

THE ROLE AND VALUE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR CORNELL COLLEGE

A Presidential White Paper
From Jonathan M. Brand

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“The purpose of planning is not to decide what should be done in the future but to decide what should be done now to make desired things happen in an uncertain future.”

Edgar Stoesz and Chester Raber

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In a world of limited resources and unlimited ideas, strategic planning may be one of the most important efforts in which an institution's members can engage. The significant economic downturn which began in 2008 has placed even greater pressure on all families as well as colleges and universities which must consider every aspect of their programs in light of their missions and how best to deploy resources to achieve those missions.

At the same time, many individuals at colleges and universities approach strategic planning with skepticism. This only makes clear the importance of explaining the goals of strategic planning and also ensuring that strategic plans become meaningful guiding documents rather than documents that simply collect dust on bookshelves.

The goal of this white paper is to discuss the goals of strategic planning this year at Cornell College. The paper seeks to delineate why strategic planning is so important: it touches on the history of strategic planning at Cornell, with the goal of tying previous efforts to the current planning process, and it then focuses on the structure and substance of the current process and the outcomes that we hope will emerge from it.

Institutional Benefits of Strategic Planning

There are many benefits that come with effective strategic planning. More specifically, a formal strategic planning process:

1. Affirms what an institution should and will do versus what it cannot or should not do in a world of limited resources.
2. Provides a mechanism for affirming institutional identity—mission and core values—as well as what an institution's stakeholders identify as that institution's vision for the future, motivating and inspiring the members of that academic community who are there because they believe in that institution's mission.
3. Supports efficient and justifiable decision-making and gives a clear basis for budgeting so that an institutional budget does not seem chaotic and diffuse but organized and focused.
4. Provides a regular mechanism for analyzing and monitoring changes in the external environment such that an institution can respond to change and succeed in creating a competitive advantage.

5. Gives clarity to an assessment of effectiveness—strategic planning provides an explicit mechanism for deciding how an institution will define success in meeting specific goals.
6. Forms a basis for establishing fundraising priorities, identifying an institution’s highest priorities and helping make a compelling case to those who wish to invest in that institution’s success and future.
7. Gives clarity to messaging and marketing—what should the institution say about itself, and for what does it wish to be known?
8. Advances shared governance by clarifying who is responsible for specific institutional decisions.
9. Models healthy decision-making processes—teamwork, communication, and collaboration—for students, which will serve them well post-college.
10. Provides to accrediting bodies’ assurance that the institution is setting priorities and using its limited resources to achieve its mission.

Potential Risks and Drawbacks to Strategic Planning

There are also significant challenges or risks associated with strategic planning. Strategic planning can:

1. Create frustration because of the considerable time and effort strategic planning requires.
2. Result in platitudes without a clear delineation of crisp steps or action items (and a mention of who will do what and on what timeline).
3. Get so mired in detail that decisions are not made in a timely manner.
4. Fail to capture the fluid and rapid changes that occur internal and external to an institution. Planning requires aiming at a constantly moving target.
5. Cause disillusionment among those involved in the process because it may be several years before it can influence actual decisions (and the allocation of resources) and because the lion’s share of an institution’s budget is in fixed costs that cannot easily be curtailed or reallocated—for example, faculty and staff positions and campus maintenance.

With these goals and potential risks in mind, we have increasingly made strategic planning a priority at Cornell College. In so doing, Cornell College seeks to make the most of strategic planning and to minimize, if not fully eliminate, the drawbacks.

History of Strategic Planning at Cornell College

The leadership of Cornell College most certainly engaged in something like strategic planning from the founding of the college in 1853. Much of the planning in the early years of the college revolved around the identification of important facilities needs followed by formal efforts to secure the resources to make those facilities possible.

The first explicit reference to strategic planning appears during President Russell Cole's tenure, according to *Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History*¹. At the conclusion of World War II, much like many other colleges across the country, Cornell had experienced significant financial hardship. After all, many potential Cornell students had been deployed in the War and student enrollment suffered as a result. Accordingly, post-World War II (and seven years before our centennial celebration), President Cole presented to the Board of Trustees a formal "long-range development plan" that was intended not only to improve the quality of the campus but also to help Cornell strengthen its academic programs (page 255). More specifically, President Cole asserted that additional resources were needed to support faculty salaries and sabbatical leaves as well as greater financial support for research and library services, among other areas. President Cole also hoped to increase the amount of financial aid available to students and led significant growth and expansion of Cornell's physical plant, particularly during the last years of his presidency.

From the beginning of his presidency in 1961, President Arland Christ-Janer maintained President Cole's commitment to formal planning. In fact, near the beginning of his tenure, President Christ-Janer presented to the Board a plan to build a new student center—what we now know as the Thomas Commons—and four new residence halls (Pauley, Rorem, Dows, and Tarr). This facilities planning sparked a 10-year capital campaign, commencing in 1963.

In 1987, President David Marker convened a Strategic Planning Committee ("SPC") comprised of eight faculty members, six administrators, and two students. The SPC reviewed Cornell's foundational documents, such as the mission statement, and evaluated the college's internal strengths and weaknesses as well as its opportunities and external challenges. What resulted was a new mission statement called "The Aims of Cornell College," which continues to be the college's extant mission statement.

¹ Heywood, Charles William, and Thomas, Richard Harlan. *Cornell College: A Sesquicentennial History*. Cedar Rapids: WDG Communications Inc., 2004.

“Values in Action,” the product of this particular planning process, identified areas of major focus going forward, including modifications to the curriculum, enhancements to campus life, and improvements to the college’s business management.

Consistent with past planning processes, President Marker proposed in 1990, and the Board approved, a \$60 million campaign, The Program for Cornell, to be achieved in five years. This campaign focused on three major priorities—endowment for teaching and learning, academic and living facilities, and operations support. Catalyzed by Richard Small ’50 and honorary alumna Norma Thomas Small’s \$20 million pledge—still the largest gift in Cornell’s history—and significant financial support by the Board and the faculty, the college eclipsed \$60 million in only three years. In addition, President Marker used the strategic planning process, conjoined with a Lilly Foundation-funded opportunity called the Board Development Project, to create internal measurements for institutional success and appropriate comparative data.

The role of strategic planning increased again under the leadership of President Les Garner. He engaged both the college community and the Board of Trustees, and his open, consultative model for goal-setting and decision-making focused the college’s efforts to ensure that it made the most of its limited resources in a very competitive external environment, all with the goal of strengthening student learning.

In 1996, the Board reviewed a “Statement of Strategic Intent,” which delineated seven major initiatives that the college could undertake, each with specification plans. This again would provide a model for decision making at Cornell—well-articulated plans as a result of formal, inclusive processes that relied on data and shared information. The college was successful in achieving most of these goals, due in part to the institutional buy-in and the well-developed planning behind them.

President Garner’s model of strategic planning remained a constant during his presidency. There were annual evaluations of Cornell’s internal strengths and weaknesses as well as a review of the external environment. President Garner provided both the Board and the wider college community frequent updates on the college’s institutional plans and progress.

What can one conclude from previous strategic planning efforts at Cornell College which would be helpful for our current planning process?

1. Cornell has and must always ground strategic planning in its identity and mission as a residential liberal arts college.

2. The best institutional decisions at Cornell have been based on data and have resulted from an honest assessment of our internal and external environments.
3. The most meaningful and effective strategic plans have relied upon effective shared governance and collaboration.
4. Strategic planning is most useful when it is part of an ongoing process that includes planning, budgeting to that plan, and assessing our progress in achieving our goals.
5. Planning has required courageous leadership that requires making hard but appropriate decisions.

Our Current Planning Process

Cornell College has so much to celebrate. Over the last decade, we have launched important academic centers such as the Berry Center and Dimensions as we strengthen and continuously redefine the contours of a liberal arts education. Our faculty is as passionate as ever about teaching Cornell students. The staff is equally motivated to support students and faculty in the academic enterprise. In fact, we are nationally recognized for the unique and uniquely effective ways that we educate our students. Our students know why they are at Cornell—they seek a creative learning environment that prizes academic challenge and achievement. And our faculty and staff adore mentoring them.

Our enrollment picture similarly looks promising, as we just enrolled the largest student body in Cornell's history. In addition, the academic quality and the diversity of our student body have never been stronger. We recently completed a \$105 million campaign, the largest by a liberal arts college in Iowa. Thanks to a \$5.6 million gift from the Russell family, we are moving forward with the Thomas Commons project. And additional facilities projects are on the horizon.

We are at an important juncture in the college's history. We have made impressive progress on a number of fronts, and yet we continue to experience competitive and financial challenges, especially as a result of the economic downturn of 2008. At this stage in our history, we must emphasize what is distinctive and great about Cornell, solidify our recent gains and momentum, and place the college on a stronger competitive and financial footing for the future. In so doing, we must decide as a college how we should direct limited resources to meet our highest priority of growing the college, both in enrollment and in distinctiveness, in a manner that is consistent with our mission and values. Such an effort will not be easy. After all, Cornell

faces an economic environment that continues to be unpredictable, and growth in enrollment and distinctiveness is challenging in today's very competitive educational environment.

Two years before our current planning process, the stage was set by the Trustees and senior staff, who identified a central strategic goal of growing Cornell College. That goal of growth was expanded by our Pathways Quality Initiative process, as part of the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) new accreditation process. As a result of that HLC work, a group of faculty and staff has defined comprehensive growth and set the principles for that growth.

In light of the foregoing, the college has launched a year of focused strategic planning that involves the entire Cornell community—students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and friends. During this process we will revisit our mission statement and core values, ensuring that any institutional decision is consistent with them. Based on data collected through our kickoff event, focus group sessions, and planned surveys, we will then develop a framework for guiding future decisions that can help us achieve our overarching goal of growing the college. We will also have a structure for benchmarking and monitoring our progress, which we can then share with the campus community on a periodic basis. Our intent is to present to the Board of Trustees at its May 2012 meeting a completed plan that has the widespread support of the Cornell community.

It has been a real pleasure to research the history of strategic planning at Cornell, to understand how our current planning process fits into past processes. I hope that this white paper gives you a clear sense of why strategic planning is so important at Cornell, especially at this point in our history.

Because a major goal of this institution-wide effort is to ensure the participation of many, you will continue to receive regular updates during the year and requests for feedback on the emerging plan. I am still learning more about our culture and traditions; strategic planning must be consistent with them. I welcome any comments or observations you might have on our strategic planning work. You can always reach me at 319-895-4324 or jbrand@cornellcollege.edu.

Thank you for your continuing interest and commitment to Cornell. We would not be the same institution without this connection.