which collect and organize data related to the institution and its comparators, are playing a substantial role in strategic planning. Data include such information as, for instance, enrollment figures, results of surveys and other internal assessment, as well as comparative data from similar institutions. Institutional research provides strategic, data-driven decision support and can assist administrators to develop assessment plans to measure progress toward meeting their strategic planning goals (McLaughlin, McLaughlin, & Kennedy-Phillips, 2005). In addition to supplying relevant institutional and comparator data, institutional research personnel often provide assistance in gathering information specific to the institution and its stakeholders through surveys, interviews, and other methods of data collection (Voorhees, 2008).

Many colleges and universities develop successful strategic planning processes that acknowledge that those institutions are in the business of higher education, and compete for tuition dollars or research grants with similar colleges and universities. They develop strategies for attracting and retaining students or recruiting faculty. One example is the 2007-2010 strategic plan that the University of Massachusetts Boston (n.d.) developed. In it, the institutional planners state that they must increase enrollment, construct buildings, and recruit new faculty in order to achieve their vision of being a great public urban university.

Strategic Planning in Academic Libraries

Strategic planning in academic libraries dates to the late 1960s (Hipsman, 1996) and became much more popular in the mid 1980s as a response to the complexity of issues facing academic libraries, such as budget reductions, the introduction of new technologies, and the expectation that libraries had to do more with less (Clement, 1995). There are many examples in the literature of library and information science (LIS) of strategic planning in academic libraries, such as those developed by member institutions of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), many of which have existed for decades (Clement, 1995). In addition, ARL was actively engaged in offering consulting services for strategic planning to its members and to others, (e.g., small academic libraries) as early as 1970 (Webster, 1982). Other examples include a team-based approach to strategic planning initiated at Villanova University in 2001 to monitor and ensure the attainment of strategic goals (Kelley & Trainer, 2004), the description of a year-long self-study and strategic planning process at National University Library in 2002-2003 (Secord, Lockerby, & Roach, 2004), and the development of a new strategic plan at the University of Connecticut Libraries, which aligns this organization more closely to a new university plan (Franklin, 2009).