Strategic Planning
Process Evaluation

Final Results

Prepared by
Office of Planning, Research, & Accreditation

Caroline Q. Durdella, Ph.D.
Director
Abstract
This study examines the strategic planning process at Saddleback College. Small group and individual interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the strategic planning process in order to gather the range of perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the college’s current strategic planning process. Participants expressed a range of opinions on how to improve the plan development process as well as implementation. Key findings include strengthening communication, narrowing the scope of the plan, clarifying the relationship of the planning groups in relation to the planning structure and operations, and the integration of metrics into plan development and implementation.

Introduction
Saddleback College conducts a strategic planning process evaluation as part of the college’s ongoing effort to ensure high quality and effective planning processes in accordance with accreditation standards set forth by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). As stated in the annotated standards on accreditation, the commission expects member institutions to “…assure the effectiveness of its ongoing planning and resource allocation processes by systematically reviewing and modifying, as appropriate, all parts of the cycle.”

In order to comply with this expectation, the Office of Planning, Research, and Accreditation conducts an evaluation of the college strategic planning process each penultimate year of implementation of the current cycle of planning so that findings can be used to improve the next cycle of planning. This evaluation conducted during the Fall 2012 term, on behalf of the Planning and Budget Steering Committee (PBSC), covers the strategic planning process developed during 2009.

The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the current strategic planning process, affirm components that work well, and discover aspects of the process in need of strengthening or change. What follows are the results of the study and recommendations for improving the next strategic planning process (2014-2020).

Evaluation Design
In order to provide the college with more in-depth feedback, a qualitative evaluation design was employed rather than survey research methodology. During October and November 2012, several
small group and individual interviews were conducted in order to ascertain the range of perspectives related to the effectiveness of the strategic planning process at Saddleback College. The interview protocol was designed to discover and affirm the strengths of the current strategic planning process as well as uncover opportunities for improvement.

Because the purpose of the evaluation was to facilitate comparisons of several perspectives, purposeful sampling was employed and stakeholders were divided into homogenous constituent groups. Key stakeholders in the planning process included: classified staff, managers, planning group chairs, and faculty. With the exception of the planning group chairs, leaders of each of the constituent groups were asked to nominate or recommend participants. In all, four classified staff, eight managers, and seven faculty members participated in either a small group interview or individual interview\(^1\). Additionally, each major operational unit of the college, instruction, student services, administrative services, and the Office of the President, was represented in the process. Instruction comprised the largest group of participants (n=12), followed by student services (n=4), administrative services (n=2), and the Office of the President (n=1).

As the primary goal of the process evaluation was to facilitate comparisons of several perspectives, the same interview protocol was used across all constituent groups. All interviews were approximately 60 minutes in duration. A full copy of the interview protocol is contained in Appendix A.

The interview was designed around three key planning areas: current understanding of the strategic planning process at Saddleback College, the plan development process, and plan implementation. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything else they would like to add. A thematic analysis of the notes from each interview was performed in order to identify key themes in the data.

The next section describes the salient themes connected to each section of the interview protocol.

**Results**

This section describes the major themes uncovered during the small group and individual interview sessions. General themes are identified as well as themes closely associated with specific constituent groups. Results are organized by section of the interview protocol. Themes related to participants’ current understanding of the planning process are presented first, followed by themes related to plan development and implementation.

**Current Understanding**

Study participants were first asked to express their understanding of the current planning process as well as offer their opinion about areas in need of strengthening (see questions one and two in

\(^1\) Planning Group Chairs consisted of two faculty members and two managers.
Appendix A). During this part of the interview, three themes linked to general awareness, overall purpose and the planning structure, and completion emerged from the data.

**Awareness**
Lack of understanding and awareness of the strategic planning process was a perception expressed by some faculty and classified staff. Although this perception was not widely held across all of the constituent groups, it was particularly salient because the participants expressing this view held leadership roles on campus. For example, one participant stated,

“I have little knowledge of the strategic planning process. The campus needs better and more broad-based understanding.” As well, another participant stated,

“I’ve seen the emails about planning but I don’t have clarity of the process.”

The lack of knowledge and awareness that exists among identified college leaders and was articulated during the interview process is significant and speaks to an urgent need to more clearly articulate the strategic planning process and its importance to a broader audience.

**Purpose and Planning Structure**
In general, participants across stakeholder groups expressed a general dissatisfaction with the overall planning process. Participants expressed feelings that the planning process was flawed. In particular, they expressed negative perceptions of the planning group structure as well as the absence of information to support plan development. Although not unanimous, the perception that the strategic planning process lacked clarity of purpose was also widely held among the stakeholders. In terms of lacking clarity of purpose, faculty participants noted,

“The planning process needs to be better defined. There needs to be a linking or clarification of purpose to strengthen the importance of participating. We need to move beyond compliance as a purpose. People need to understand what it is, why it’s important, and how it affects them.”

“There is a huge disconnect between operations planning and strategic planning. Strategic planning seems to exist outside of everything else.”

A management participant stated,

“The plan was random and unfocused. It was very messy and it didn’t make sense.”

With respect to the planning group structure, one of the planning group participants noted,

---

2 Although frequently mentioned in connection with the general questions contained in the interview protocol, the use of data to inform the planning effort will be dealt with under plan development and implementation.
Strategic Planning Process Evaluation

“The planning groups didn’t work. The strategic plan should be aligned with the department and divisional structure similar to program review. The planning groups bypass the existing management structure and these people don’t work on anything else together so it doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Another planning group participant stated,

“Planning groups should revolve around issues like enrollment management and student success and it should all tie to the budget.”

One management participant noted that,

“The four planning groups didn’t work because it was never clear what their purpose or charge was.”

A classified participant felt that the process was so flawed that they could not recommend a single aspect of the process that was worth keeping. For example,

“It was complete chaos. You had leaders of groups developing goals for areas that they had no knowledge about and goals for areas that they didn’t even manage.”

Classified participants also expressed a lack of clarity and purpose in the planning group structure. For example,

“We need to sharpen our focus. There was no consistency in the groups. The groups need consistency and commitment. There were too many membership and leadership changes. Groups should gather around a single idea or concept.”

In summary, there was general consensus that the plan and planning process lacked clarity and that it was unclear how the planning groups added value to the process.

Completion

With respect to completion, many participants expressed a general dissatisfaction with what they perceived to be “a lack of follow through” and continuous modification of the plan. For example,

“After 18 months of not making progress, people lost interest. There was widespread participation but no long-term commitment by all involved.”

“There seemed to be a lack of consistency. It was always changing; we need to pick something and stick with it.”

“People didn’t follow the plan and it was disheartening. In the end there was too much latitude given for changes.”
Strategic Planning Process Evaluation

“We need consistency in implementation. It’s hard in a very politically driven climate. It is not a friendly environment because these problems cause the strategic planning process to slow down and not progress.”

The consensus among study participants was that the plan lacked two requisite elements of a successful planning process – consistency and commitment.

Strategic Plan Development

With respect to the strategic plan development process, participants were asked three questions related to: integration of data into the planning process, strategies to ensure dialogue and broad participation, and integration of past goals and objectives (see questions three through five in Appendix A). Three primary themes emerged related to the scope of the plan, the use of data to inform the plan, and awareness and engagement in the development of the plan.

Scope

The general consensus across the stakeholder groups was that successful strategic planning should be narrowly focused. Several participants expressed this view, but it was particularly salient in the management and classified stakeholder groups. The following statements exemplify this theme.

“We need to focus and follow through; we need to develop data for those areas. There has to be more direction.”

“There were too many goals for a three year plan. It was not achievable. We need to keep things focused and simple with no more than three areas of attention or focus. Existing units need to be tasked to do their work.”

“The plan was too ambitious.”

“We need to focus and keep it doable. We need realistic goals and focus. We need to reduce the scope.”

“There needs to be a process to mediate the voices of very specific people. Some of these people are too overwhelming. Parameters need to be set before meetings take place.”

“We should decide on a theme.”

Use of Data to Inform Plan Development

There was general consensus that the use of data and metrics to inform the planning process was essential to its success. Additionally, many participants perceived that the current plan was lacking because analysis of data and synthesis of information was completely absent from the process. Evidence of this perception was present across all stakeholder groups; however, they were most strongly articulated by faculty, management, and planning group constituents. Within these constituent groups, participants were unwavering in their perception that the use of data and metrics
to inform the planning process was critical and essential to the success of the planning effort. The strength of these perceptions is exemplified by the following:

“The plan was not data driven and it was very frustrating.”

“We should have understood all of the research. Measurement was a major issue. It led to failure and a lack of focus. There was no sense of where we were going and what we were doing and why.”

“Plans were made up with no data therefore nobody could embrace the process.”

“We need more data driven decision-making.”

“People need data. They need experts to frame the data for the college.”

“…we were guessing rather than using real data and benchmarking.”

“Data needs to inform enrollment management and pathways to student success.”

“We need to develop 20,000 foot level data for the goal development process and for faculty in-service.”

“Dialogue about data is crucial.”

“Metrics need to be put into place because past practice is always a problem. If some kind of data were used then perhaps resources might be reallocated.”

Awareness and Engagement

Overall, participants expressed their perceptions of a lack of broad-based awareness and engagement with the strategic planning process. More specifically, participants expressed the idea that “the same folks tend to participate on the same committees,” and that there is a need for “person to person connections,” in order to increase awareness and engagement. Participants indicated that they felt that the current planning structure, which relies on information dissemination through representatives from constituent groups, did not achieve broad-based awareness and engagement with the strategic planning effort. Additionally, classified participants perceived an over reliance on technology to disseminate planning information as well as the perception that technology as a dissemination tool was an end in and of itself. One classified participant noted,

“There seems to be a perception that just putting information on Sharepoint is going to solve all of our problems.”

In this participant’s view, “just putting information on Sharepoint” was not a meaningful way of disseminating information.
Plan Implementation
In terms of implementation, participants were asked a series of questions related to communication of modifications and progress as well as the current planning group structure (see questions six through 11 in Appendix A). The questions concerning plan implementation yielded three primary themes connected to: the use of metrics, accountability, and communication.

Metrics
While participants had a lot to say about the lack of data to inform the planning process, they were generally silent on the issue of using metrics to monitor progress both in terms of implementation as well as the achievement of the plan goals. One notable exception, was the comment by one participant that with respect to the presentation of annual findings, metrics related to plan achievements should be more general and reflect “the view from 20,000 feet” rather than more detailed. Finer levels of detail in terms of performance metrics were perceived by this participant to be something that those more closely engaged in working on specific goals and objectives would be more interested in monitoring.

Accountability
There was a general perception that accountability with respect to goals, objectives, and action items needed to be strengthened. Several participants noted that it was difficult to get others to comply with requests for information or status updates on action items and objectives, while others commented on the necessity of integrating incomplete goals and action items into a new plan, and others focused on issues related to plan modifications.

With respect to plan modifications, several participants expressed concern with what they perceived to be arbitrary or capricious modifications to plan goals, objectives, and actions steps. This perception was held across all constituent groups. For example, one participant noted,

“there seems to be a place where changes get made, but those changes are not communicated back to the planning groups,”

and another noted,

“we all worked so hard on developing goals and objectives and then they all got changed somehow so people lost interest in the process.”

Others felt that when considering changes to the plan,

“there needs to be more transparency and accountability to the larger campus community.”

In terms of the integration of previous goals and objectives into the development of the new plan, there were divergent opinions. One constituent group felt that it would be best to see if incomplete goals and objectives “bubbled up” on their own rather than formally revisiting them and integrating them
into the plan. Others felt it was important to develop the new plan and then revisit the incomplete goals and objectives. And others felt it was necessary to “scrap those and just start fresh.”

In sum, participants expressed a need for greater accountability with respect to plan implementation as well as a desire to deal in some fashion with incomplete goals and objectives from the existing plan.

**Communication**

Participants were asked a series of questions related to communication strategies surrounding the strategic plan. Several themes emerged related to communicating plan progress and achievements.

There was a divergent range of perceptions regarding the frequency of communication regarding the strategic plan; however, participants across all stakeholder groups felt it was important to communicate both progress in meeting goals and objectives as well as achievement of improvement in plan performance metrics. While the general consensus was that plan progress should be communicated quarterly or twice per fall or spring term, one participant expressed that plan progress should be communicated monthly. In addition, various types of communication as well as the nature of communication were also suggested.

There was also consensus among study participants that plan achievements and reports on plan metrics should be communicated annually -- at most. Additionally, the majority of participants felt that plan achievements and reports on metrics should occur at the August in-service meetings.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is important to note that the evaluation was designed to solicit feedback on areas of the college planning process that worked as well as areas that were in need of improvement. With the exception of the planning groups and dealing with changes to goals, objectives, and actions steps, participants were mostly silent regarding the effectiveness of the strategic planning structure. This could suggest a lack of familiarity with the structure of the planning process and/or a general acceptance of most of the strategic planning structure.

However, as discussed above, several themes were observed in the interview data that relate to specific sections of the interview protocol. For example, when participants were asked about their current understanding of the strategic planning process, themes related to awareness, purpose and planning structure, and completion emerged. As well, looking across the themes associated with specific sections of the interview protocol reveals additional insight about specific areas in the planning process in need of strengthening. These areas are: communication strategy, plan scope, planning structure, and use of data throughout the planning process.

With respect to areas in need of strengthening, improvements to the strategic planning process may be achieved by consideration of the following recommendations:
Recommendation One
The college should work to improve its communication strategy surrounding strategic planning. A possible solution is to have the Office of Planning, Research, and Accreditation work with the Office of Marketing and Communications to develop a comprehensive communication plan for strategic planning. Having a communications strategy in place will facilitate more effective ways of communicating changes or modifications to planning goals, objectives, and activities; as well as communicate progress and achievements and relevant deadlines.

Recommendation Two
The college should also work to ensure that the scope of the next strategic plan is realistic and appropriate to the implementation timeline. The Planning and Budget Steering Committee (PBSC) should oversee this process and make a recommendation to the Consultation Council concerning the final goals and objectives contained in the plan.

Recommendation Three
The college also needs to revisit the strategic planning structure with respect to the four Planning Groups. PBSC should develop a recommendation related to changes to the planning structure.

Recommendation Four
Internal and external data should be used to inform the development of the new strategic plan. As well, performance metrics related to plan implementation and achievement of plan goals and objectives should be developed. The Office of Planning, Research, and Accreditation will facilitate the development of the new plan by providing both internal and external data. Additionally, PBSC and the Office of Planning, Research, and Accreditation will work collaboratively to develop Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) to address the success of plan implementation and achievement of goals and objectives.
Appendix A

Strategic Planning Process Evaluation

General Questions

1. Describe to me your current understanding of the strategic planning process. How well do you think the process has worked? Is there anything you would do differently? Are their aspects of the process that you think work particularly well and think the college should continue?

2. What do you think the college needs the most help with in terms of strategic planning?

Plan Development

3. What is the best way to integrate data, both internal and external, into the development of a new plan? Who should be involved in the dialogue? What is the best format in terms of delivery of information for the purpose of developing directions, goals, objectives, etc.? What is the best way to ensure broad participation in the development of a new plan?

4. What is the best way to ensure that dialogue about past goals and objectives is integrated into the new planning process?

5. In terms of developing a new strategic plan, what do you think is the best way to ensure that goals, objectives, and action steps are developed within the appropriate context and involve the stakeholders of affected areas? How important is it that those developing the plan have participated in dialogue concerning college data?

Implementation

6. What do you think is the best mechanism for communicating progress to the broader campus community? How often should the college community hear about the strategic plan and progress on the plan?

7. In terms of communication, what kinds of reports do you think would be most helpful to the broader college community?

8. How well do you think the current planning group structure functions? Describe for me the ideal role of the planning groups? In what ways should they change? In what ways should they remain the same? If you had to recommend changes to the planning group structure, what would they be?

9. What is the appropriate role of PBSC in overseeing implementation of the plan and accomplishment of goals, objectives, and action steps? What role should PBSC play in relation to the planning groups?

10. How should changes to goals, objectives, and action items be handled/communicated?

11. What do you think is the best way to communicate changes to goals, objectives, and actions steps that might occur?

12. Is there anything else that I have forgotten or that you would like to add to the discussion?