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3 things community colleges get wrong about strategy—and how to get them right

By Larisa Hussak

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Few campus activities in higher ed are more divisive than preparing for a new strategic planning process. As researchers with EAB's Community College Executive Forum, we wanted to know—why all the baggage? Why does a process designed to focus and energize campus suck everyone dry?

When we talked to two-year college leaders, we realized that the devil *was literally* in the details. They confessed to us that the endless wordsmithing, tired debates and ultimate return to status quo cause fatigue. Even more unfortunate was the discovery that while many leaders have reinvented their strategic planning process a[nd]   [th]an ever, few have plans that reflect more than a colle   platitudes. And sadly, these plans fell far short of achievi   ere are the three most common things we see going wr   actionable strategic plan.

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The most common refrain we hear from our community college members is "student success is our strategy." This spoke to us in a meaningful way. The passion community college leaders feel for their mission—and the urgent priority they place up on it—is all a good thing. However, labeling student success as your primary strategy can run counter to crafting a specific plan that drives momentum and lasting change. Here are some underlying pitfalls behind this claim that can make it fall short:

- Pitfall 1: Creates a false all-or-nothing dilemma between a high priority like student success, and the operational realities of running a multi-million dollar enterprise. This ultimately stretches people and resources thin and can lead to the dreaded initiative fatigue we all too often experience.

- Pitfall 2: Assumes added resources to accomplish a lofty goal which few two-year colleges have at their disposal.

- Pitfall 3: Addresses varied and complex root cause challenges that don't make it easy to measure interim progress.

At best, the end result of this approach is unrealistic expectations. At worst, it either causes a "wait and see" attitude about efforts designed to drive long term completion rates or created too much focus on interim metrics that neither predict success nor drive behavioral change.

2) Too many (or conflicting) metrics

We're frequently asked by our members to review their strategic plans and provide insight on how to make them more effective. A major trend we've noticed in recent years is the proliferations of metrics within their plans. In fact, we reviewed one plan and strategic goal cascade that included 144 discrete metrics! Leaders tell us that they include KPIs to inspire action on campus and engage stakeholders in working toward a clear and defined goal.

However, just because something is measurable doesn't make it actionable—a   many cases, attempting to quantify a goal can lead to beh   g it. For example, a college might promote a goal of   etric of student success and teaching effectiveness.   ctices like grade inflation as faculty work to achieve the   al. For a better result, **Spokane Falls Community Colle**   with presidential direction and explicit instructions   use the data to achieve sustainable gains.

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In the business world, we often hear that "culture eats strategy for breakfast." At community colleges, it's probably more accurate to say that the desire to achieve consensus eats strategy for breakfast...lunch and dinner. While prioritizing inclusion, open and honest communication, and broad participation are admirable goals, when put into practice, they often result in a paradoxically vague, incomplete, or biased vision. A few loud voices dominate in a crowd: Accepting and including every proposal can produce wish lists with no actionability.

Rather than try to incorporate all stakeholders at all stages, colleges should prioritize plugging people in where they are likely to be most effective. In general, this means tasking presidents and their cabinets with higher-level visions and charging faculty and department heads to take the lead on implementation and operationalization.

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Community College Executive Forum

By Larisa Hussak

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