

The Responsive and Responsible University

As we have seen before, and as glaringly evidenced in the three models, strategic thinking in colleges and universities has to reconcile two conflicting approaches to reality. It must simultaneously honor a commitment to intrinsic academic values and to organizational viability. Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy (2005) call this being “mission-centered” and “market-smart.” This may be, but we need a variety of conceptual resources to resolve the value conflicts in these two phrases. If we are to achieve a durable reconciliation of these mind-sets, the solution has to respect each part of the equation. Without doing so, we will end up considering higher education as either an isolated world of contemplation or a marketplace of commerce, not ideas. To effect the reconciliation requires many things, including appropriate ways of thinking about institutional identity.

Strategic thinking itself presupposes that an academic organization’s identity is situated, not abstract; responsive, not fixed. A responsive and responsible institution takes its specific form at its point of interaction with the wider world. It brings its fundamental intellectual values into specific formative relationships with particular circumstances, and influence flows in both directions. Just as an individual’s identity is constituted by an integration of basic elements of the self with the circumstances of time and place, so do the academic values of colleges

and universities both influence and carry the imprint of the various social purposes and practical realities that differentiate them. The paradigm of responsibility (or response-ability, as the capacity to anticipate, create, and respond) provides the most hospitable pattern of assumptions for the work of strategy.

Colleges draw life from their values and purposes as well as from the constituencies and social institutions that sponsor them, whether these are government, alumni, foundations, local communities and businesses, or donors and board members. Countless colleges are the product of religious denominations, and they variously bear the marks of that relationship in their identities as they cope with various forms of change. Most universities are creatures of state governments, perhaps designed in the land-grant tradition to teach the “mechanical and practical arts,” to give priority in admission to state residents, and to serve the agricultural and business enterprises of the state through teaching and research, all in the context of a shifting economic and social environment.

To respond effectively and congruently to the diverse fields of forces in which they live and to which they must respond, leaders as agents must first interpret the strategic issue at hand and ask, “What is going on?” They do this typically in dialogue with others and through the use of a wide variety of ways of thinking and knowing, from empirical analysis to storytelling. As agents, we respond both through our interpretation of the action on us and in anticipation of the response to our action, and “all of this is in a continuing community of agents” (Niebuhr 196, 66). The paradigm of responsibility takes us beyond the ideas of legal and moral accountability and suggests the notion of response-ability as open, creative, and anticipatory responses to the challenges and opportunities that the world sends our way (cf. Niebuhr 1963; Puka 2005).

As a paradigm, responsibility tries to find an integrated, authentic, and fitting response to the stream of life in which it finds itself. It does not dismiss instrumental values, as the classical academic model is prone to do, but tries to make sense of them in a continuing pattern of interpretation and responsiveness. Nor does it reduce its sense of value to commercial norms, as happens in the educational shopping mall. Unlike the corporate university, with its fractured identity, responsibility seeks integrity and authenticity through dialogue and interaction with the world around it. The paradigm of responsibility is pluralistic, with many valid patterns and syntheses of values, not relativistic, where any value is as valid as any other. The task of responsible leadership is to integrate values by staying riveted on both the guiding purposes of the organization and the meaning of change.

Contextual Academic Identity

Strategic planning programs often spin their wheels because they lack the concepts and the language to interpret the integral strategic identity of the institution. As a result, they shuttle back and forth between being mission centered on some issues and market smart on others. Where the challenge of conceptual pre-suppositions becomes most difficult is with regard to the strategic understanding of

the academic program itself. The natural academic tendency is to enhance quality and improve programs through the elaboration of the evolving professional canon of each discipline, the addition of more specialties and brighter students being the surest way to add value and to bring a department to a new level of excellence. This natural pattern of thought is not wrong, and often it is appropriate. The problem is that it is frequently misplaced, for it lacks vital connection to the strategic possibilities of the institution or of the academic field itself.

A responsive and responsible university situates its academic programs in other ways by differentiating its competencies and purposes contextually. Just like the institution itself, academic programs have a situated identity. As such, they consist of a repertoire of academic resources and capabilities by which the college or university responds uniquely to a demanding and changing environment. More than just various sets of course offerings, however complete or sophisticated, the academic program represents as well a series of organizational and faculty competencies in the design and implementation of programs, and in differentiated approaches to teaching, student learning, and research.

To see academic offerings and the talents of faculty in this strategic light is to open oneself up to contextual ways of thinking about educational value. From the strategic perspective, connections to the larger purposes and worth of education come more quickly into view, linkages in self-understanding create novel possibilities, and the sense of shared communal enterprise is made visible and vital. The distinctiveness of the institution emerges from the way its organizational body combines with its academic soul to create a unique identity.

A FRAMEWORK FOR AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY PROCESS

In the framework that follows, our goal is to suggest the essential components of an integrated strategy process that bears the imprint of the paradigm of responsibility. Nothing especially elaborate or innovative is contained in the steps that are presented here, and they are not offered as the definitive or orthodox version of strategy. Decision makers who have experience with strategic planning will find it familiar, but those who do not can use it as a point of reference for part 3. We should note that this model suggests a more comprehensive and integrative approach to strategy than most of the textbook models. It does so by placing values and vision at the core of the process and by making quantitative strategic indicators, financial issues, and the tasks of implementation explicit parts of the work of strategy itself. As we shall see time and again, everything relates to everything else in both conceiving and enacting strategy, so it is systemic, especially as a tool of leadership.

The proposed centrality of identity and vision in the work of strategy may seem obvious, but many institutions fail to capitalize on its significance as a way to transform the process into a vehicle for strategic leadership. As I have been at pains to indicate in both the preceding argument and the following sections, strategy has to be placed within the appropriate conceptual framework for the

power of identity and vision to take hold. They have to connect with the values, narratives, and possibilities of a place in order to be authentic and motivating. In precise terms, a vision is a narrative of aspiration. It announces meanings that are to be lived, not just contemplated, so the cognitive form of a vision is the same as that of a narrative. The shift from management to leadership also turns precisely on the ability of a strategy to create a shared sense of the future that motivates a community to make commitments, set priorities, and take actions. If strategy is about purpose and vision, then it has to be a form of leadership.