Strategic Planning in Distance Education

Introduction

Strategic planning is popular in the business sector and there are many publications that detail the process in different ways, software to assist with data analysis, and companies that act as consultants in the process. A classic text on strategic planning in a business context, often prescribed in MBA programs, is Michael E. Porter's Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors. It is not suitable for direct application in educational institutions. John Bryson's Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement can be used by educational institutions as can other publications specifically targeted at higher education: for instance, Michael G. Dolence, Daniel James Rowley and Herman D. Lujan's Strategic Change in Colleges and Universities: Planning to Survive and Prosper and its companion, Working Toward Strategic Change: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Planning Process. Another useful publication is Daniel James Rowley and Herbert Sherman's From Strategy to Change: Implementing the Plan in Higher Education, which adapts many of Porter's ideas.

If you are thinking about strategic planning in your institution, you need to read these and other texts first and make a decision that suits your own context. You can also consult the website of the Society for College and University Planning: www.scup.org and look on the web for the strategic plans of other education institutions that you think of as your peers or competitors or as leaders in the field.

Banking, Bartending, Bible Study, Biology …

There is no "one size fits all" in terms of strategic planning, either in business or education contexts. When we narrow the focus to distance education, we find that institutions in this category do not form a homogenous group.

- Some for-profit institutions with a narrow niche market might wish to use a business model similar to that advocated by Porter although they would be advised to adapt it to include an educational focus – partly because the stakeholders include faculty, students, alumni, education authorities, professional associations, accreditation commissions and so on; other institutions are publicly funded and have a broad teaching, research and community service focus so they need an education model.

- Some distance education institutions work exclusively in an online environment,

others deliver their services and instruction through mixed media while yet others are predominantly paper based.

- Some are exclusively distance education; others are part of traditional campuses that have branched out into distance education to provide service to their own students online as well as expanding their instruction to a wider market.

- Distance education is also offered at different levels such as K-12 and post-secondary.

- Institutions often have a professional or vocational orientation so everything from office management to health care to liberal arts is offered through distance education.

An institution needs to know what strategies are appropriate for its specific context. Therefore, the five-step model suggested in this publication is merely a generic process, not a prescriptive recipe for undertaking strategic planning.

What is Planning?

Planning is an ongoing process in any institution to ensure that things get done on time and as efficiently as possible. At a school or university we plan for the upcoming registration period, for the writing of new courses, for the budget for the following year. Note some significant features of these plans: they

- are discrete,
- involve existing activities, and
- focus on the present or near future.

In many ways, they are concerned with fulfilling the institution's present mission and they often take place at a micro level, although the budget is a macro-level activity.

How is Strategic Planning Different from Other Planning?

Strategic planning can take place at a unit or institutional level. For instance, the Department of Student Services could decide that it wanted to investigate ways to serve students more efficiently and effectively; an institution could decide that it wanted to develop strategies to be more competitive. Note some of the significant features of these decisions. They—

- involve change, and
- focus on the future.

In fact, they are concerned with vision and such planning takes place at a macro level.

What is the Purpose of Strategic Planning?

The purpose of strategic planning, as it is outlined in various publications (Bryson 1995, Dolence, Rowley and Lujan 1997, Rowley and Sherman 2001), is to align the institution with the external environment. In fact, it is a complex solution to a complex problem. Environmental change is inevitable and it will always impact your institution sooner or later. It is better to be proactive, thoughtful and in charge of change than to be always in a reactive mode to external stimuli.

How is Strategic Planning Defined?

Strategic planning is

- a disciplined, fact-based decision-making process,
- based on an analysis of internal and external contexts and data,
- related to choices on how you are going to commit your resources,
- in ways compatible with your vision and mission, and
- to optimize strengths and opportunities and minimize weaknesses and threats.

Bryson (1995:211) defines strategic planning more technically as "a set of concepts, procedures, and tools designed to help leaders, managers, and others think and act strategically on behalf of their institutions and their institutions' stakeholders."

Strategic planning forms a bridge between where an institution is now and where it wants to be in future in the light of its analysis of the environment.

Current Position: Mission		Future Direction: Vision
Reason for existence Groups served	Strategic Planning • bridges between the present and the future; • analyzes internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats; • generates alternative strategies; • chooses from alternatives in the light of predetermined criteria; • sets measurable goals and objectives; • draws up implementation plans including action plans, people responsible and time frames; • draws up evaluation criteria.	Where the institution wants to be in 3-5 years

FIGURE 1

What Do You Want to Do and Why?

Strategic planning, if successful, may lead to an institution's success or continued improvement. It should be undertaken with a clear purpose in mind because it entails a great deal of work. It is particularly useful in a number of situations: (1) for major transformation initiatives; (2) as a basis for continuous improvement through cycles of strategic planning; (3) to solve specific problems; (4) to take more advantage of specific opportunities. Bryson (1995:7) says there are clear benefits although they might not all be realized: for instance, it promotes strategic thought and action, improves decision making, enhances institutional responsiveness and performance and helps people work together to fulfill their roles. He also points out, as do other writers, that strategic planning is not always advisable. A crisis needs immediate and decisive leadership, not a committee. If there is no support from leadership or implementation is unlikely, it is not a good idea to go ahead either.

We can think of strategic planning initiatives on a continuum with re-engineering at one extreme and incremental improvement at the other:

Re-engineering _____ Incremental Improvement

Re-engineering is drastic, risky, time-consuming, costly and most likely to cause insecurity that will result in resistance. However, it is also sometimes necessary. You just need to be very sure why you are doing it: the need for dramatic improvements in cost, quality, competitive advantage or just plain survival.

At the other end of the scale we have incremental improvement. You might look at your institution and decide that on the whole it is functioning well but that one or two departments need to be more effective. You could decide to undertake strategic planning processes in those departments only. However, you need to look at the institution as a system and note how a change in one subsystem would impact on another subsystem. A unit's strategic plan must always align with the institution's mission and not be at the expense of another unit's plans. "Alignment," in this context, is the process of ensuring that lower level goals support and flow logically from higher level strategies and the overall mission. You could also make an institution-wide strategic planning initiative the basis for the introduction of cycles of strategic planning in budget or cost units and thus begin a process of continuous quality improvement.

Should Strategic Planning be Top-Down or Bottom-Up?

Strategic planning is usually a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes in educational institutions. The quality of results from the combined process is usually better. The vision or general direction often comes from the top but actual strategies are developed with participation at all levels. Only in extreme circumstances would a President/ Principal/ CEO

or governing body step in and take unilateral top-down steps. Plans would meet a great deal of resistance and might break trust for years to come, effectively undermining any benefit from the change. Rowley and Sherman (2001) point out that a bottom-up model is important for motivation and for using the expertise of people who have to implement the plans. However, a purely bottom-up process could result in a lack of coordination among initiatives if not properly planned and managed. In business, strategic planning is often top down. In universities, the concept of shared governance is important and there is a tradition of partic- ipation by faculty in decision-making processes.

How Often Should Strategic Planning Be Done?

Strategic planning is usually undertaken in three to five year cycles. To attempt such in-depth planning every year would be onerous since it is not the work of a day or week. However, Bryson (1995) points out that strategic planning and its implementation should not take more than 10% of the time of top decision makers each year, between five and twenty-five days.

A written record of the strategic plan and the process provides a valuable reference tool for monitoring and evaluation. The document would consist of an executive summary, the strate- gic plan and any addenda.

Unless the strategic planning brings about complete and drastic transformation, the institu- tion will be implementing these strategies alongside existing strategies. As the planning com- mittee had baseline information about existing processes and strategies, there should be few problems, but some explicit mechanisms or guidelines might be necessary.

Sample Case Studies

Distance education can be distinguished from traditional, classroom education in a number of ways:

- the geographical distance of students from campus and each other;
- the geographical distance of faculty from campus in the case of adjunct faculty;
- the asynchronous nature of much of the learning, although technology is chang- ing that to some extent;
- the constructed nature of academic activity, which is not simply a matter between faculty and students, because instructional designers, editors, critical readers and peers all contribute to the material developed;
- the technology-based nature of contact between faculty and students, whether through printed materials, audio and video tapes, radio programs, CD-ROMs or computers linked to the Internet; and
- limited physical plant.

It would be a good idea to read the five-step model outlined in the next section with specific institutions in mind, preferably your own. However, to illustrate some of the tools, and based on the features of distance education listed above, selected details are given about three fictitious institutions below: Home Network, Office College and Public University. Technology has been chosen as the main focus as it cuts across boundaries within institutions.

The three institutions have the following features in common:

- They have been in existence for over 25 years.
- From their inception they have been paper based, using study guides and/ or commercially produced textbooks.
- They use small teams of instructional designers to help faculty produce study material where applicable.
- They have gradually introduced audiotapes and videos in some courses.
- They have gradually introduced computers for use by staff for typing, recording and storing information, e-mailing students and so on.
- The institutions that have permanent teachers/ faculty members have supplied them with computers.

Home Network
- Pre-school, plus K-12
- Home schooling for children in remote areas, children who have disabilities that keep them house bound, children whose parents wish to home school them
- Permanent teachers
- Traditional age students for this type of schooling
- Publicly funded
- Limited computer access; little connectivity
- Study guides printed at state printer plus commercially produced textbooks, included in enrolment fee

Office College
- Variety of secretarial and office oriented short courses, 3-12 months
- Contract faculty
- Adults, usually working
- For-profit
- Computer and internet access by students: limited access at work or at home but there are internet cafes as well
- Study guides only, produced through desk top publishing equipment as needed, included in enrolment fee

Public University
- Degree granting; undergraduate, graduate and first professional degrees
- Permanent faculty
- Adults, usually working
- Publicly funded