Barbara S. Fuhrman and
Evelyn A. Jez

Implementation:
The Missing Link in University Planning

Although planning has gained importance at universities across the country, insufficient attention to the issues of implementation has caused many well-laid plans to become lost on shelves rather than becoming the bases for either academic or operational decisions. Between 1991 and 1993, Virginia Commonwealth University developed a comprehensive and detailed strategic plan designed to direct the university through the decade. Following the adoption of the plan, the provost and the director of academic planning created a process and strategies for guiding and insuring implementation of the plan, including its 15 broad strategic directions and 162 more specific objectives.

George Keller's 1983 classic on planning in higher education, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, marked the beginning of an entirely new era in the way in which colleges and universities think about their future. Prior to the early eighties, higher education in the United States was in an unparalleled mode of expansion: enrollments were soaring, resources seemed unlimited, campuses and programs were growing, and support for higher education was widespread. In this environment, the new "metropolitan" universities were born. But times have changed: since the early eighties, resources have tightened, the flood of new students has slowed, graduates are no longer pursued by employers, and public sentiment has become increasingly cynical. Colleges and universities no longer enjoy the luxury of saying yes to everyone and everything, and planning has evolved from a singular focus on where to put new buildings to the process by which hard decisions among competing demands are made in all areas of university life.

In the press to respond to these new realities, typical topics at higher education conferences today (most often in the form of pre-conference workshops) invariably include strategic planning, accountability, assessment, reengineering, restructuring, downsizing, and outsourcing. Colleges and universities, as well as their more specific academic and operational units, are

told to develop mission statements, goals, and objectives, with advice on how to plan from the growing body of literature. Numerous guides are available (some of which are listed in the references at the end of this article), and virtually everyone in higher education can now speak the language of mission, environmental scanning, SWOT analyses, goals and objectives. To date, most institutions have developed what they call strategic plans, although sometimes these are developed merely to avoid slipping out of sync with current expectations from outside the academic environment.

Observations from the Literature

Plans are only paper, and they do not automatically lead to change. The literature, as well as the experience of many of us in the thick of things, is clear: the point at which most academic planning fails is in implementation. Expansive (and extensive) plans that took months (if not years) to develop, are published on slick, expensive stock, are submitted to governing boards for their approval, and are touted for promotional purposes, but they are too often lost on shelves or serve as coffee table decoration in administrative offices, rather than influencing either operational or academic decisions.

Why is implementation so difficult? The literature offers insights. Flack (1994) refers to the "politics of acceptance and implementation," noting that in colleges and universities, multiple constituents have very specific roles in ensuring that plans are implemented. Whereas the president must call for, support, and eventually accept the plan, the trustees should endorse the directions, and faculty and administrators together must develop the plan. Finally, at the time of implementation, administrators and faculty governance groups must develop the strategies by which the goals of the plan will be realized. Without proper attention, both politically and operationally, to the necessary involvement of each group, no plan will have the commitment that is necessary for successful implementation.

Meredith (1994) surveyed colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, and found that only 12 percent reported success with implementing the plans that had been formulated. One of the most difficult issues was that of linking planning to budgeting; without budgets based on the plan, implementation was likely to falter.

> [I]mplementation of even the best designed plans often seems half-hearted, as does the linkage of the planning priorities to budget allocations. These are serious, debilitating failures to connect and on

which to follow through. But institutions should deliver as well as devise..

Schuster (1994) notes that problems with implementation arise from the political maneuvering and classic academic turf protection that create extreme resistance to change. Furthermore, plans are too often not rooted in reality and are unrelated either to ongoing governance processes or budgeting processes. In a chapter descriptively entitled "The Asynchronous Domains of Planning and Governance," Schuster notes,

> In effect, many campuses have created parallel processes: one for governance, to attend to the normal run of institutional decision making; the other for 'grand planning,' to formulate a more visionary and global outlook for the institution, its mission, and its relationship to the environment. The former process relies heavily on faculty and administrative involvement; the latter often entails broad-based constituent participation....All of this is to say that the orientations—the centers of gravity—of the governance and planning processes are quite different.

Lest we in academia believe that we are the only ones to fail in implementing our plans, Goodstein (1993) refers to a study of CEOs of businesses which found that strategic planning was rarely integrated into the operations of their businesses; fewer than half of the CEOs even attempted to implement the plans that had been developed. Goodstein, like Schuster, identifies the problem as the difference between large-scale planning and ongoing management, noting that all too often implementation is left to managers who had no part in developing the plan and who therefore also have no ownership of it.

Implementation problems exist not only in the corporate sector and in higher education, but in the public realm as well. Levin (1981) analyzed implementation cases in the public sector, and found that the predominant portion of them had been ineffectively implemented, if at all. From his study, however, he was able to identify conditions that contributed to effective implementation. These were:

- strong leadership;
- a favorable context (either a crisis that signaled need for change or broad consensus in support of change);
- interest groups that aided implementation through their support,

pressure and protection of the changes involved;
- a new (or at least flexible) organization or program, as opposed to an entrenched system;
- autonomy and the independence to act, including freedom from bureaucratic constraints;
- coercion, in the form of political, budgetary, or legal pressure;
- the availability of a technological solution to the problem; and
- pressure from the outside to change.

Finally, Norris (1991) summarizes the obstacles to effective planning and implementation in higher education specifically:

- Organizational goals in higher education are often vague and diffuse and when well defined are often contested;
- The division of responsibility is unclear for strategy setting between disciplinary units and the organization as a whole;
- Loose coupling of organizational units often precludes timely, organization-wide responsibilities and setting of strategy;
- Cultures and histories of universities often make them hesitant to change;
- Institutional leadership does not necessarily control the institution's direction;
- There is seldom basic agreement on strategy; even if the institutional strategy is clear and well articulated, the strategy of individual units may not be clear and compatible with it;
- Institutional leadership may be poorly prepared, by their training and experience to set strategy;
- It is quite difficult to link value and idea-oriented strategic planning to budget-oriented organizational planning.

Based on this review, we concluded that the keys to effective implementation are strong leadership; the development of clear, concrete objectives and strategies to achieve them; the assignment of responsibility for implementation that makes use of the context of the organization; ensuring the centrality of the plan to the ongoing business of the university; the inclusion of regular review of implementation performance; the development of widespread support for the plan; involvement of all key players; and resource allocation in

support of the plan.

Implementation at One Urban University

The conclusions described above guided our implementation of a strategic plan for an urban university comprised of almost 22,000 students studying in over 150 degree programs on two campuses serving a major metropolitan area. The accompanying figure describes the process by which the strategic plan was developed and implemented.

The plan had been developed over an 18-month period by a highly participatory planning council. The planning process had been called for by the university's governing board and was supported by the president, was led by the provost, and involved key players from all corners of the university. The result was a comprehensive plan that included 15 major strategic directions and 162 specific objectives. For example, Strategic Direction 4 called for the promotion of targeted areas of excellence among educational programs, including appropriate reallocation of resources. Within this broad strategic direction, 17 specific programs were identified for university enhancement, 12 were identified as warranting additional attention within their academic units but were not targeted for university enhancement, four were tabled for further review, and nine were identified as candidates for diminution. In addition, Strategic Direction 4 called for the identification and elimination of academic duplication, the establishment of a new undergraduate program in engineering, and the renaming of several programs to more clearly communicate their nature and roles. Appropriate deans and program directors were assigned responsibility for implementing each of the objectives.

As the plan was being published and discussed, the Office of Academic Planning developed a companion document, entitled "A Guide to Implementing the Strategic Plan, Virginia Commonwealth University," which was distributed almost as widely as was the plan itself. It was designed to define tasks, assign responsibilities, establish priorities, schedule decisions and actions, and take actions as called for in the plan. The guide called for adherence to the following principles of implementation:

- unity of control, with the provost reporting to the president and each of the fifteen strategic directions publicly assigned to one or more senior administrators reporting to the provost;
- distribution of responsibility and authority to specific individuals within each strategic direction;

- regular and frequent communication throughout the university concerning progress on implementation of the plan;
- oversight and control of the resource allocation implications of the implementation plans;
- evaluation and revision as part of the ongoing planning and management process;
- establishment of a regular and ongoing cycle of strategic planning.

The guide was designed to serve as a tool for administrators, faculty, and staff who are responsible for implementing the plan. The guide assumed that to be useful, strategic directions must produce decisions and actions made in the best interest of the university as a whole. It therefore delineated structures and lines of accountability designed to coordinate decision making and action. The guide also assumed that regular and frequent communication between those charged with implementing the plan and the wider university community would be essential, and therefore called for the development of a communication plan to ensure that all appropriate communication mechanisms would be used to report progress on implementation.

To assure full implementation, each of the fifteen strategic directions was assigned to a specific senior administrator, who in turn directed and coordinated the efforts of appropriate additional individuals and groups toward realization of the objectives set forth in the plan. These "responsible persons" were also expected to establish priorities, determine time frames for actions to be taken, delegate responsibility, determine financial implications and monitor cost-effectiveness of each objective, report on progress and issues within each strategic direction, and hold one another accountable. Each administrator was required to use a specified format twice yearly for reporting on progress and additional planning related to each objective within the strategic direction. Through this very specific assignment of responsibility, the grand plan was directly linked to the everyday management of the university.

To oversee university-wide implementation efforts, and to multiply the influence of various constituents, the provost established a Council of Advisors to provide a thoughtful, university-wide perspective on progress toward implementation. The Council was appointed by the provost and was broadly representative of faculty, staff, and students. However, in order to avoid the political maneuvering and turf protection identified by Schuster (1994), the

members of the council were selected because of their commitment to the university, and *not* because they represented any group. The council, which was chaired by the provost, consisted of one dean, one center director, several senior faculty from different academic units, a junior faculty member, an advisor to the president, one graduate and one undergraduate student, and the director of academic planning. No one either represented or reported to a constituency. The council was charged with overseeing and guiding implementation of the plan, conducting regular evaluations, planning for the next cycle of strategic planning, and providing a communication link between the administrators charged with implementation and the wider university community.

Finally, successful implementation of any plan is dependent on the allocation of scarce resources among competing demands. If planning and budgeting are not intimately linked, the plan is likely to be ignored, with the budget becoming the *de facto* plan. In order to fund strategic initiatives, and thus to make the plan truly meaningful, the president and provost established an annual reallocation pool of one million dollars. To create the pool, each of the university's five divisions initially contributed a portion of its current funds for each of the first two years (0.5 percent from instructional budgets; 1 percent from all others), with the money used to fund specific priorities emerging from the plan. This has now become a permanent reallocation mandate. In addition, administrators were encouraged to allocate resources within units based on strategic priorities.

Impact of the Plan and its Implementation Efforts

In the two years since the publication of the strategic plan and implementation guide, significant progress has been documented in every one of the fifteen strategic directions. The Council of Advisors has been actively involved in overseeing and evaluating implementation efforts, with each of the administrators responsible for implementation of a strategic direction providing both written reports throughout the year and appearing in person before the council. In most strategic directions, administrators have appointed task forces to oversee implementation, resulting in the direct inclusion of hundreds of university faculty, staff, and students in the implementation of the plan. The council provides written evaluations of implementation in each strategic direction, citing accomplishments, identifying issues, and providing recommendations and suggestions for next steps. The reallocation pool is

seen as the source of funding for initiatives, and university faculty and administrators have not been reluctant to apply to the pool, knowing full well that their application will be approved only to the extent that it is consistent with strategic priorities. In addition, because one of the original objectives in the plan was to identify a 15% cost reduction in administration, these savings have been identified and will be reallocated to strategic priorities as administrative downsizing occurs.

A communications audit of university publications revealed new avenues for news about implementation targeted to specific constituents. Other news appeared in traditional forms such as news bulletins and regular university publications. The result was an information campaign that attempted to identify and reach the university's multiple constituents through a variety of publications and electronic communications mechanisms. In each of the first two years, the Office of Academic Planning also published a comprehensive report on implementation, detailing the plans, progress, and amended plans related to each of the 162 objectives.

The implementation process is working, and changes both large and small have been made. The second year implementation report demonstrates that well over 50% of the original objectives were fully completed or close to being fully completed within two years of the publication of a plan that was designed to cover a six-year span. A small number were judged to be unwise and therefore abandoned, and the remainder were well on their way toward full implementation. Significant financial resources have been reallocated, primarily from administration to instruction and to the development of state-of-the-art technology, with additional reallocations scheduled for each year in the foreseeable future. Substantively, two professional schools merged into one and a third professional school was eliminated, with some of its programs being eliminated or significantly altered and others moved to more appropriate homes. One new school was developed and approved, and is now just one year away from receiving its first students. Programmatic changes in general education, the majors, and the professions have been made and will continue to be made. Interdisciplinary cooperation has been enhanced, as has technologically-assisted instruction. Students have new academic and service support. Support staff and functions have changed. Faculty roles and rewards have been examined, and new university tenure and promotion guidelines are being developed. Issues concerning safety in an urban neighborhood have been addressed and preventive means, fences and security,

have been enhanced. Both faculty and staff development have been improved. Every school has developed its own strategic plan, and academic programs are being modified accordingly. The university is clearly different in 1995 than it was in 1992. It has been identified as one that is moving forward in a time of retrenchment, and has received the accolades of external audiences for its proactive approach to planning and evaluation.

The changes have not been easy, and there is by no means universal commitment to the kinds of changes that have been made, but there is no question that the university is committed to thoughtful planning and to following through on the directions it sets for itself. We found that Flack's (1994) admonition concerning the necessity to pay attention to every constituent group meant spending inordinate time and energy with individuals and groups across all areas of the university. We found, as Meredith (1994) observed, that the reallocation of resources based on the plan was the single most important factor in achieving the objectives of the plan. But even that was not enough. The attention provided, and the money reallocated depended, as Levin (1981) and Norris (1991) summarized, on commitment from the senior leaders of the university, strong support from constituent groups, a context that demanded change, clear goals, assignment of responsibility, and expectations for public accountability.

Perhaps most important, however, are not the actual changes that have been made or the degree to which any one individual in a complex institution is satisfied with those changes, but rather the notable changes that have occurred in daily behavior regarding how decisions are made. Even in this large, multipurpose university, there are few who do not know the importance of the priorities established in the plan. Virtually everyone, from the president on down, frequently refer to the plan when making decisions, particularly decisions that involve the allocation of resources. While the plan clearly does not preclude taking advantage of unpredictable opportunities, serendipity and personal interests no longer serve as primary decision bases, and a new spirit of public accountability is evident. We have learned that implementation fails not because of ill will, but because insufficient attention is given to the hard work and public accountability necessary for implementation to succeed.

Suggested Readings

A Guide to Implementing the Strategic Plan of Virginia Commonwealth University. Richmond, Virginia: Office of Academic Planning, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1993.

Flack, H. "Three Critical Elements in Strategic Planning." *Planning for Higher Education,* 22, 1994, 24-31.

Goodstein, L.D., Nolan, T.M., and Pfeiffer, J.W. *Applied Strategic Planning.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1993.

Kaufman, R. and Herman, J. *Stragetic Planning in Education: Rethinking, Restructuring, Revitalizing.* Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Technomic Publishing Co., Inc., 1991.

Keller, G. *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press., 1983.

Levin, M.A. "Conditions Contributing to Effective Implementation and Their Limits," *Research in Public Policy Analysis and Management,* 1, 1981, 65-111.

Meredith, M. "What Works (and Doesn't) in Planning." *Planning for Higher Education,* 22, 1994, 28-30.

Norris, D.M., and Poulton, N.L. *A Guide for New Planners.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Society for College and University Planning, 1991.

Schuster, J.H., Smith, D.G., Corak, K.A., and Yamada, M.M. *Stretegic Governance: How to Make Big Decisions Better.* American Council on Education. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1994.