Few enterprises are more vital to the viability and vitality of a college campus than the development of a strategic plan. A good plan will identify the campus' foundational tenets as well as its loftiest dreams. It communicates to the world who we are as well as who we aspire to be and how we plan to get there. These statements provide critical information that prospective students and faculty will want to know before deciding whether a college or university is right for them. To fall short on either developing or communicating these identity markers is to risk losing the students and faculty who are most likely to thrive on our campuses. In this highly-competitive market, we can't afford to get this one wrong.

WHY PLAN?

An effective, current strategic plan and the concurrent commitment to implement it is a key element for relations with governing boards, system executives, legislators, benefactors, and the public, as well as students and faculty. Each primary constituency can be better aligned and more helpful in realizing the optimal potential of a plan if their own understanding is cultivated as a part of planning and implementation.

This chapter describes a particular leadership style, and a model of campus strategic planning that has grown out of that style. Having led both a small private college and a branch campus of one of the best, large public universities through this strategic planning process, I have become aware of the components of this model that work well in different settings.

The most successful strategic planning models, in my experience, have as their foundation extensive conversation with and advice from every corner of the campus—a series of intimate and structured meetings that invite the substantive participation of every member of the campus community. Such a strategy is both more possible and more valuable in a branch campus than in a state flagship because branch campuses often are small to midsize university communities affording the advantage of scale; flagship campuses also tend to have their identities—their missions—framed by the combination of prominence and legislative

history. A branch campus can take advantage of a scalable process, explicitly using a campus wide strategic planning process to discover, give voice to, and claim a distinctive mission within a larger system. Also, since branch campuses are almost always younger institutions than system flagships, successful planning can give a branch campus a nimble clarity in claiming its place within the system.

In North Carolina, the university system in which I work and in which I was educated, offers an extraordinary level of state commitment to the education of its citizenry. Complemented by a robust community college system, North Carolina can boast a university included in the state constitution, with the creation of my *alma mater*, the Chapel Hill campus, in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The branch campus where I serve as chancellor, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, is more than a century younger. UNC Asheville is not only a younger sibling, but also a fraction of the size of the founding campus in the university. In 2007-2008 there are over 209,000 students enrolled in all of the University of North Carolina campuses combined; approximately 3,500 are enrolled at UNC Asheville.

Strategic planning can enable a branch campus to choose its identity, to understand itself, and to negotiate its role within the larger aims of the university system. The system as a whole could not conceivably engage in a planning process that was anything other than representative, while UNC Asheville and similar branch campuses in other states can undertake planning as a community enterprise, and to great advantage. Our comparatively small size allows us to update and recommit to our distinctive mission as the state's designated public liberal arts university. This remains true even when the growth of the state—from eleventh most populous to the seventh most populous state in the decade ahead—and the sheer magnetic size of the university could potentially swallow branch campuses into homogenized, local versions of the same offerings. Indeed, the ongoing balance each branch campus must maintain requires a dynamic tension between the overarching plans of the state's university system and the distinctive purpose of a branch campus, both of which must serve the needs of the state.

Planning on a branch campus calls forth—into view for everyone—the true and unique potential of that campus.

Planning on a branch campus can be a crucible for distilling just what matters most to us as a campus community. The way we chose to achieve this on the campuses I have led required developing a process designed to invite and engage everyone's imagination—imagination, that is, in the way that Coleridge and others understand it, as "essentially vital," and an ability "to shape into one." Imagination, called forward from everyone, has the power to assemble the elements of our daily work and experience into a coherent, lively whole. To do it this way, a campus president or chancellor will need to lead a very intentional and intimate process. For example, she or he may choose, as I did in 2006-07, to lead several dozen two-hour discussions at all hours of the day and night, on and off campus, to be sure to include everyone on campus and beyond. This is a crucial and valuable experience for the campus and for those individuals who invest their energies on behalf of our students. An authentic environmental scan of all campus constituents is vital to the health and future of a strategic plan that will have value, weight, and credibility. The capacity to connect the university community in this common enterprise can only be accomplished at a campus small enough for everyone to be consulted.

THE CONSULTATIVE PROCESS

Consulting with everyone not only requires a significant investment of time and energy by the president or chancellor, but also requires multiple 'listeners.' Before convening the small groups for discussion and consultation, it is important to gather a group of colleagues who serve in a variety of roles (faculty, staff, and students, in both leadership and non-leadership roles), and who are responsible for helping the president invite participation and listen to the discussions. These listeners then become important collaborators in the distilling process that occurs later on. At UNC Asheville, a group of about 25 individuals, called the Conveners, was assembled to assist with the process. At least two of them were present for each of the consultation groups, listening and recording the valuable feedback from the

sessions. When we later moved to the process of compiling and distilling the vast amount of advice they had gathered, they could provide first-hand guidance as we pulled forward the most important ideas and incorporated the most crucial advice. A subset of the Convener group – a faculty and staff think tank – worked with me over an entire summer to review and critique several early drafts of the plan. Having served as inviters, listeners, participants, and scribes through our early discussion sessions lent additional credibility to the think tank members and avoided suspicion that the plan was being developed by anonymous people in a room somewhere far removed from the campus culture.

Planning in this way enables a campus to engage with conflicting ideas productively, but will not result in unanimity. There will be, at each stage in planning, skeptics and doubters. Even those who persist in expressing their disagreement come to respect the collective effort of the plan and to recognize many elements of the plan as an accurate description of the university we steward in common. Nonetheless, skeptics and doubters should not hold up the process or the implementation of an unfolding plan. Their critiques are useful warnings and can help the university's plan include the widest possible – and consequently, most powerful – agreement for a given time. It is unrealistic to expect 100 percent accord for even the best process or plan.

This model belongs to a particular style of leadership that is more concerned with authenticity than hierarchy, and with building community rather than consensus. As I have undertaken various planning processes, it has proven to be essential for me to be fully present to every member of the campus community who chooses to participate in the strategic planning discussions. This has meant finding ways to make certain that everyone has an opportunity to contribute their ideas and observations. My preferred method is to introduce, in advance and again at the beginning of each meeting, a series of structured questions, so that participants know what to expect. I then ask each participant to share with the group some version of an answer or observation related to the question. I then go around the room to give

every person an opportunity to participate. Although we certainly have more than our share of shy persons and introverts in higher education, it was rare that anyone chose the available option to pass and not contribute to the conversation. Inviting, honoring, recording, and feeding back to participants the ideas and insights, criticisms and complaints, suggestions and stories of hundreds of their colleagues is a practice that builds and strengthens a sense of community for all who experience it.

The structured questions should relate to the needs of the particular campus. Most strategic planning processes include some version of an environmental scan. A popular and effective method is a SWOT analysis – assessing Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Both the consensus and the divergence of opinions gathered through these questions are instructive to all who participate in the conversation. Another set of questions should address some version of 'who are we?' On the campus I serve, we had drafted a set of campus values in an earlier series of meetings, and I used this setting to test these draft values. I find this a good exercise to help people think aspirationally, as the question invariably turns into 'who do we want to be?' A third type of question should address some version of the 'what now?' question. Because our campus had adopted a bunker mentality that grew out of years of chronic underfunding, I asked participants what we would do if we had a billion dollars. The hope was to gather some really spectacular and creative ideas that I was certain were being held back by a deeply ingrained financial restraint. Although not everyone was able to leap into imaginative mode on demand, we gathered some truly wonderful ideas – and had a great time dreaming together. For many, it was the first time they had been invited to do so.

Of course, these sessions have often brought forth directly contradictory observations and statements of fact. "We are clear about our mission," and "We have lost sight of our mission" are two comments that have been offered in the same session. Similarly, "We need to offer more graduate programs" and "We shouldn't offer any graduate programs" have both been offered with equally compelling arguments to accompany the passion. Although participants often

looked to me to resolve these contradictions, it seemed wiser to honor the richness and complexity of experience that brought these conflicts about, and to learn more about them. As I trusted the process to show us where we needed to go, I honored – rather than shying away from – the conflict, as well as the individual who brought the conflict forward for discussion. Through this process, the community began to trust itself, and even the most discouraged among us began to believe they were capable of resolving long-standing unanswered questions. Rather than avoiding the deep disagreements, then, we used these planning sessions to determine where the real substantive conflicts lay, and made certain to arrange full and robust discussions on these important topics before making any determination about them. Had we been more concerned with mere agreement than community-building, we would not have uncovered, examined, and ultimately resolved some of the unanswered questions that had long divided and confounded our campus community.

FINDING A CAMPUS VISION

Another hallmark of this leadership style is actually an extension of trusting the process as described above. It has to do with developing a campus vision. It is not uncommon for a very fine college or university to set about looking for a new leader who will bring a new vision and direction for the campus with him or her. I found this expectation to be almost palpable, most especially in times of turmoil or unresolved conflict. But I actually don't believe this to be a credible, long-term solution for a campus. The vision and direction for a campus that will be the most enduring is the one that emerges organically from the campus community itself. A leader who can invite, listen to, and respect all members of the campus community, embrace conflict and trust the community to resolve it, may find herself in a position to *uncover* and *articulate* the vision and direction of the campus, and ultimately give it back to the campus to which it belongs.

This model of planning also includes multiple cycles of feedback loops: presenting drafts to the campus, receiving feedback, assessing the feedback, and adjusting the draft to incorporate the feedback as

appropriate. This makes for a process that is not in any way swift, and often not orderly, if attention to the feedback is genuinely considered. Truly listening to a campus takes time, needing regular and reliable communication, multiple invitations to participate, multiple feedback loops, and a willingness on the part of campus constituencies, especially campus leaders, to keep an open mind throughout the entire process. Like democracy, it can be a bit messy. This process can be pretty daunting. The investment of time for the campus and the relative commitment of individuals within it can be tiring, occasionally exasperating, but entirely worth it.

Even as a shared vision and plan emerge, one should predict questions about process. Who will make this decision and at what point will it be made? Campus governance customs and the patience and flexibility to allow the emergence and implementation of a strategic plan allow individuals and groups to "join up," to start to use drafts of the plan in a department, in a campus planning group, and so on. Also, this style of strategic planning is hard to put into a sound byte, and can appear disorganized and unnecessarily slow to the community, especially in the consultation stage.

THE ADVANTAGES OF A CONSULTATIVE LISTENING PROCESS

So why have I have chosen this format of strategic planning over the many other credible models available in higher education and beyond? The primary reason has to do with ownership. It is my experience that those who work in higher education do so because they are committed to the work they do and to the mission of their universities. On the whole, they feel passionately about the direction in which their universities should go, and it is vital for campus leaders to understand both the substance and the tenor of that passion. When so many members of the campus community are aligned with their university in this visceral way, successful strategic planning will need to be symbolically and functionally connected to the campus community's image of their university.

A university which chooses its future collectively in this way almost assuredly makes better decisions about what to do. Leaders who trust an engaged group to make a better decision than any individual, however gifted or skillful she may be, allow the future of the university to come from the inside—from the insides of all of the insiders. Therefore, the engagement and commitment to move forward are more likely to be effective. Some practitioners refer to this as *adaptive change*.

Individuals need to be able to see themselves in the plan, or they will – consciously or otherwise – separate themselves from it. If widespread ownership of the ultimate strategic plan is absent or weak, there is a greater likelihood that the plan will sit in a file somewhere and have little influence on the work that is done on a daily basis. When individuals feel ownership to the strategic plan – when they have participated in discussion groups, provided feedback on a draft or two, asked the hard questions of the campus leadership during the process, and recognized at least some of their advice reflected in the final plan – they begin to see themselves in the new plan. Ownership of the plan develops *in tandem* with the development of the plan, and commitment to implementation follows as a natural evolution.

It is instructive to point out that a branch campus can, more credibly and effectively than a flagship campus could aspire to, create a shared sense of the future imagined by the campus as a whole using a model that is very similar to, and has proved very effective in, small private colleges. At Colby-Sawyer College, where we used this model, final publication of the four-page plan was evident all over campus, posted in offices and classrooms and meeting rooms. This was not something that was required or even suggested; it just flowed naturally from the evolution of the plan. The campus community understood it to be a planning and a decision-making tool, and individuals quite naturally provided it with the prominence that this would suggest. Similarly, at UNC Asheville, when the faculty met to discuss the controversial issue of whether or not the University should consider proposals for additional graduate programs – a question that had hung in the balance, unresolved, for years – the ultimate decision of the faculty arose out of

a discussion that included regular referencing of the many related discussions we had held throughout the strategic planning process on this topic. Even though the strategic plan was still, at that time, in a mature draft stage, campus leaders, (including faculty leaders), carried a deep and rich understanding of where this controversial issue mapped in terms of priority within our collectively-developed strategic plan. One faculty member waved the one page plan as he spoke, but he didn't need to refer to it to know what it said.

Other early commitments which were possible, in light of our strategic planning, included an articulated decision about the ultimate enrollment size of the university. This achievement required a communitarian understanding of an optimal trajectory for building capacity and access while acknowledging that our mission would not accommodate unlimited growth. Another early commitment was to staff and faculty compensation, with particular investment in those at the lowest end of our compensation scale. Because this topic was so prevalent in our many strategic planning sessions, our early efforts to address compensation among the lowest paid staff were celebrated by everyone, avoiding entirely any of the usual retreat to jealousy or envy of progress made by others. Similarly, we heard so consistently, early in our planning process, that increasing diversity and inclusion were key to our campus's future, that when we chose to invest in that priority immediately, before the plan was completed, there was full campus support behind this decision.

ISSUES IN STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR BRANCH CAMPUSES

However, it is precisely this issue of ownership that complicates a strategic planning process on a branch campus. Branch campuses everywhere struggle with some measure of identity confusion: are we a university campus with a distinct identity, mission, and goals, or are we a branch of the central university that responds primarily to the needs and requirements of the university system?

Nowhere in university governance is this question more pertinent than in the strategic planning process of a branch campus. If a primary role

of a strategic plan is to focus the energy of the campus on specific identified goals, then a strategic plan for a branch campus has an additional responsibility to clearly connect those identified campus goals to the goals of the University system. A campus-focused environmental scan simply is not sufficient for a branch campus within a university system. For example, if one goal of the university system is to improve the quality and quantity of teachers being produced by the campuses in the system, as is the case within the North Carolina system, it would be both politically and fiscally unwise for any campus within that system to set a goal to eliminate an education department in order to improve the pre-med program, regardless of how intrinsically helpful it might appear to increase the number of graduating seniors entering medical schools.

An essential part of a strategic plan for a branch campus is a convincing articulation with the plans for the university system as a whole—one that is both firm and malleable. The best plans for the finest public university systems frame the aims and challenges of the university system and the aims and challenges of the state—the former submitting its purpose to the long-term benefit of the latter. A public university must always keep its independent perspective, intellectual integrity, and purposeful freedom to provoke, improve, and address issues that face our states, our country, and our larger world. A branch campus responds to this impetus required by a global economy by identifying what the state and local needs are. Public universities have—because they are public—an unassailable and undeniable obligation to serve the long-term "public good," sometimes at the expense of short-term public satisfaction. And branch campuses must, in order to articulate and implement plans in response to the state, country and world in which students of the future will lead, develop a keen sense of what the university system is committing to do for the state and to incorporate that commitment into branch campus plans.

Recent planning efforts in North Carolina have turned away from a biennial planning cycle with priorities gathered at the general administration of the university in favor of a statewide plan which asked explicitly, "What do the people of North Carolina need from

their university?" This inspiring, model effort for the University of North Carolina is called "UNC Tomorrow." The development of UNC Asheville's strategic plan paralleled this overarching plan for the University of North Carolina. A branch campus must include in its response to the system specific ways it will —better than other branch campuses, better than larger campuses, better than a system's flagship— best serve the long term needs of the public for generations to come.

Clearly establishing a sense of identity (who we are and what do we do best) for a branch campus serves both a campus need (as discussed above) and a university system need: If it is clearly established and in a communitarian way, then the arguments for who a branch campus should serve or what it should offer or create or expand and why can be persuasively constructed in terms readily articulated with the university system's priorities.

Finding out what matters to the system and the state in the near and long term is crucial, because no branch campus can do everything. Just as in any small business, there is a significantly smaller margin for error. The full complexity of the university system and the assorted requirements for compliance are identical for all campuses, but shouldered by fewer people and supported by proportionally fewer resources on the smaller branch campuses. There is a greater need for clarity because resources must be aligned more strategically.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Once the articulation of a branch campus's identity within the university system's requirements is clear, emphasis will turn to implementing the plan. Working with a campus-based consultation group (in our case, the Conveners and think tank) and checking, in mature draft form, with key external stakeholders and influential leaders beyond the university (board of trustees, foundation board, alumni council, parents council, etc.), a set of benchmarks and declarations of what will be different will emerge. Once there is

agreement about what will be different, the logical next step will be 'how will we get there?'

As implementation begins, it is important to engage a larger circle of campus leaders, both leaders who have identified titles and responsibilities and those who have undertaken informal roles of leadership. Although the previous stages of strategic planning have been led by the campus chancellor or president, implementation will require the involvement and investment of additional campus leaders. This might occur through a series of retreat-style engagement opportunities that will provide opportunities for these leaders to give valuable guidance on implementation while they begin to envision their own roles in leading the campus through the exciting opportunities presented by the plan.

Further, this is a time to engage campus communication experts and/or marketing/public relations assistance, so that the plan can be launched to the internal and external public in a way which is consistent, powerful, bold, and focused. Similar to a living organism, an organization functions best if it can rely on a nervous system that will deliver information and guidance to the parts that need it instantaneously. Even years into the implementation of a strategic plan, efforts should be invested in lively and regular communication, so easily facilitated with current technology, to continually update the campus community on progress (or the lack of progress) toward the plan's stated goals. These could include all campus meetings, faculty meetings, briefings to students, in publications, on the web, in community gatherings, with governing boards, successes cited in local news venues or articles in specific publications, and in annual or periodic updates to the campus.

Excitement and confidence, especially as early wins can be achieved, will build and add to the enthusiasm for the plan, even prior to an official launch of a plan. At UNC Asheville, support for scholarships for underrepresented groups, endowed chairs for faculty, historic progress in increasing diversity, small gains in compensation for the lowest paid staff members, and significant program support for a

signature program from a prestigious foundation become victories for everyone, not just the scholarship recipient, the faculty member who is selected for an endowed chair, the support staff who realized an unexpected salary increase, or the development officer who obtained the gift. Achievements and significant steps that make progress on the plan are celebrated by the university community as a whole, because such achievements serve the priorities we have all chosen.

BUILDING AN ONGOING CYCLE OF PLANNING

In order for a strategic plan to remain a lively partner in our work together, the strategic plan for a branch campus must be updated. Planning must be aligned with the legislative budget cycle, so a period of four or five years as a planning horizon may address two biennial budgets. Planning for a branch campus must also admit and maintain sufficient flexibility to address emerging issues facing the system or the state, so a longer period than four or five years before reviewing the plan in a significant way would be imprudent.

A similar length of time in planning and implementing can get a campus ready for a capital campaign, since the aims and aspirations of a branch campus—when those aims and aspirations are held in accord—is the basis for the most compelling case statements with which funding and fundraising are achieved. Whether the trigger or purpose for refreshing the plan is a legislative cycle or a capital campaign, a renewed round of consultation and commitment should be institutionalized every four or five years, with regular updates on implementation in between, at least annually. Planning updates should be an effective, frequent centerpiece in board retreats, campus communications, and further community-building elements with on-campus constituencies.

The community building that was so valuable in the first cycle builds the confidence of a branch campus in what it can achieve in a second planning cycle. This is especially true since there will be credible, tangible advances for the branch campus to point to from their previous plan.

Though all campuses, public or private, need to develop a strategic plan, the institutional effectiveness of a branch campus can be substantially enhanced. Flagship campuses, with their deep history and deep reservoirs of resources, can aim in a more general way and succeed. A private college or university can benefit from a clearly communicated plan, changing its emphasis when necessary. Even more than these sectors of higher education, a branch campus can truly flourish when a strategic planning process allows the university to build a plan out of the community of scholars and colleagues—the university community itself. The specificity and informative clarity of our shared aims make a public university community to which all of us may be proud to belong.