

STRATEGIC THINKING AND ACADEMIC QUALITY

For many of the reasons that we have analyzed, the introduction of an authentic strategic perspective is an especially demanding task in the sphere of academic specialties. Consider the ways in which we ordinarily think about the quality of academic departments. Let us do so by examining the profile of two history programs inspired by actual models, one in a major university and the other in a very small college. The comprehensive undergraduate history program at a large regional research university with a departmental faculty of fifty-four offers five majors, eight program concentrations, and 110 courses. Its faculty is well published and many of its members are widely recognized, two of its specialties are in the top twenty-five in graduate program rankings, and it attracts talented doctoral students, though it is much less selective in some fields than it would like. Most of the lower-division courses are large lecture classes supported by teaching assistants, the courses for majors enroll thirty to forty students, and honors students take a senior seminar. The number and quality of its undergraduate majors have declined moderately in the last decade, though most students perceive history to be a popular program that makes moderate demands.

Consider next the history department at a small liberal arts college that has a solid reputation in its region. With a faculty of five, it offers a single major with concentrations in European or American history. Its largest class enrolls twenty-five students, its entire faculty is full time, and it places a major emphasis on the use of original texts and documents in all its classes. Its majors have always been among the most talented students at the college, and it has a reputation for being a demanding department.

The realities of institutional mission, culture, size, and resources have shaped two radically different history departments, even though there are some formal parallels between them in courses and requirements. As we compare the two programs strictly with the professional eye of a historian, we have to judge the small college's program to be marginal in quality and viability. It is very weak in scope, in depth, and in the professional reputations of its faculty. In terms of disciplinary measures, one cannot begin to compare the comprehensive range, depth, and prominence—that is, the quality—of the university program with the impoverished version that exists in the college.

Yet as we turn our attention to the culture of student learning in the small college's department, other characteristics come to the surface. We learn that many of the leading graduates of the college studied history, and that a disproportionate number of them, including several eminent historians, went on to earn doctorates in the field. Whenever these graduates tell their stories, they consistently note that their professors required them to learn history by doing it—by studying original texts and documents, writing countless interpretive papers, and participating constantly in discussions and presentations in small classes. Their teachers held them to rigorous standards but also encouraged them. Faculty members often became mentors to students and interacted with them frequently both in and out of class. The faculty's narrative of academic quality concentrates on the character and depth of student learning. They hold themselves to these values and make professional decisions in terms of this understanding of quality.

These cases allow us to raise an impertinent question. Which of the two undergraduate history programs is of higher quality? Which one creates more educational value for students? The answer depends, of course, on the values that a person privileges in his or her understanding of academic quality. In the college, educational worth is measured by student learning as intellectual engagement and transformation, while in the university, quality is defined around the creation of knowledge. For most of us, the question brings up a series of conflicts in academic purposes that can never be entirely resolved, but that can be reconciled through effective leadership.

Although it seems deceptively basic, the strategic articulation of principles of educational worth is a difficult task for most disciplines. This is so because it is often carried out, as we have seen, in a context defined by the internal criteria of an academic specialty alone or is imposed by an external management system. When disciplinary logic encounters managerial logic, the tensions are inescapable. Although the transition to a broader pattern of reflection is initially challenging, when a program's educational rationale is explicitly connected to the more inclusive aims of liberal education and student learning, to special institutional characteristics and capabilities, and to changing methods of the discipline and the needs in society at large, the process becomes more strategically vital and fruitful (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2004). As these steps occur, the model shifts from emphasizing the requirements of management to focusing on the responsibilities of collaborative strategic leadership.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND POWERFUL LEARNING

The purpose of strategic leadership is to look inside and outside an institution simultaneously and to align the two perspectives. As it searches for the structural trends in contemporary higher education, it finds some markers that should rivet its attention. One of these is the intensifying focus on student learning. Long-simmering changes in the methods of teaching and learning have taken form as a self-conscious movement. There is a growing preoccupation with the nature

of learning itself, with what and how students learn in ways that are motivating, enduring, and powerful (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2002; Bok 2006; Gaff, Ratcliff, et al. 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al. 2005; Levine 2006).

Engagement in Learning

Common in many expressions of the learning movement is a focus on student engagement—on forms of teaching and learning that make a successful claim on the interest, energy, and motivation of the student. The emphasis is on ways the student becomes personally engaged in a process of learning. The implied contrast is with learning that is passive, in which the student receives knowledge and information from a teacher. In engaged learning, students are agents more than observers, makers of meaning rather than recipients of information (Morrill 2002).

Learning as the Development of Human Powers

One of the critical presuppositions of this intensified focus on learning is that liberal education has to do with the development of deep and enduring intellectual and personal abilities. One commonly finds that institutions express their rationale for liberal education in terms of the development of complex cognitive abilities such as critical, analytical, and integrative thinking; effective communication; global and multicultural awareness; and technological and quantitative literacy (Bok 2006). Included as well are intellectual dispositions and values such as curiosity, mental resilience, and imagination as well as commitments to the values of an open society.

From the perspective of strategic leadership, more important than these lists is the unspoken presupposition that liberal education has to do with the development of fundamental human powers, the enhancement of the intellectual and moral capacities through which the human project itself unfolds. In tracing the evolution of liberal education at the University of Chicago, Donald Levine (2006) finds and formulates the inner logic in its concern to develop the multifaceted powers of mind. As Thomas Green suggests, “Coming into possession of the powers that we have as human beings . . . is the defining presence of educational worth” (1982, 182). So, engaged learning is also powerful learning because it intends to make a compelling difference in the ways that humans as agents create meaning and act in the world.

Why does any of this matter for the strategy process? It does not if strategic planning is simply a discipline of the market. To contribute to academic leadership, strategy has to be integral; it must connect with the deepest purposes of the organization as it has been shaped in response to the context in which it lives. For a college or university to understand its differentiating characteristics, it has to know what it believes in, what it intends its education to be, and how it can create for its time and place the practices and conditions on which powerful student

learning depends. It has to ask itself continually what it means to be an educated person, and in the plurality of answers to that question, it must reflect on the center of educational gravity in its own methods and programs. It especially has to do this in a time when liberal education is neglected and misunderstood. Is liberal learning about information or knowledge, methods or content, the powers of the mind or the habits of the heart, or what? How does it relate to the unrelenting demand of society for a well-trained workforce and of students for careers? (Bok 2006). In pursuing this inquiry, the institution has to consider where, if anywhere, it has developed generative core competencies that distinguish it from others and that deeply mark its programs and its environment for learning. A review and self-assessment of the following list of some of the components of powerful learning will help institutions see what characteristics of learning truly set them apart and understand strategically where they excel or should or could excel (cf. Association of American Colleges and Universities 2002).

The Characteristics of Powerful Learning

Powerful learning is:

- **Transformative:** It intends to develop human intellectual powers, moral capacities, and personal abilities at fundamental levels and in enduring forms.
- **Intentional:** It help students become aware of the interconnected aims and results of liberal and professional education and learn how they can design their studies to connect in purposeful ways with their own goals.
- **Engaged:** It involves students in learning actively through collaboration, discussion, writing, speaking, performing, doing research, leading projects and presentations, and forming relationships with teachers who have high expectations.
- **Global:** It involves students in the study of other languages, cultures, and societies, optimally through living and studying in another country.
- **Broad:** It requires students to master content, methods of reasoning, and ways of solving problems in a variety of fields and disciplines.
- **Coherent:** It designs and presents programs of study with a clear rationale and goals that connect themes, courses, and learning experiences in meaningful and explicit patterns, both in general education and in the major.
- **Useful:** It demonstrates how cognitive powers and knowledge are deeply practical in preparing students for employment and civic responsibilities.
- **Inclusive:** It features programs that address the diversity of human experience and cultures as enriching educational resources.
- **Integrative:** It encourages an understanding of the relationship of fields and disciplines in the study of intellectual, moral, and social issues and offers programs based on interdisciplinary and integrative methods.
- **Enriched:** It draws upon a wide variety of resources, including facilities, technologies, scientific instrumentation, books and periodicals, cultural events, and local organizations.

- **Technological:** It uses information technology to draw on the new universe of Web-based knowledge to develop computer literacy and to make learning and communication continual, global, interactive, and motivating.
- **Experiential:** It uses a variety of ways to involve students in learning through experience in service projects, internships, and field research, closely coordinating theory and practice.
- **Responsible:** It prepares students to understand and to act on their responsibilities in a democratic society and fosters their commitment to its basic values.
- **Substantive:** It explores the structure, methods, languages, and content of various disciplines and bodies of knowledge and uses landmark original texts and materials in doing so.
- **Rigorous:** It sets exacting standards and has high expectations concerning both the quality and the quantity of student educational achievements.
- **Assessed:** It uses a multiple set of methods to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and feeds these results into the teaching and learning process to improve future performance.
- **Encompassing:** It occurs in many campus contexts and relationships both in and out of the classroom and is strengthened by an ethos that carries, communicates, and reinforces a clear and strong set of consistent messages about the institution's identity and educational purposes and practices.

Strategic Thinking and Powerful Learning

The effort to evaluate which forms of learning are most in evidence at an institution is a rewarding strategic task, and the preceding list of characteristics offers a place to start. Groups of faculty and staff in a strategy process can analyze and map their own institutions and programs by asking several questions about each characteristic: Which most resonate with our narrative of educational identity and quality? Where are we now, and where would we like to be in the future? Where are we deficient, where adequate? Which of these forms of learning are distinguishing characteristics? Are there any that are or could become core competencies? What strategies and goals would move us forward? The process of analysis should stir the interest of many faculty and staff members, for it offers a systematic template for defining issues about which they care deeply.

In the process of discussing and evaluating its culture and characteristics, an institution begins to gain a clear sense of its own identity and its vision as a community of learning. Its self-evaluation should be realistic and recognize that generally no more than several of its characteristics can become core competencies. The discussion should also be guided by all the forms of available evidence, such as a content analysis of its academic programs and practices, its results on the National Survey of Student Engagement, and other forms of assessment and strategic evaluation.

One of important affirmations in this book is that the character and quality of student learning are a central strategic issue. The study by George Kuh and

his associates (2005), *Student Success in College*, shows the intimate connection between student learning and this wider view of strategy, even though the authors do not use that term in describing their findings. As we have already seen, the study describes the characteristics of twenty campuses whose graduation rates and engaged learning practices exceed what would be expected in terms of their institutional and student profiles. The colleges present features that bear directly on aspects of strategic leadership because, among other things, they demonstrate: a “living” mission and “lived” educational philosophy, an unshakeable focus on student learning, an improvement-oriented ethos, and a sense of shared responsibility for educational quality and student success. Moreover, they each embody a strong culture and highly resonant identity that marks out paths for student success and an environment that enriches student learning. The leadership of these institutions is also focused on student learning both in terms of the actions of those in positions of authority and as distributed in processes and relationships throughout the organization. In our terms, the narratives, values, and visions of these colleges and universities are expressed in their organizational cultures, programs, and collaborative practices, all of which are sustained through a distributed process of strategic leadership.

Perhaps it is no clearer than in the sphere of student learning that official leaders are often followers in strategic leadership. Teachers and students take the lead in shaping the practices of engaged learning, which those in academic leadership positions may then help to clarify, systematize, and support. In the sphere of teaching and learning, the idea that strategy emerges from practice is entirely apt and accurate. When the University of Richmond issued its strategy report entitled *Engagement in Learning* in the mid-1990s, it chose a theme that arose from the educational practices that were emerging in and outside its classrooms. The strategic consciousness of those practices arose in dialogue with faculty members and students who shared with the planning committee their uses of collaborative learning, interactive classes, experiential learning, study abroad, service learning, and student research. The report carried a title and explored themes that would soon emerge prominently in the wider conversation in higher education.

General Education

One of the places where the strategic analysis of student learning should concentrate is general education (cf. Gaff, Ratcliff, et al. 1997). Because it occurs at the intersection of a series of defining organizational commitments, it is a quintessential strategic issue. To begin, general education typically represents a major investment of institutional resources. Its special courses and requirements draw heavily on faculty time and energy and require a large number of faculty positions. In most institutions, more than half of a student’s first two years of study are devoted to general education, so its influence on a student’s early educational experience is often decisive. Typically a student makes some form of intellectual connection with the campus during these years or may never do so. Thus,

the relationship to retention and enrollment is crucial. Most importantly, many institutions explicitly define the meaning of liberal education around the purposes of their general education programs.

In terms of the motif of powerful learning, it is often in general education that institutions make explicit their distinguishing characteristics, core competencies, educational values, and credos. In the course of the work on the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Greater Expectations* (2002), it became clear that institutions were increasingly tying their general education programs to their special characteristics and competencies. A college or a university's distinctive academic profile in teaching, curriculum, and research was translated into ways to engage students in coherent, intentional, and integrative forms of general education.

As we consider strategic leadership in the context of student learning and general education, we see the depths to which it must reach. It must draw on the institution's most powerful conceptual resources in order to address comprehensive educational questions. In working on general education, faculty members and academic administrators have to be encouraged and enabled to be educators, not just field-specific experts. It may appear odd that institutions committed to higher learning need to focus on the conceptual foundations of programs of study, but that is a requirement of strategic leadership. A well-founded, distinctive, and rich program of powerful learning in general education and throughout the undergraduate curriculum and co-curriculum brings into focus an institution's specific educational capacities, reflecting its story, values, and identity. It creates a sense of common enterprise and seeks to involve students and faculty in the experience of a true educational community. If this intense focus on learning is to be sustained, faculty as educators need to reach periodically for the best current literature on student learning, study model programs, and continue to think deeply and coherently about educational design and execution, all in terms of a differentiated concept of quality (cf. Bok 2006; Levine 2006). Such is the nature of strategic thinking in the academic sphere. As a form of leadership, it moves through conflicts and disagreements to find the shared values and concepts to which people are willing to make commitments.