PLANNING
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RECOVERY-PLANNING STORY

Rebooting a COVID-19-Stalled Strategic Planning Process

Try Reframing Traditional Assumptions with These Four Steps

by David P. Haney

The current pandemic presents an opportunity to pivot from planning for an unknown future to designing solutions for our "wicked" problems. Results-based strategic design offers tools for an alternative planning process that addresses constraints, constituent needs, experimental solutions, behavior change, and the energy of early adopters.

Introduction

Because even the immediate future of higher education is so unclear, many institutions are planning for multiple scenarios that range from near-normalcy in fall of 2020 (increasingly unlikely) to disruption through the next academic year (Friga 2020). And previous trends offer little help. If you were engaged in a traditional five-year strategic planning process at the start of 2020, it has probably been put on hold. My goal with this article is to show how planning can be reframed in this environment by pivoting from *planning* for an unknown future to a flexible process of *designing* experiences that will help our institutions survive in that future.

3 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . To Tap into Institutional Energy and Promote Strategic Behavior Change

1. In the current environment, **focus on *designing* rather than *planning***.
2. **Use the resources of human-centered design thinking**: framing problems within constraints, identifying constituents' needs, and engaging in prototyping.
3. **Concentrate on results rather than activities.**

Results-Based Strategic Design

Years of engaging in strategic planning at multiple institutions led me to become a strategic planning skeptic. That's because, as I have argued in *Inside Higher Ed*, many traditional strategic plans closely resemble each other and are filled with things an institution should be doing anyway—rather than providing blueprints for distinctive change (Haney 2020). I call the alternative process that I developed as president of Centenary University "results-based strategic design." It is less a methodology than a reframing of questions, so that it can be inserted into existing strategic planning processes or become the basis for a new and different kind of approach.

I drew on two major influences, the first of which is human-centered design thinking. Inspired by the work of IDEO, a global design and consulting firm, design thinking has been used worldwide for strategic planning in for-profit and non-profit sectors (Brown 2009, 155–176). With a few exceptions such as Lynn University, the process is not commonly used in higher education for strategic planning. Developed by the Silicon Valley designers who created the mouse, the laptop, and the smartphone, design thinking asserts that we no longer simply design products; instead, we design the human experience of using the products (Brown 2009, 109–149). This makes it a natural fit for higher education, which is in the business of designing experiences for students. Design thinking also embraces the unpredictability of the future. Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, in *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*, wrote: "As you begin to think like a designer, remember one important thing: It's impossible to predict the future. And the corollary to that thought is: Once you design something, it changes the future that is possible" (Burnett & Evans 2016, 26).

The results-based part of the process is inspired by the work of Hal Williams, founder and long-time CEO of the Rensselaerville Institute. As an "outcome guide," Williams has assisted major nonprofits, corporate foundations, and educational institutions in focusing institutional cultures and planning processes on outcomes. Although higher education has adopted the language of outcomes in planning and assessment, too often its culture remains process- and activity-oriented. We often judge results less on their own merits than on the extent to which they are achieved through a process of consensus. Learning outcomes remain subordinated to reading lists on our syllabi. Job descriptions outline employees' activities rather than the results they are expected to achieve. Meeting agendas list topics instead of anticipating results. A results focus addresses a common criticism of design thinking (especially as it is practiced outside of the actual design world) as being too process oriented, associated with freewheeling brainstorms on writeable walls and the mass consumption of Post-it notes (Vinsel 2018).

Reframing Assumptions

Here are four ways in which results-based strategic design can reframe traditional strategic planning assumptions in the post-COVID-19 planning environment.

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1. Framing Specific Problems Within Constraints

Whereas traditional strategic planning often starts with blue-sky thinking (cue faculty eye roll) about where we want the institution to be at a given future point, designers think in terms of concrete projects that address specific problems within a clear set of constraints. Unlike straightforward engineering problems (e.g., you need to cross a river, so you build a bridge), designers often tackle what they call "wicked" problems, problems that are not just complex—which building a bridge can certainly be—but that are ill-defined and multifaceted and with no single obvious solution (Camillus 2008).

For example, a laptop hinge must be able to keep the computer screen both open and closed, withstand considerable motion, and hold the screen at many angles. That is a multifaceted design problem that admits of several solutions. Higher education, with increasing stresses on its business models even before COVID-19, is rife with such wicked problems made even more wicked in the current crisis.

The best way to start a planning process for COVID-19 recovery is to ask: *What are the specific wicked problems that we need to solve?* That question is more specific and ultimately of greater value than: *Where do we want to be in five years?* Asking the right question is not as easy as it sounds. That's because we may need to reframe our thinking about what a problem is. Too often we get hung up on what designers call "gravity" problems (Burnett & Evans 2016, 9–14). These are not really problems because, like gravity, they cannot be solved—and a problem is not a problem if it doesn't have any potential solutions. Therefore, unless you are in the business of developing vaccines and treatments for COVID-19, the pandemic is a gravity problem—a given that we must deal with and not a problem to be solved.

I have also observed that many in higher education inadvertently name or imply solutions when they think they are stating problems. Doing so short-circuits the process. For example, those who say their problem is how to get students back on campus as quickly as possible are not stating a problem; it's a solution (getting students back on campus) to several possible problems. Those problems might include how to solve an anticipated financial deficit, how to provide an effective education in these times, how to communicate the value of an institution's education, how to remain true to an institution's mission, how to engage students, how to retain current students' loyalty, how to attract new students, or some combination of all of these. Getting students back quickly may or may not be the solution, depending on exactly what the problem is.

Problems also need to be solved within the constraints set by the design situation. Just as the design of a laptop hinge is constrained by factors such as size, weight, cost to manufacture, ease of manufacturing, and fabrication materials, solutions to

higher education's wicked problems, especially now, are limited by financial considerations, the unknown course of the virus, the demographics of current and prospective students, and other institution-specific issues. Identifying these and then getting creative within the confines of those constraints can produce the right institution-specific solutions. I have found it useful to follow author Tim Brown in thinking of constraints in terms of "three overlapping criteria for successful ideas: feasibility (what is functionally possible within the foreseeable future); viability (what is likely to become part of a sustainable business model); and desirability (what makes sense to people and for people)" (Brown 2009, 18).

For example, getting students back to campus in the fall may not be feasible because you lack the resources to provide the necessary coronavirus testing and monitoring. And face-to-face operation may not be desirable since it may not make practical sense to students, parents, staff, and faculty, even if getting students back to campus is viable in the long term. But it may be feasible, desirable, and viable to have some students on campus under carefully-monitored conditions and some off campus, through a combination of low-residence programs and HyFlex courses (hybrid learning in a flexible course structure where students can choose to participate virtually or in person). Program-specific instruction decisions about online versus in-person and synchronous versus asynchronous would need to be made. Scheduling changes (such as block scheduling, lengthened class days, and shortened semesters) to allow for fewer people on campus at a time should also be considered. The solutions are out there, thanks to the creativity that higher education has shown in the last few months, but finding the right ones for your institution depends on identifying, framing, and reframing your specific design problems within the appropriate constraints.

Here is how one university used the design process to reframe the concept of employee furloughs, which are often used for quick financial savings. It was determined that the specific problem was annual cash flow. This was because of the mismatch between the timing of revenue and expenses. While expenses are spread throughout the year, cash comes in only when tuition and fee payments arrive or federal financial aid funds are drawn down. In the context of this specific problem, the furlough was reframed from a simple effort to save money to a kind of bridge loan to the institution that would be repaid to the college employee with interest. Staff members who were compensated over a certain income threshold would be required to take one (unpaid) week off at any time that was approved by their supervisor between February and July. They would sacrifice two weeks

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of pay, which would be withheld incrementally for all furloughed employees during the months of low cash flow (e.g., March through August). The full two weeks of pay that they sacrificed earlier would be returned to them, for example, in October, when the institutional coffers were full. The pay that was withheld could be seen as money "loaned" to the institution at the time when the institution most needed cash. The "interest" on that "loan" would be the week off that the employee had taken earlier, for which their compensation was deferred until a later time.

This reframing of a furlough as a loan would also attune employees to the institutional cash flow cycle, since the timing of employee revenue would be linked to the timing of institutional revenue. Accurately understanding real problems, identifying constraints, and thinking creatively about possibilities can help get you unstuck (Burnett & Evans 2016, 63–82) by reframing inherited assumptions that lead to old solutions.

Creative institution-specific design solutions can emerge that may ultimately increase the viability of your long-term business model. For example, for "new majority" students—first-generation college students, students of color, adults, and military veterans (Lyon and Matson 2019) who may have a family and a job, flexibility is paramount, and the accommodating solutions that you design for the current situation may add long-term value to what your institution can offer. As commentators have said recently, this COVID-19 crisis provides the opportunity to fix things that we should have fixed long ago (Wyner 2020).

2. Discovering Constituents' True Needs

Too often colleges and university planners start from the perspective of what is best for the institution, while a design focus redirects us to the needs of constituents (primarily students). "Let's ignore our users' needs and focus instead on taking our institution to the next level," said no one at Apple ever, although many a college president has implied the first while stating the second. You will not discover what people need by simply asking them. As Henry Ford is supposed to have said, if he had simply asked people what they needed, they would have responded, "a faster horse." A good design process gives people what they don't yet know they need by inferring their needs from their actual behavior. This is called the empathy stage in design thinking: putting yourself into the position of the users as both individuals and groups. (Brown 2009, 49–62).

Students have been surveyed on their interest in the pivot to online education (Jaschik 2020), but if we are going to redesign student experiences effectively, we need to get beyond student *opinions* to get at their actual *behavior*. Many students have a low opinion of their education's sudden online-only existence, but what does their (and their teachers') behavior reveal? How much did they actually learn while they received online instruction? How much did they use online support mechanisms? Was the experience a simple switch from classroom teaching to emergency

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online teaching, or was adaptive learning technology used to personalize the online learning experience? Did they have access to the appropriate content and technology? Were their teachers experienced in and excited about online education? How did they behave as individual students, and how did they behave as groups of students? Did academic learning or socialization suffer, or both? A well-designed survey can get at some of this—for example, through questions that measure frequency of behavior rather than attitudes (Benton & Evans 2019)—but institutions should also be mining the analytical capabilities of their learning management systems for other concrete information about faculty and student behavior. We need to get beyond the panicked logic that says, "They didn't like those online courses and they won't pay for them, so we need to get our campus back to the way it was before as quickly as possible." An opinion-based design that simply replicates the past is not worth the designer's trouble. We now have an unprecedented opportunity to design for the future by putting ourselves in our students' shoes and designing for their actual needs, rather than simply planning for institutional self-preservation.

3.Prototyping

A cornerstone of both design thinking and Hal Williams' approach is prototyping: trying things out to see whether they work or not, testing the critical concepts at work in a design process. A prototype differs from a pilot. A pilot project is a small-scale version of an endeavor that is already planned out, prior to a full-scale launch. A prototype tries something out at an early stage of the design process to see what works and what doesn't, something Tim Brown calls "building to think" (Brown 2009, 87). The point of a prototype is to build something quickly and cheaply as an experiment that will test an idea. For example, as health concerns complicate the tension between private and collaborative spaces, post-COVID-19 learning and office environments can be mocked-up physically with arrangements of chairs and cardboard partitions or with added virtual technology—or in some combination—and students and employees can be asked to try out these prototypes. Enrollment and registration processes can be tried out with inexpensive physical or digital mock-ups. Before an idea gets too far along the path of development, someone needs to say: *Let's try something*. Prototyping is particularly useful when planning for multiple scenarios, as we now must do. It is not that difficult to try several prototypes at once or change the assumptions governing a given prototype.

When introducing this idea, I have sometimes been told (usually with a great deal of self-righteousness by an opponent to change), "We shouldn't be experimenting on our students." My response is always, "We *should* be experimenting *with* our

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students." As institutions dedicated to creating new knowledge, we should be using our own campuses as experimental labs—what better way to involve students in the process of designing their own experiences?

4. Energy and Behavior Change Joining Forces

Design is a messy, collaborative process, but at the same time it can increase planning efficiency by focusing on the essential rather than attempting the comprehensive. Building a strategic design requires deciding what is strategic and what is not. According to Williams, something is strategic only if it requires a behavior change and cannot be accomplished by business as usual. Too many strategic plans include things you should be doing anyway, such as assessing student learning outcomes. If you are not doing that, you are simply not doing your job, and you don't need a strategic plan to tell you that. By contrast, if you want to focus the institution's financial efficiency in a time of crisis by moving from a standard top-down budgeting process to one in which cost centers are responsible for meeting an agreed-upon financial margin, that may require a behavior change at several levels of the institution. Such a truly strategic move may be worth significant institutional energy.

Wasted time and effort can be prevented by locating and nurturing the sources of energy in your institution, rather than waiting for consensus to be achieved through traditional institutional processes. Williams stresses that energy is one of the most important attributes of a successful institution, and locating, resourcing, and supporting the high-energy members of your organization can produce results much more quickly than a bureaucracy can (Williams 2008). Every institution has what Williams calls "community sparkplugs," those who often step up in times of crisis, who may not be in positions of leadership. They are ideal early adopters of new ideas, and supporting their work will produce results much faster than attempting to build consensus throughout the organization, which often leads to the lowest common denominator. If the results of design processes work, or show promise at the prototyping stage, sufficient consensus will follow. Sparkplugs will not want to sit through endless planning meetings, but they will gladly form the core of action-oriented design teams that craft solutions to wicked problems. This is not a rejection but rather a reframing of shared governance, emphasizing, as author Steven Bahls advocates, a collaborative focus on institutional priorities rather than an oppositional or merely consultative structure (Bahls 2014).

Although the end result of a design process can be elegantly simple, and the process can reduce wasted time and energy by focusing on what is important, it is also intentionally messy and collaborative, with multiple small design teams (we had 21 at Centenary University) prototyping multiple solutions to multiple problems. It requires strong but open-minded

executive leadership to keep the process moving forward, constant communication, and a sophisticated tracking system, such as the one we used in a mind-mapping software program called "The Brain" (Haney 2019). After working on this process for a year or so at Centenary University, I was happy to see a shift in our language. Instead of saying: *Let's form a committee to study problem x* (which only an administrator would say), people from throughout the community began to say: *Let's get a design team together to solve problem x*. There were always more volunteers for the second approach than for the first.

Conclusion

Now more than ever, we need to be engaging our campuses in a process of designing creative solutions to our wicked problems, rather than simply planning for a future that we won't be able to see clearly until it is here—if then.

WHAT WORKED

- **Prototyping new processes** that changed institutional behavior.
- **Developing a focused design for change** over the course of one academic year and revising it for the next year.

WHAT DIDN'T

- **Abandoning traditional planning modes** (for some participants).
- **Incomplete connections to budgeting and assessment processes.**

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Engage with the Author

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