

Myths About Strategic Planning

By Dr. Marylouise Fennell and Dr. Scott D. Miller - *College Planning & Management, February 2011*

"No one ever said it would be easy." These cautionary words from our colleague Dr. Jo Young Switzer, president of Macalester College, aptly summarize the climate facing college CEOs, COOs, and CFOs today. Dr. Switzer notes, although headline-grabbing items abound, college presidents and senior administration receive "scant attention for leadership during times of external challenge.

"There is no doubt about it. Leading an institution is hard work in good times. In sustained difficult times, the arduous job becomes even more wearing. The good news, though, is that sustainable, quality growth continues on many campuses. In this series, we want to debunk five prevalent myths surrounding institutional sustainability. Among common misconceptions are these: Colleges without large endowments cannot thrive in tough economic times; increased enrollment must come at the cost of decreased selectivity; capital projects should be put on hold or severely scaled back; scarce resources mean fewer opportunities for synergistic partnerships; and finally, the unstable times demand short-term solutions rather than long-term planning.

In this first of a five-part series, we will address the fifth prevailing myth first, because careful planning is the bedrock upon which all growth must be based. As an astute admissions dean once remarked, "The ability to respond to the market is a better benchmark of the health of an institution than any short-term tactics."

In a chapter for our book *Presidential Perspectives* (Aramark Publications), Dr. Antoine H. Garibaldi, president of Gannon University, emphasizes that, "strategic planning is a time-consuming but worthwhile process that requires discipline and effective implementation," including the following steps:

- The plan must include a clear vision and focus for the president and senior leadership, emphasizing priorities and aspirations;

- it must also serve as a working blueprint for the institution's current and future direction, giving guidance to faculty and staff in their development of new programmatic initiatives;
- progress or lack of success on individual goals must be reported annually as another means of demonstrating that the strategic plan is a serious document;
- a clear transitioning plan is essential to blend the existing strategic plan with the new and next five-year strategic plans; and finally,
- because strategic planning is a continuous process, the strategic plan must be viewed as a living document.

While thoughtful, focused strategic planning, implementation, and annual progress reporting are essential elements in fostering sustainable growth, we offer these additional recommendations.

Leverage facilities to create value. Sustainable viability means long-term planned growth, planning for alternate uses, leasing rather than buying, and leveraging the successful strategies of the non-academic environment to create a competitive advantage. "Tired" classrooms, grounds, and facilities create a drag on the entire enrollment management process. Often grouped under the areas of "student services and facilities," enhanced residences, recreation/fitness facilities, and dining services as an integral part of the student experience play a vital role in attracting and retaining students, supporting institutional growth, and retaining faculty and employees.

Investing in technology today reaps rewards tomorrow. Technology in higher education is best understood and managed, not as a one-time expense, but as an ongoing investment for institution's vitality and growth. Thus, we must continue to manage what our colleague Michael K. Townsley, former president of the Pennsylvania Institute of

Technology, called the "six conditions of high technology management," including the need to change structures, policies, processes, and delivery of services to accommodate new technologies. Randomly spreading technology around campus, Dr. Townsley emphasizes, will neither automatically yield operational efficiency, nor will it enhance strategic value.

Keep the focus on students by constantly evaluating and reviewing the institutional product mix. As families become increasingly savvy about educational values and outcomes, we must continually find new ways to communicate these as well as accountability. Nontraditional, graduate, certificate, and distance programs offer the opportunity for a health rate of growth without increasing expenditures on infrastructure.

Finally, sustainable growth demands a relentless focus on core mission and values, recognizing that any institution that attempts to be all things to all people is doomed to fail.

Dr. Scott D. Miller is president of the College and M. M. Cochran Professor of Leadership Studies at Bethany College in West Virginia. Now in his third college presidency, he has served as a CEO for nearly 20 years. Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, a former president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, is senior counsel for the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and a partner in Hyatt Fennell, Higher Education Services. They have collaborated on five books, including Presidential Perspectives (2009) and President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education (2010). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.