The Curriculum-Centered Strategic Planning Model

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Overview

This research bulletin provides an introduction to the Curriculum-Centered Strategic Planning Model (CCSPM). Numerous strategic planning models are available today. Most are derived from business models that involve developing a mission statement and key performance indicators (KPIs); conducting an environmental scan; and engaging in a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. They conclude by constructing and implementing strategies, goals, and objectives. This common approach has evolved for almost a century.

The roots of strategic planning can be traced back to the industrialists of the early 1900s with the publication of Fredrick W. Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management*¹ and the later advent of the Harvard Policy Model.² The Harvard model outlined the basic SWOT analysis still in use today. Broad-based formal strategic planning became common practice in the 1950s, driven by the demands of mass reindustrialization following World War II. Dr. Igor Ansoff, considered by many to be the father of strategic management (and planning), developed a very sophisticated and detailed process model.³ Strategic planning was simplified and further popularized by George A. Steiner in his 1969 book *Strategic Planning: What Every Manager Must Know*.⁴ Michael E. Porter turned the focus of strategic planning to the five forces of competitiveness in the 1980s.⁵ Henry Mintzberg declared the end of one era of strategic planning and the dawn of a new age with his popular book (and a must read if you are really interested in planning) *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, published in 1994.⁶

These historic concepts still apply to formal strategic planning methods as they are evolving. Since the 1960s, higher education has attempted to adapt and adopt these various business concepts and models for use in colleges and universities. While much progress has been made, a great deal of friction has characterized the process of adapting business models to academic culture. Differences in governance, structure, language, values, analytical demands, expectations, spans of control, and decision making have all contributed to an unhappy marriage between higher education and strategic planning. Despite this friction, a host of various formal models, including my strategic decision engine,⁷ have been applied to colleges and universities. A few examples are John Bryson’s strategic planning model for nonprofits,⁸ Robert Shirley’s strategic and tactical planning model,⁹ and Robert Cope’s high-involvement model.¹⁰ Scores of homegrown, simplified models have been constructed and deployed throughout higher education, all with varying degrees of success.

The intent in reviewing this history is to give readers a background, establish the deep roots of planning methodologies, introduce the natural concept of evolution in planning methodologies, present the names of scholars in the field, and set a context for the introduction of the Curriculum-Centered Strategic Planning Model.

The CCSPM differs from other models because it has been developed specifically for higher education. Its roots lie both in the emerging learner-centered movement as described in *The Learner-Centered Curriculum Model: A Structured Framework for
Technology Planning and in the combined best practices of formal strategic planning that have emerged from business, education, regional accreditation initiatives, and the quality movement.

**Highlights of the Curriculum-Centered Strategic Planning Model**

The CCSPM provides the framework for systemic strategic planning in higher education. Because it is centered on the curriculum, it is consistent with academic culture and practice. It is designed in a way that enables whatever planning has already occurred in an institution to be imported, avoiding the unpleasant prospect of starting over. It can integrate seamlessly with accreditation self-study processes and, if implemented in time, can become the core of the accreditation process. The CCSPM can also integrate academic program review into the overall institutional strategic planning initiative, providing unprecedented cohesion between academic and other institutional plans. Designed to run continuously, the process encourages quarterly review and evaluation, refreshing itself each cycle and providing an effective communications process, resulting in clear understanding among the array of institutional constituents.

The CCSPM introduces the concept of the planning-derived mission statement rather than the mission-derived planning process. Mission is still of premier importance, but it is carefully derived from the same strategic analysis that informs the planning process. The CCSPM also incorporates an analytical view of curriculum into the model in the form of the Learner-Centered Curriculum Framework (LCCF).

**The Curriculum-Centered Strategic Planning Model**

The CCSPM is conducted through five interlocking planning activities: (1) identifying and defining KPIs; (2) detailing an LCCF; (3) conducting an external environmental scan; (4) conducting continuous self-study; and (5) developing an action plan process and implementation. Evaluating implementation and assessing progress toward achieving institutional strategies, goals, and objectives are achieved through continuous self-study that informs the planning process. Action planning is used to develop specific organizational tactical and operational plans such as an academic master plan, an information technology plan, a financial plan, a strategic enrollment management plan, a marketing plan, an assessment plan, and any other required plans. With the LCCF forming the core, all plans relate directly to the learning environment and link to supporting the curriculum and the learner.

Figure 1 illustrates the basic components of the CCSPM and the relationships among the components. (A diagram of all components of this model may be downloaded from http://mgdolence.com/index.aspx.)
Section 1: Key Performance Indicators

KPIs establish the frame of reference for the planning cycle by specifying the primary numbers to be used to monitor institutional performance. A wide variety of measures are appropriate and can be used, including measures from the federal or state policy arena, regional accreditation requirements, and program accreditation requirements, as well as management measures such as enrollment, revenue, and learning outcomes. Caution should be taken not to enter “KPI purgatory”—select a few essential numbers that drive strategic planning. Numbers such as undergraduate FTE, graduate FTE, total deferred maintenance, and total revenue are good examples. Each of these numbers represents the roll up of important metrics, but the detail of those metrics should be addressed by tactical and operational management processes and need not be reflected in the overall strategic plan. The model can be run by various institutional entities using KPIs that are important to their operation and success. This flexibility provides a mechanism for staying focused on performance while avoiding oversimplifying the planning structure.

Section 2: Learner-Centered Curriculum Framework

The LCCF provides a structure for curriculum design, development, and deployment focused on the learner. Table 2 provides a carefully detailed, structured approach to evaluating the curriculum from a strategic perspective. Seven interrelated and interlocking components shape the LCCF and provide the basis for an institutional strategic plan. (The full model diagram may be downloaded from http://mgdolence.com/index.aspx.) Each component provides a strategic plan anchor...
The integrated array of strategic, tactical, or operational plans must address these seven components.

### Table 2. Learner-Centered Curriculum Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Populations</th>
<th>Learner Objectives</th>
<th>Learning Providers</th>
<th>Learning Theory and Methods</th>
<th>Curriculum Architecture</th>
<th>Curriculum Configuration</th>
<th>Learner Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognize the wide array of population types in the learning marketplace</td>
<td>Recognize that learners seek a wide array of objectives from learning providers</td>
<td>Recognize the numerous learning providers in the marketplace today</td>
<td>Recognize the numerous learning theories and teaching and learning methods</td>
<td>Recognize the numerous pieces that make up an institution’s curriculum</td>
<td>Recognize a specific curricular configuration is designed around learners</td>
<td>Recognize a variety of learners will require a variety of services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand the various learner populations and their defining characteristics</td>
<td>Understand the various objectives learners seek and why</td>
<td>Understand the vast array of curricular and business models available to learners</td>
<td>Understand how they match certain learners’ needs and are used by other providers</td>
<td>Understand how each serves the learning populations you have selected</td>
<td>Understand that an institution may have numerous configurations</td>
<td>Understand which learners need which services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select those you must (fiduciary) serve and those you choose to serve</td>
<td>Select those for which you will provide curricular and learning opportunities</td>
<td>Select those that match the learners you have selected and the objectives they seek to achieve</td>
<td>Select and use those appropriate for your curriculum and learners</td>
<td>Select the components where gaps exist and construct appropriate curricular components</td>
<td>Select and deliver those that match the learners you serve and the objectives they seek</td>
<td>Select and deliver those services that meet your learners’ needs and support their success</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Section 3: Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning is the systematic process of examining trends and events outside the institution’s span of control to identify and understand emerging strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The fundamental purpose of environmental scanning is to avoid negative impacts and derive maximum benefit from emerging opportunities that result from dynamic environmental forces. The greater the potential impact a force has on the institution, the more effective the outcome of environmental scanning and the resultant strategic planning can be. An environmental scan involves examining external trends and events that have impacted or will potentially impact the KPIs selected in Section 1 and the curriculum detailed in Section 2 of the model. A cross-impact analysis can be used to determine the impact of each environmental trend or event on KPIs and the curriculum, thereby identifying opportunities and threats.

### Section 4: Continuous Self-Study

Continuous self-study recognizes the need to constantly assess organizational performance. The approach combines the rigors of accreditation self-study with ongoing strategic, organizational, and operational analysis. The continuous self-study framework involves examining organizational performance measures as they relate to the KPIs, the curriculum, and the external environmental scan. Strategic analysis involves assessing institutional performance against regional as well as program accreditation standards;
outcomes measures; stated strategies, goals, objectives, and KPIs; and human, physical, and fiscal resources. Organizational analysis applies the strategic lens to an assessment of organizational structure, governance, infrastructure, capacity, and capabilities. Operational analysis uses both strategic and organizational lenses to examine policies, processes, procedures, productivity, and satisfaction. The point here is to stay focused on performance, identifying components that are not working to their full potential and improving them.

**Section 5: Action Planning**

Action planning synthesizes the strategic plan from the research and analysis embedded in Sections 1 through 4. The action planning process involves a series of steps that develop the organization’s action agenda that will increase strengths, minimize weaknesses, leverage opportunities, and mitigate threats. Action planning is the process of generating ideas; formulating mission; developing strategies, goals, and objectives; and establishing an implementation and evaluation schedule. In this phase, responsibilities are assigned and interdivisional alignment is achieved.

**What It Means to Higher Education**

The CCSPM’s five interlocking activities provide the necessary framework for planning. It is appropriate in collegiate cultures to involve the institution’s full array of constituents before the planning process begins by the development of what might be termed the “Plan to Plan.”

**The Plan to Plan**

Strategic planning, as with any comprehensive complex process, must be well designed to be effective. The Plan to Plan should reflect a deliberate and legitimate process of determining how the plan will be designed, developed, and used. Its purpose is to begin to align the collective thinking processes and efforts of a complex organization around a central set of strategies, goals, and objectives; how these are identified and prioritized becomes a fundamental concern of all constituents in a collegial environment. Setting the course of actions that will lead to such key decisions involves developing a process roadmap.

**The Roadmap**

The Plan to Plan guides the implementation of the planning process. It is a detailed roadmap of the course that will be followed in the process. It should

- delineate the fundamental purposes of the plan to be developed,
- detail the primary focal and issue areas to be addressed,
- identify the process or model to be used,
- define the outcomes and expectations,
- delineate how organizational entities will align with each other,
establish the planning calendar that sets the rhythm and key milestones for the process,

establish the planning organizational structure,

clarify planning responsibilities,

establish the planning decision structure and process,

delineate planning tools to be used, and

detail how the plan will be used.

The Plan to Plan is an agreement reflecting the decisions on how planning will be conducted and implemented. It clarifies the process, eliminates many misunderstandings, establishes expectations, sets milestones, and provides clear directions for participants. A common mistake is to pay too little attention to the preparations for planning.

Using the Model

The most common complaint regarding strategic planning is that it appears to be a waste of time. This complaint derives from a number of recognized deficiencies common to many processes. To use the CCSPM, it is not necessary to start from scratch or to restart the planning process. The CCSPM is designed to integrate with virtually any process or system currently in use. To begin the integration process, take an inventory of the existing elements and plug them into the CCSPM.

Inventory Existing Planning Assets

Next, rather than starting over, take the time to survey the planning assets you already have in place. An inventory of the numerous existing plans and planning documents will yield valuable resources. The inventory should include

- the most recent accreditation self-study documents (use in Section 4),
- the current regional accrediting bodies’ guide to self-study (use in Section 4),
- the current regional accrediting bodies’ current requirements (use in Section 1),
- any formal plans currently in place (use in Section 5),
- the current college catalogue (use in Sections 2 and Section 4),
- demographic studies, environmental scans, and so forth (use in Section 3),
- the current committee structure and charges (use in Section 5), and
- annual reports, budget, and so forth (use in Section 1).

While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does convey the idea of how existing documents, reports, and analytical studies can be plugged into the CCSPM. The inventory embraces past and current work and places it within the context of a
curriculum-centered approach. As planning teams work through the model, these documents provide insight, answers, and frames of reference important in the decision-making process. Other critical decision metrics are KPIs.

**Determine a Short List of Key Performance Indicators**

The model can be used with a wide variety of KPIs. The selection of indicators is half science and half art—too many performance indicators and the process becomes cumbersome and unwieldy, too few (or the wrong ones) and the process falls short. The first run through the CCSPM should be done with a short list of essential KPIs, which can vary from the highest level roll up to the minutest detail. Select indicators appropriate to the level of planning you are doing. A mix of enrollment management, financial, and performance metrics are useful when introducing the model. Remember, a number of KPIs are embedded in the LCCF as well. If your institution is trying to resolve other issues, use the KPIs associated with those issues.

**Apply the Learner-Centered Curriculum Framework**

Applying the LCCF forces the focus on key anchoring strategic academic questions, the answers to which shape the institution’s strategic plan. Who do we serve? Who should we serve? What objectives do specific learners seek? What does our competition offer and to whom? How do we approach learning? Is it appropriate for our learners? What learning opportunities do we offer? What programs do we offer? Are they delivered appropriately for the populations we serve? In what business models are our academic opportunities packaged? How is accountability maintained? How is assessment conducted? Are the assessment strategies we deploy appropriate? Do we meet accreditation criteria? Are the learning services we offer appropriate and effective for the populations we serve? Are our curricula configured optimally for the learners we serve?

These key questions form the decision matrix for the strategic plan. They also keep the entire planning process focused on how learning occurs and how the learner is affected. Uncertainty in planning is common, however, and has a great deal to do with the external environment over which an institution’s constituents have little or no control.

**Perform the External Scan**

A scan of the external environment is the accepted method for identifying trends and events that will affect the institution. The energy spent scanning should be in direct proportion to its usefulness and value to the planning process. While for most institutions scanning occurs regularly, an annual formal focus on the external environment helps ensure both awareness and alignment. Scanning, when done correctly, drives decision making. For example, in these tight budgetary times, most institutions began belt tightening long before the actual shortfall of state revenues affected their budgets. Planning is enhanced by a formal and deliberate look at the external forces and how they affect higher education.
Integrate the CCSPM with Accreditation Self-Study

Virtually all accreditation self-study processes require or rely on an institutional strategic planning process. In addition, most have begun to require particular attention to learning and assessment. Accreditation elements naturally align with the CCSPM and are easy to integrate. Begin by packaging them together conceptually. When distributing strategic planning background, circulate the accreditation self-study guidelines as well. Map the various components of the self-study process to the CCSPM to enable constant attention on the accreditation criteria.

Integrate Ongoing Self-Study and Planning

While most institutions continuously engage in planning and self-study in one form or another, activities are seldom aligned and integrated. In addition, the curriculum and academic master plan seldom drive the processes. This state of affairs is significantly improved by implementing the CCSPM. The curriculum-centered structure provides a means of conceptually integrating the numerous academic and administrative processes and cycles around the curriculum. It also provides a structure to facilitate alignment, monitoring, analysis, and decision making. By recalibrating strategic planning as continuous, rather than episodic, a less-disruptive process is achieved. A quarterly review/update cycle punctuated by an annual reinvigoration ensures that strategic planning incorporates ongoing decision making and aligns tightly with the management functions of the institution.

Action Planning

Action planning is the process by which the institution executes the issues, ideas, and findings developed during the planning process. Actions should be developed that appropriately address strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Action plans can take many forms. The peak of the hierarchy is the Institutional Strategic Plan, a capstone plan supported by an array of tactical plans (thematic plans that integrate activities across divisions such as the academic technology plan or the strategic enrollment management plan), division plans, unit plans, and individual work plans. Plans, when implemented, are evaluated against the projected impact on the institution’s KPIs. It is important to close the loop by requiring that action plan implementation be assessed quarterly.

Seamless Integration with Management Processes

The CCSPM is designed to integrate seamlessly with the management process as a continuous endeavor. It is derived from many years of experience with numerous institutional planning initiatives using a host of formal and homegrown models. Strategic planning, like most skills, improves with use and experience. This will be true with the CCSPM as well. The decision framework it provides improves communications, ensures focus and discipline, aligns with academic cycles and culture, and details the context for institutional assessment and evaluation.
One of the most common reasons for planning failure is lack of implementation. If individuals do not take the process seriously, milestones and deadlines are not enforced, or there is no downside to disregarding planning activities, planning can and probably will be ignored. Another common complaint regarding planning is that the plan, once developed, is not followed. A host of legitimate reasons may cause this derailing, but its impact is usually fatal to the planning process. A number of toxins can poison any process. Detoxify the process by focusing on building trust, developing a positive culture, achieving a few short-range objectives, or enriching the mix of participants. Planning is not an event but rather a complex, ongoing process—it requires an investment of both time and energy.

**Key Questions to Ask**

- When selecting a planning model, ask if the process fits an academic culture. Does the process support and help streamline the management process? To what extent can you use existing elements in the new process?

- When implementing a planning model, ask if you have a method for how the strategic plan will be designed, developed, and used (a Plan to Plan). Are you serious about using the plan to guide decision making? Are you committed to taking the time to plan? Is there an agreed upon way the planning process and plan will integrate with ongoing management processes? What overhead can you eliminate in the deployment of a new planning process?

- When evaluating the planning process, ask if the process is useful and if it provides value. Is it yielding the kind of environment envisioned? Are all appropriate individuals engaged in the process? Is the process getting done? Is the plan adaptive to emerging day-to-day realities?

**Where to Learn More**

- A full set of diagrams can be downloaded from [http://www.mgdolence.com/](http://www.mgdolence.com/) by clicking on “Featured Content” link and referring to the documents.


**Endnotes**


**About the Author**

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