

Lessons Learned: Mountain College in the Midst of Change

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Abstract

This case describes a strategic planning process initiated by the division of student affairs at a small, private college. It presents several issues related to institutional identity, strategic planning initiative development, faculty and staff buy-in and stay-in, and the changing landscape of higher education. The case is designed for usage in educational leadership programs and is particularly pertinent to provoke discussions regarding leading from the middle, leadership for institutional change, and moral and ethical leadership. Students in educational leadership enrolled in student affairs leadership and administration courses, budgeting or strategic planning, or organizational theory courses can engage in discussion using multiple aspects of the case.

Keywords

student affairs leadership, strategic planning, change management

Case Narrative

Mountain College is located in Sparks, a mid-sized city in the Western United States. The private, non-profit institution enrolls approximately 3,000 students with 2,200 students enrolled in undergraduate programs and 500 students enrolled in graduate programs. Another 300 students enroll in the graduate business administration program in Asia. About half of Mountain College students are from out of state, 30% of students receive some form of financial aid, and 70% of students live on campus or in the surrounding neighborhoods. Seventy-one percent of Mountain College students identify as White, 5% Hispanic, 1% African American, 3% Asian, and less than 1%

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Indian American. Forty-one percent of the Mountain College faculty are employed on a 9-month contract with primary responsibilities of teaching and advising students.

Sparks is a city of 750,000 residents with an economy focused on government, technology, education, and a robust service sector focused on the outdoor recreation industry. Sparks is home to three colleges and universities in addition to Mountain College. A research university enrolls 23,000 students, and a community college enrolls 17,500 students. A non-profit institution, World University, enrolls 7,800 students in competency-based programs in Sparks and on satellite campuses throughout the region. Mountain is located in a “boutique” neighborhood of Sparks that caters to the Mountain College students and young professionals. A health-food store, several restaurants, bars, clothing stores, and a beautiful park make Mountain College’s location ideal for college students.

Dr. Arthur Williams is retiring from his position as Vice President of Student Affairs, a position he held for more than 10 years. As soon as Dr. Williams arrived at Mountain College 10 years ago, he led Student Affairs on a department-wide strategic planning initiative. The initiative was initially very well received and ultimately included input from the entire department. The Student Affairs department identified the need for additional opportunities to engage students through alternative learning pedagogies, keep tuition affordable, produce graduates prepared for the workforce, and improve diversity on campus.

The President of Mountain College, Dr. Lenore Springer, was impressed by the strategic planning process. She suggested Dr. Williams involve all members of the campus including faculty, staff, administrators, and students. The strategic plan became a huge initiative at Mountain College and involved almost everyone on campus in the early phases of the plan. Campus-wide meetings, working groups, and community-engaged events allowed all constituents to contribute to the strategic plan and the future direction of Mountain College. In the past 10 years, the plan has slowly become a strategy guided by Dr. Williams and a few key staff members with very little input from the campus community. Dr. Williams is so proud of this initiative that he has asked a group of researchers from the local university to conduct a qualitative study on the strategic planning process and produce a report outlining the “lessons learned.”

After a national search, Dr. Beverly Burton was hired as the new Vice President for Student Affairs. Dr. Burton joined Mountain College from a similarly sized institution in the Midwest. She and her partner relocated to Sparks to live closer to family and to experience the mountains. Dr. Burton was very excited to join Mountain College, a campus that recently garnered national attention for being a great place to work. Dr. Burton has worked in student affairs for more than 20 years in residence life, academic advising, programming, and high-level leadership roles. She has held leadership positions in national professional associations, is an advocate for the importance of student affairs in student retention and completion, and strongly supports professional development among her staff. Dr. Burton’s references described her as an “asset-based” leader where she often sees the positive in what students, faculty, and staff bring to campus. She has “tons of energy . . . I don’t even know if she sleeps,” one of her references expressed.

During the first few weeks in her new position, Dr. Burton set out to meet with all of the student affairs staff, which includes 10 full-time and 2 part-time staff members. She also met with numerous faculty, student groups, and individual students. Beverly learned from her more than 20 years of experience in student affairs that it is important to listen for a long time before implementing changes at a new campus and she planned use this approach at Mountain.

In her meetings, Beverly soon realized that the staff is exhausted. The past 10 years have been exciting with great change and growth at Mountain College with the implementation of many different initiatives, including an electronic portfolio graduation requirement for all students, doubling the number of beds on campus, increasing the size of the counseling center more than tripling the number of students it sees each semester, developing several learning communities, and adding 15 new undergraduate majors and 6 graduate programs.

With so many initiatives, some people feel as if the identity of the institution is not clear. One graduate associate in residence life said,

Sometimes I think the identity of Mountain College is just sort of incohesive. I don't know, it's like we pride ourselves on being a liberal arts, a small liberal arts college, but our strongest program is the business program. So, I suppose sometimes, I just feel like there's a lack of just general like, you know, what is this college?

Beverly also learned about the student experience. Whereas students in general feel welcome on campus, students of color feel particularly unwelcome. As one faculty member shared with Beverly,

We have a big push for diversity and internationalization, and we have done a good job, really good job of increasing the *number* of underrepresented groups on campus. We've increased international students, which is just a money-making device. It's not really diversity. And, we sit around and congratulate ourselves about that . . . I'm not sure the diverse students who we've brought to the campus have had an impact on the campus. It's the same problem: Black students sit at this table, Hispanic students sit at this table, people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, transgender, questioning, at that table, and the international students are over in a corner talking in some language that nobody understands. I'm not sure we've done a good job of maximizing the value of increasing diversity.

Beverly has heard accounts of a particularly disturbing incident where a student who identified as gay felt so uncomfortable at his student employment job that he quit and left campus. Another staff member reported that several students enrolled in the nursing program left the program after a number of inappropriate comments were made by students inside and outside the classroom.

Beverly also learned from her meetings with faculty and staff that Dr. Williams was very invested in the national conversation around reducing costs in higher education. One student affairs administrator explained,

The cost-quality discussion was and continues to be a hard sell when, by a lot of indicators—enrollment, budget size, our ability to continue to provide salary increases

through the economic downturn, new buildings—the whole traditional thing that campuses look like they're doing great—to have your VP say, "This whole enterprise is coming apart at the seams and you've got to wise up or Mountain College is going to disappear." Which at Art's most unguarded has been the message. That's not really explicitly in the strategic plan, but that, over the last couple of years, has been the toughest discussion.

Beverly also learned that Dr. Williams was quite interested in implementing innovative ways of delivering education to students, especially through competency-based programs such as those delivered at World University, the non-profit institution in Sparks. In fact, Beverly discovered Dr. Williams accepted a consulting position with World University to expand enrollment at the institution after departing from Mountain College.

In a lunch meeting with a few student affairs professions from around campus, Beverly brought up the topic of developing a new strategic plan. The conversation quickly turned to a discussion of Dr. Williams's strategic plan. The group expressed that it was very inclusive at the beginning of the process, but over the past 10 years, it became "Art's plan." Beverly further learned that Art actually identified the initiatives for the plan and hand selected staff members to lead the new initiatives. Furthermore, in the student affairs staffs' view, the strategic plan became less about students and more about enhancing the prestige of Mountain College. Dr. Williams wanted Mountain to be recognized nationally as a great place to work, an incubator for innovation, and an institution that offers a premium education at a low cost. However, the staff felt that few of these initiatives became fully realized and very little transformational change had occurred because of their efforts.

During another meeting, a faculty member asked Beverly what had happened to the information from the university researchers who evaluated the strategic plan developed by Dr. Williams. This reminded Beverly that she had been planning to look over the report. Perhaps it could help her organize her thoughts around the issues at Mountain College. To her pleasure, the report confirmed a lot of what Beverly was hearing around campus. The report emphasized issues such as a lack of institutional identity, focus on too many diverse initiatives, a decrease in campus involvement in the strategic planning process in recent years, institutional attempts to reduce costs, and the need to refocus on students' issues (see the appendix for the executive summary of the report). After more than a month of meeting with nearly 50 people at Mountain College, Beverly feels as if she has a good sense of the critical issues at Mountain College. She knows that she needs a plan but decides to schedule a meeting with President Springer to get advice on how she might move forward.

The following week, Beverly met with President Springer who enthusiastically suggested that Beverly begin a new strategic planning process. President Springer believes that Mountain must focus on innovation to make it in the difficult economic market of private higher education. She encouraged Beverly to form a committee of faculty, staff, and students to come up with new recommendations for how to grow the college, improve retention, expand the college's footprint in the area, reduce costs, and

improve the college experience for students. Beverly mentioned her many meetings with faculty, staff, and students and the report from the university research team. All of this feedback indicates that it may be time for Mountain College to take a break, reflect on the past 10 years, evaluate its core mission, and realign resources to a few strategic initiatives. President Springer has indeed reviewed the report, but she disagrees with many of the concerns in the report and pushes Beverly to move forward with a plan.

After her meeting with President Springer, Beverly feels overwhelmed by the task ahead of her and conflicted about how she should move forward. Perhaps the president has not heard the same feedback from staff that Beverly has heard, or perhaps she has her own agenda she wishes to pursue. Nevertheless, Beverly needs a plan. A long holiday break is ahead. Beverly plans to use this time to digest everything and formulate a plan.

Teaching Notes

This case was written for courses in educational leadership. It may be particularly useful for students studying school or student affairs leadership, roles that often require leaders to deal with ethical dilemmas, change management, and leading from the middle. In the case, Beverly Burton is asked by the college president to spearhead a new strategic plan with faculty and staff who are fatigued by the pace of change in the past 10 years. She is also aware of unaddressed concerns related to how students are treated in academic programs and employment positions.

Leadership From the Middle

Educational leaders on campus and in schools often lead from the middle, a place where there are organizational demands from above and below them, and which demands that they balance these needs. Bolman and Gallos (2011) discuss some of the unique issues middle leaders confront such as the “need to please both bosses and subordinates to survive” (p. 153) and how this affects the personal stress and professional satisfaction of the middle leader, not to mention the impact on achieving the goals of the organization. They also discuss the “dance of blind reflex” (p. 152) that describes the dynamics between individuals who engage in predictable behaviors that conform to their role in the organization. In the dance, superiors behave in the expected ways of superiors and subordinates act in ways typical of subordinates, regardless of the immediate situation. In addition, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggested that teachers examine their own experiences, create peer respect, and connect all actions back to what is best for students. In addition, educational leaders and teachers in schools are often asked to be middle leaders who span internal and external cultures and demands as they make decisions and develop strategic plans. This is the case for Beverly who must weigh constant tensions between the resistance of internal constituents to the change that is demanded by the changing external environment and increased calls for accountability. Indeed, Fournier (2011) argued that the

organizational innovation needed to respond to a quickly changing external environment depends on the effectiveness of middle leaders.

Given the importance of and demands on middle leaders, consider the following suggestions from Bolman and Gallos (2011, p. 159), and how they might assist Beverly as she moves forward with her planning process:

- Listen, understand, and respect differences
- Look for mutual gains
- Stay alert to system dynamics and take new leadership stands

Leadership for Change

Leaders are often asked to lead toward change (Kezar, 2009). University presidents are often interested in leading institutions in a new direction, and this task is sometimes distributed to leaders like Beverly. Through the lens of four frames, Bolman and Deal (2013) discuss leadership and change in organizations. The authors focus on the significance of framing issues, working within the political context to affect change, and coalition building. Fullan (2005) discussed the importance of capacity building as an additional feature of improvement programs in turnaround schools including offering training for key leaders and “lateral capacity building” (p. 178) intended to establish intentional opportunities for schools and districts to learn from each other. Kezar (2011) noted that both higher education and K-12 environments have struggled with scaling up change efforts, due to complex implementation contexts, cultural norms, the lack of incentives for changing, and the issue of who owns the change. Rather than embracing the scaling-up approach to change, Kezar argues that a combination of mutual adaptation and social movement is a more appropriate model for change in educational environments. Consider Kezar’s suggestions for improving change in education as you determine Beverly’s best course of action:

- Deliberation and discussion that touch on individual norms allow people to understand the change and increase their motivation to change
- Networks provide opportunities to connect to others with similar ideas, promote access to information, and allow for the adaption of change strategies
- External supports and incentives that recognize and reward change agents help keep the change moving forward even in times of difficulty and provide extra incentives for staying with the change process

Moral and Ethical Leadership

Issues related to moral and ethical leadership are quite apparent in this case when Beverly learns about some rather significant problems at Mountain College through her conversations with colleagues and students. Some of these moral and ethical issues are obvious, and in other cases, they are masked as organizational issues. Bolman and

Deal (2013) argued that creating a sense of authorship in employees can increase their commitment to ethical behavior. Authorship, as used by Bolman and Deal in this case, involves providing individuals with the time for creativity, innovation, and thinking about their work. Bon and Bigbee (2011) found that educational leaders combine a sense of personal ethics with the ethics of the profession, which are both intermingled with a sense of doing what is best for students as they consider what ethical behavior for school leaders looks like. However, the authors noted, time for discussing ethics—both personal and professional—is not commonly allotted in schools. ACPA (American College Personnel Association) and NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) (2010) have developed guidelines for ethical practice that also emphasize the integration of personal and professional codes of ethics, noting that Student Affairs professionals must have the skills not only to identify ethical issues in their day-to-day work but also to address these issues. Each of the authors cited above noted the importance of recognizing and addressing ethical issues, through the use of dialogue and professional guidelines, all of which requires time to think and talk. Consider your own profession's guidelines, your personal code of ethical conduct, and the following suggestions from ACPA and NASPA (pp. 12-13) as you think through the ethical issues that Beverly must confront, and how she might do so:

- Articulate your personal code of ethics, which should reflect the ethical statements of your profession
- Explain how one's behavior embodies the ethical guidelines of your profession
- Identify and work to resolve incongruences between personal, institutional, and professional ethical standards
- Consider the influence of a variety of cultures on the understanding of personal, institutional, and professional ethical standards

Questions for Discussion

1. Which constituents does Beverly need to be concerned with, and why?
2. How can Beverly address or avoid the “blind reflex” in this situation?
3. Where can Beverly look for mutual gains at Mountain College? How will identifying these areas assist her as she moves forward?
4. Kezar (2011) discusses three mechanisms of change including deliberation and discussion, networks, and external supports and incentives. How might Beverly use these strategies to address the situation at Mountain College?
5. What are the moral and ethical issues in this case, and how are these issues presented in the case? How would you respond to these issues based on your personal and professional code of ethics?
6. In reviewing the *ACPA and NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (2010), what issues presented in the case should most concern Beverly from a moral perspective?

Appendix

Lessons Learned at Mountain College

In February of 2012, at the request of Vice President Arthur Williams, a university research team engaged in a comprehensive review of the strategic plan and the campus initiatives implemented over a 10-year period as part of that plan. This report describes the methods utilized for conducting the review, highlights seven “lessons learned” through the review, and offers several implications for future planning processes at the college.

1. Method:

A comprehensive list of documents related to the strategic plan and ensuing initiatives was made available to the research team by President Bassis. The research team began the process of combing through the documents to gain a detailed understanding of how the strategic plan was developed and the various campus initiatives that grew out of the initial strategic plan. The review of documents also increased each team member’s familiarity with Mountain College. In the early stages of the data review, the research team arranged for a campus tour and conducted research meetings on campus to help provide a context for the information contained in the documents.

Our next step consisted of interviewing constituents from across campus. We conducted 10 interviews with faculty and administrative staff, as well as one administrative staff focus group. In addition, we met with seven Mountain College students. The intent of our interviews and focus groups was twofold: to learn more about Mountain community members’ experience of the strategic planning process itself and to learn about how the strategic plan and its related initiatives have affected the day-to-day work of Mountain community members. Our document analysis assisted in the development of a semi-structured interview/focus group protocol.

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed by the research team members. We then individually analyzed the interview and focus group data searching for “lessons learned” in overarching themes recurring throughout the interviews and focus groups. After our individual analysis was completed, we met to review the emergent themes as a group. Seven themes that were common across our individual analyses form the “lessons learned” part of our report.

2. Lessons learned: The following themes emerged from our analysis of interview, focus group and document data.

Develop a clear and cohesive institutional identity: Our interviews suggested a need to develop a clear and cohesive identity across campus. Although the College’s branding is clear, campus constituents are unsure of how that

translates into an institutional identity. Campus community members are not sure how to refer to the college, and they are not certain what, other than the focus on students, draws people to and contributes their continuing engagement with, Mountain College. One faculty participant noted that Mountain needs to “create a cohesive story.”

Focus and streamline new initiatives: In the wake of the 2004 strategic plan, dozens of campus initiatives were instituted. In our conversations with them, campus community members expressed a desire for a more explicit connection between these initiatives and the goals outlined in the strategic plan, as well as with the campus’ core identity. Clearer connections will help campus constituents understand how and why resources are allocated across new and existing campus programs.

Consider ways to make change reach deep into the institutional culture and structures: As we examined the changes that Mountain experienced in the past decade, we saw more rhetorical evidence of change than behavioral or structural. In some of our interviews and focus groups, campus community members noted that it takes more than talking about change to create deep cultural change. Faculty, administrative staff, and students agree that the depth of change on campus is not as significant as it could be. One administrator called the lack of real change “the difference between rhetoric and reality.”

Continue a focus on instituting the learning paradigm: One example of how change at Mountain could be deeper is the shift from a teaching to learning paradigm: Everyone can talk about it, but few, including students, can articulate how it has changed students’ experience at Mountain. We highlighted the teaching to learning paradigm shift in our section above describing what we view as the lasting components of the strategic plan, noting that all campus community members we talked to at least mentioned it as a foundation of the plan. However, as shown in the finding above, creating lasting and deep change takes more than just talk.

*Recognize the importance of buy-in **and** stay-in:* Mountain College’s initial strategic planning process was incredibly collaborative, with campus-wide input on the goals and strategies outlined in the plan. As implementation ensued, the collaborative feeling declined, resulting in some campus constituents feeling a lack of what we defined as stay-in. The impact of so many new initiatives and the effort required to sustain them caused some community members to withdraw their involvement in plan implementation, resulting in a sense that the plan no longer belonged to the entire campus.

Address the changing face of higher education: Although not a clear component of the 2004 strategic plan, campus awareness of, and concern for how Mountain will respond to, the changing face of higher education has increased. This issue was prominent in the midpoint review of the strategic plan in 2009. Whereas some campus constituents remain skeptical about the degree to which the college will have to change to address the rapidly changing higher education environment, other community members are interested in continued

conversations about how to ensure institutional viability while addressing growing cost concerns as Mountain College moves forward.

Maintain a strong student focus: Campus community members consistently expressed a strong commitment to the college's focus on students. Students, staff, and faculty all concurred that this focus is what attracts them to, and keeps them engaged in, Mountain College. Although students rank high on campus constituents' priority lists, our team noted that students have not been widely included in strategic plan development or implementation.

3. Implications: Our research team focused on two ways the "lessons learned" outlined above can influence the future direction of Mountain College.

Shape future planning processes around a common, consistent identity: As the college moves forward, the development of a strong, consistent identity that is embraced by all members of the campus community is essential. Future planning and strategic initiatives must revolve around a common core, and the connections between new initiatives and this core must be clear and explicit. Student voices should be included in conversations and processes centered on developing this identity.

Focus down rather than spreading out: The number of new initiatives related to the implementation of the 2004 strategic plan is mind-boggling. The campus constituents we spoke with consistently expressed a need to focus down rather than spreading out. As the college develops a clear identity and mission, new strategic planning processes that emphasize a consolidation of ideas and initiatives rather than the development of new ones will be well received by the campus community.

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