

SHIFT YOUR MINDSET, TRANSFORM YOUR INSTITUTION

STRATEGIC PLANNING CAN UNITE COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
CHANGE CULTURES, AND CREATE FERTILE GROUND FOR
INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION.

BY LIZ MURPHY



WHEN YOU REFLECT ON YOUR INSTITUTION'S STRATEGIC planning process, what comes to mind? Cabinet members and campus leaders huddled deep in administrative annexes enduring lengthy, painstaking, and tedious discussions? Endless processes and box-checking — both of which elicit audible groans — for the sake of maintaining accreditation and relegating a beautifully formatted, three-inch thick bound dissertation to the shelf where it will collect dust until the next strategic planning cycle begins?

A tad hyperbolic, for sure, but if this sounds at all familiar, you're not alone.

Over the last two decades, I've worked with countless institutions to change their perspective on, and approach to, strategic planning. As CEO of CampusWorks, a consulting firm dedicated to higher education, my team and I continue to refine a methodology that goes beyond direction setting to unite community members, change cultures, and create fertile ground for institutional transformation by way of the strategic plan.

I invite you to temporarily cast aside your beliefs and biases about this traditionally burdensome process in order to embrace three simple principles that can incite meaningful change.

It Begins with a Mindset Shift

Many colleges think of strategic planning as a *project* — a finite initiative that a select group undertakes to achieve a specific outcome (that good old three-inch document). This mindset is where the process begins to break down because it lends itself to a “top-down” approach in which the strategic plan is created in a vacuum.

Strategic planning is not a project, *it's the work of the college*. It's not something to be completed and revisited in five years, it's the goals and objectives your community members work toward every day. It's the active pursuit to realize your college's vision and mission. It's ongoing, never ending. And if you do it right, it's transformative.

To enable your community members to view strategic planning in this light, the process must be collaborative, transparent, and pervasive. Rather than charging a select group with the task, engage all internal and external community members and give them a voice in the process. Instead of building a several-hundred-page document, create a strategic plan that “fits in your pocket.” A printed booklet of 20 pages or less is a far more powerful way to communicate your institution's mission, vision, values, strategies, objectives, metrics, and action plan because people will actually read it. And the portability of such a plan enables your community members to carry it with them to meetings, enabling every discussion, decision, and activity to be vetted with the strategic plan in mind. Arizona Western College's Strategic Plan 2025 demonstrates the power of a pocket-sized plan (see it at: azwestern.edu/office-of-the-president/strategic-planning).

Put Students at the Center

Top-down strategic planning rarely connects with community members in a meaningful way because they often don't see their contributions or needs reflected in the plan. Without community buy-in, execution falls flat.

Gaining community-wide support begins with inclusion. Invite faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, employers, and students to participate in the strategic planning process. Facilitate listening sessions that allow these diverse voices to be heard. Leverage their experience and ideas to articulate the “desired student experience” your college strives to offer. Use that shared vision as the foundation upon which to iteratively build the college's strategies, objectives, and action plan.

By including your community members in the creation of the college's strategic plan, it will not only reflect their contributions and needs, it will naturally earn their support and give them a stake in its success.

Trustees Are the Guiding Light

For many colleges, the board of trustees' role in strategic planning tends to be ambiguous. But make no mistake, trustees are essential to this process and should be fully integrated into all activities. At a high level, trustees should be the guiding light. They should own the college's mission and vision, ensuring they accurately represent the institution's aspirations and, in conjunction with the strategic plan, chart the path toward the desired future.

Though trustees are not responsible for setting the college's strategy or writing the action plan, they are responsible for approving these pieces and, in concert with the institution's leadership, ensuring the plan is executed in a timely, measurable manner. The college's progress toward its strategic goals should be evaluated at every board meeting, not just at the end of the year, to allow for adjustments and course corrections.

Final Thoughts

Shifting your college's mindset about strategic planning may not be easy, but embracing these simple principles are worth it. If you're not sure where to begin, consider partnering with an independent strategic planning facilitator. An experienced partner can help you drive progress (and stay on track), infuse the process with a “best practice” perspective, and offer objective feedback on politically charged topics. When it's done right, strategic planning will no longer be a dreaded project but a powerful, unifying experience that lays the groundwork for a successful future.

To learn more about CampusWorks' collaborative approach to strategic planning, listen to “Strategic Planning for Boards” with Liz Murphy on ACCT's In the Know podcast.



Liz Murphy is the CEO of ACCT Corporate Council Member CampusWorks, a strategic higher education consulting firm that has helped countless community colleges achieve transformative results. Learn more at campusworksinc.com.