Book Review

Managing the Big Picture in Colleges and Universities

By Richard Alfred, Praeger Publishers, Westport;
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Asking the questions, selecting the tactics;

The Creation of a Successful Plan

You get in your car driving thirty five minutes for the off campus retreat believing you will participate in the creation of your institution's five year plan. At the day's end, on the return trip home, you think to yourself, "we didn't accomplish a thing;" or, "this isn't going to be effective;" or, "we will never get all of this done." Why are these assumptions common?

Administrators invest an extensive amount of resources in attempting to make their institution a success, but many either lack the business acumen or have limited experience in creating and implementing a strategic plan; from asking the right questions, to conducting the proper analysis. What business is our institution in? Who are our key stakeholders? What is our competition offering? What changes do we need to make internally? How are we going to articulate and evaluate our plan? How will I enable my

organization to fit within its current environment while remaining flexible enough to respond to, or create, changes in this environment? Each of these questions Richard Alfred poses in *Managing the Big Picture in Colleges and Universities*, that need to be answered when creating and implementing an institution's strategic plan.

The traditional boundaries of postsecondary institutions are blurring and will become even fuzzier as they, driven by necessity and enlightened self-interest, reinvent the education marketplace. Alfred's central thesis is context should shape strategy, and that context differs depending on the institution type. In defining the difference between strategy and tactics, and then articulating the framework to execute one's organizational vision, Alfred successfully creates a well organized workbook for any administrator.

Throughout the book Alfred's supports his thesis with a series of artfully written vignettes, diagrams and

frameworks which the reader can easily adopt for their environment. His success, I believe, is attributed to his ability to utilize traditional business terminologies and apply them to the higher education industry. For example, he articulates how context develops strategy, dimensions and dynamics of strategy; a way of positioning the institution amongst its stakeholders to build competitive distinctiveness with the goal of generating a sustainable advantage. An example he provides is Berea College's mission statement, "... to educate students from Appalachia with great promise and limited resources." The mission statement is just one way for an institution to present its distinctiveness; other ways include cost, prestige, and experience.

Alfred illustrates strategy development via *The Strategy Pathway*, comprising three components: formulation, articulation, and implementation. Each component possesses a series of subsections, all with a multitude of questions. Throughout the book Alfred stresses that this process of inquiry is critical; stating that it is the art of asking intelligent questions and of thinking through issues in a creative way.

Alfred states that external drivers address the customer's changing needs, and the institution needs to offer and extend a value for that need. Students generalize the experience from one organization and apply it to others. They are evaluating how a service is delivered. This subtle point highlights what many in academe neglect, that the institution is a business which services customers, and which is judged by that service, and which competes to provide it. Understanding

these drivers enables the institution's planners to define the three components of the *Strategy Pathway*: formulation, articulation, and implementation.

The formulation component comprises six progressive steps. His first, and most critical point, is that administrators need to view education as an industry, and in doing so, answer two questions: Who are our target audiences for programs? Can we create new value through existing programs? Analyzing the competition is part of this component; selecting the comparison factors, and then determining how we are going to create our value based upon this information. Alfred highlights Grove City College's pricing strategy of keeping tuition and fees low, at \$14,300, while offering less in scholarship than peer institutions which operate under a high-tuition, high-discount price model, in which actual tuition costs are reduced through scholarships and non-loan assistance, resulting in anything from a 40 to a 60 percent discount. Grove City's strategy results in a perception of getting significant value through a liberal arts education for less money. Its ability to attract so many students led to its listing in *Barron's Guide to the Most Competitive Colleges* (2003).

The purpose of implementation is to complete the transition from formulating strategy to execution. Identification of tactics, assessing capacity and description of changes, are just a few of the areas highlighted. The area that I believe to be most critical is developing the evaluation measures and then sharing this information with the staff. These metrics can encourage buy-in from

internal stakeholders, instill urgency, develop informal networks, or motivate a team to achieve an attainable reward. Metric association also provides credence to an institution's tactics amongst outside stakeholders, ie: populace and politicians, who increasingly question institutional spending.

University administrators derive their accomplishments from a diverse set of experiences, extensive on the job training, and a passion for the community: However many administrators have limited formal business training or have spent little time within the business community.

I am not advocating that everyone should be Jack Welch, but understanding how to create and execute a strategy is something that needs to be effectively implemented by the education community. Alfred has

provided the collegiate administrator with a reference to create, articulate, and implement strategy.

Alfred's book provides the university administrator with a portable MBA in strategic planning, regardless of the institution's size. From its case studies highlighting DeVry University, Grove City College, Strayer University, Albion College, and others, to its worksheets that organize: Identification of Stakeholder Characteristics, Needs, and Desires (pg. 92), Strategy Frames For-Profit Institutions (p. 196), and Stepwise Model for Strategy Implementation (p. 230), this book assists in removing the fear and uncertainty which might exist tackling the development and articulation of an institution's strategic plan.

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