

Comparing your institution's strategies to those used by an art museum curator reveals six salient ideas around which to build your strategic plan.

By K. Johnson Bowles

What can the art world teach higher education about strategic planning? Among other things, the professional skills applied to curating an exhibition. In the development of an art exhibition, the process of "curating," in which you carefully select objects that support a major theme, often inspires new ways of looking and thinking. Such changes in perspective are exactly what strategic planning is all about.

While serving as a fellow at the American Council on Education (ACE) recently, I wanted to understand the overarching ideas found in higher education strategic planning today. Since, for some years, I had been the director and curator of the Longwood Center for the Visual Arts at Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia, I decided to focus my fellowship experience on identifying activities that exemplified effective curating on campus. I conducted a survey of some 60 colleges and universities at various stages of strategic plan development (for details, see sidebar, "Notes About Methodology").

As with any exhibition, unifying elements, when emphasized, provide greater understanding of the whole. For higher education strategic planning, those elements can be grouped into the "salient six" themes that articulate and address today's challenges:

- Academic excellence.
- Affordability and access.
- Globalization and internationalization (including diversity and inclusion).
- Sustainability.
- Civic engagement.
- Place-based distinction.

Framing the Overall Vision

Before considering the salient six themes, consider your strategic plan's title and the way it influences how your institution frames and addresses its message to various audiences. Plan titles typically go well beyond simple descriptions—as do most artwork titles. Have you ever looked to its title to give you greater insight into a painting or sculpture? Clues to its meaning? The intention of the artist? Have you been frustrated and dismissive of a piece called "Untitled"? That perplexing experience conveys why a title for a strategic plan is not only important, but vital.

The purpose of fashioning the plan's title is not mere artifice. Rather, it is a distinctive first step in consensus building, marketing, and institutional advancement, positioning the organization for strategic and financial success. Thus, the plan's intended readers are not solely faculty and staff or an accrediting body, but potential donors and external partners. In fact, the concept of writing strategic plans with an authentic institutional voice, while delicately balancing the academy's values and consumer expectations, appeared widespread among the institutions reviewed.

Titles I surveyed varied in seemingly institution-specific ways, such as with Villanova's prayerful "Igniting the Heart, Inspiring the Mind, Illuminating the Spirit";

Southern Connecticut State University's teacherly "Pursuing Excellence, Fostering Leadership, Empowering Communities"; Berea College's poetic "Being and Becoming"; or Wright State University's military-friendly "Strategic Plan: Relentless 2013–17." Several other institutions found metaphoric advantage in the plan timeline, using the year 2020 as a means of symbolizing "a perfect vision" or "envisioning success" by calling the plan "(Name of Institution) 20/20."

Beyond the overall institutional vision, the survey brought the six salient themes to life through numerous campus examples that brought to mind the elements of an impressive art exhibition, as described in the following sections.

ONE

THE CAMPUS MASTERPIECE: ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

At the heart of any exhibition or institution is quality, which must be defined in supporting a particular theme. Curators select and put forward the best, most-innovative examples to prove a point. Certainly, many people would attend an exhibition about the Renaissance that was showcasing DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*. Or Michelangelo's *Pieta*. Similarly, in higher education, such attraction is all about quality: How can we provide an incredible education, improve outcomes and delivery, and be more relevant in today's world?

In higher education, it is clear that regardless of reputation, student body profile, faculty recognition, and academic rigor, each institution continues to strive for greater academic excellence. But, as institutions remain wholeheartedly committed to preparing students for work and the challenges of the 21st century, leaders identify varying paths and strategies. Some schools eagerly shore up their STEM programs, while others vigorously defend the liberal arts pedagogy focused on a breadth of knowledge.

READ AN ONLINE EXTRA

For further details of applying curating principles to strategic plan development—and an example of each of the six salient themes described in this article—read "The Artful Strategic Plan," in *Business Officer Plus* at www.nacubo.org.

As institutions consider the nature and structure of the curriculum, the trend leans decidedly toward interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary agendas. Strategic plans often aspire to create centers and institutes to foster creativity, communication, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

For example, Davidson College's planned "Academic Neighborhood," recently supported by a \$45 million grant from the Duke Foundation, boldly conveys interdisciplinary intentionality. The idea's impetus began with a need for a chemistry building. However, before authorizing a new building, President Carol Quillen asked a simple question: "What will this building do for the college?" Recognizing that the proposed building merely added space, the campus conducted a more in-depth conversation focused on what Davidson needed to move forward with its true aspiration: an interdisciplinary life for students.

Another finding in my survey of plans was the call for systematic external and internal department reviews to uncover underperforming and outdated programs, courses, and practices. For example, the University of Delaware's National Study of Instructional Costs and Productivity specializes in tools for institutional assessment that have been used by more than 600 other institutions. Eliminating outmoded subject areas identified by the assessment theoretically will then provide

resources for reallocation toward other more-contemporary areas of study.

Still another focus was leveraging new technology in pedagogy. In keeping with EDUCAUSE's 2012 Horizon Report, strategic plans more fully explore hybrid classes, flipped classrooms, e-scholarship, e-portfolios, and more. Purely online courses, whether massive or local, were somewhat cautiously addressed.

Among pioneers in new technology applications are Austin Peay State University with its e-advising program; the University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab that allows visualization of historical data (see sidebar, "Charting Territory in Cyberspace"); and Temple University's 75,000-square-foot TECH (Teaching, Education, Collaboration, and Help) Center, a learning, teaching, and innovation lab. The convergence of academic planning and master planning are tantamount for success here, and many supporting professional organization like SCUP (Society for College and University Planners) are actively providing resources for this national conversation.

TWO

THE OPENING RECEPTION: AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS

Whether it be an art museum or a higher education institution, all people must be earnestly and intentionally invited and included. Yet, many feel that going to an art museum is only for certain types of people who are "artsy," "wealthy," or "intellectual." Even college and university students may ask what they should wear to an art opening; they speak in hushed tones in the galleries. It can be a similar feeling about the college campus. Yet, everyone must see themselves in that place and believe it is for them.

How can higher education enable a welcoming environment—and one that students can afford? Institutions across the board care a great deal about students' ability to pay for and derive value from

their education and are particularly eager to guide underrepresented groups and first-generation students through this process. The survey revealed efforts in both affordability and access.

Financial visioning. As for affordability, institutions reported activities such as:

- Raising funds for scholarships and internships (with a focus on geographic areas where underrepresented students live). Financial aid tactics in general are shifting from merit-based to need-based. Saint Mary's College of Maryland supports the Baltimore City Scholarship initiative, identifying worthy students with the "will and capacity to meet the academic rigor of a St. Mary's liberal arts education, but [who] lack the financial resources to afford [one]." The college's DeSousa-Brent Scholars Program "cultivates the academic and leadership potential" of traditionally underrepresented students in order to "increase understanding of diversity and inclusion."
- Travel abroad opportunities. Smith College is at the forefront for its establishment of the Anita Volz Wien '62 Global Scholars Fund for study abroad and its Praxis Internship funding, which offers "every sophomore or junior a one-time stipend that ensures she can afford to participate in a [typically unpaid] summer internship."

Academic visioning through partnerships.

The George Washington University's partnerships with the Smithsonian Institution leverage expertise and seed monies from both institutions to further research that will ultimately lead to major grants benefiting both organizations, their faculty and staff, and students/student workers. GWU students and faculty gain access to research materials and collections; the Smithsonian benefits from scholars and student workers.

Another effective partnership is Eastern Connecticut State University's relationship with Connecticut-based insurance provider, Cigna. ECSU has renovated an on-campus building to allow students to do Cigna internships "without the burden of traveling to off-campus locations."

Notes About Methodology

Determining the "salient six" themes for "Curating the Campus" was the result of an American Council on Education Fellowship that involved reviewing 60 college and university strategic plans (at various stages of development), visiting 27 institutions, and interviewing 126 individuals over the course of the 2012-13 academic year. The institutional profiles of the strategic plans reviewed included 25 public and 35 private institutions (of which 13 had a particular religious affiliation, and five served single-gender populations). Carnegie classifications included 20 baccalaureate institutions; 21 research universities; 11 masters colleges and universities (five with special focus on art, music, and design); and three doctoral research universities.

The U.S. regional breakdown included 1 institution in the West, 6 in the Midwest, 27 in the South, and 26 in the Northeast. Of the 60 colleges and universities, 19 were located in small towns, 21 in midsize cities, and 20 in large metropolitan areas. The rationale was to include a representative cross-section—albeit not scientifically determined—from which to gather insights and perspectives.

Campus visits, individual meetings, and face-to-face conversations were invaluable. Presidents and senior administrators were incredibly generous with their time and expertise; they wanted to share their triumphs and tribulations. The site interviews represented the following positions: 16 presidents; 9 chiefs of staff; 55 vice presidents; 29 associate vice presidents, deans, or institutional equivalents; 9 faculty members; and 8 trustees. This article focuses on their respective positive responses to challenges and compelling examples of institutional creativity. The six salient themes identified in "Curating the Campus" were also informed by panel discussions, lectures, and working groups held at the NACUBO, EDUCAUSE, SCUP, AAC&U, and COPLAC national conferences.

THREE POINT OF VIEW: GLOBALIZATION AND INCLUSION

Artists show us the world from different points of view. Lewis Hine influenced child labor laws by photographing conditions endured by children working in factories; Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* gave immediacy to the needs of people during the Great Depression; and Ansel Adams showed us the majesty of natural areas to be preserved by the U.S. National Park Service. Examining and being open to the experiences of others is a way in which the world's problems are revealed, understood, and sometimes solved.

The ACE study found that higher education's recognition of changing

U.S. demographics and the importance of the global economy were stunning. While some institutions made globalization and internationalization a separate goal from diversity and inclusion, the main thrust of both was the notion that the more we understand about each other, the more successful we will be as a whole. Various points of view make for more robust discussions in solving both day-to-day and far-reaching problems.

The objectives are clear: Hire a varied workforce, enroll more diverse students, strive to be welcoming, change the curriculum, and create mechanisms for support and success to retain students and employees. All this under a broader definition of diversity that focuses not only on ethnicity and race, but includes socioeconomic, physical ability, age, religion, gender, and sexual identity. The change in terminology is psychological, moving from "diversity" (which implies

"them," "other," and "different") to "inclusion" (which implies "us," "community," and "unity").

Institutions reported that particular attention was being focused on several areas:

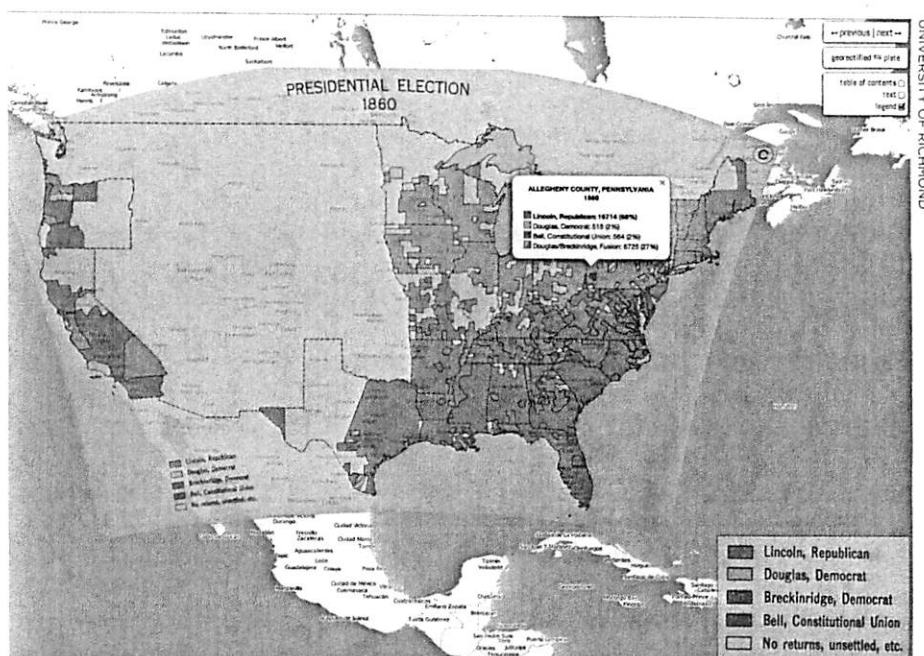
Increasing the number of students studying abroad by promoting and providing resources for those opportunities. Some institutions have forged partnerships with international businesses and organizations at home and abroad to provide additional avenues (and funding) for student learning.

Alternatively, DePaul University takes advantage of its location in a global city. Students and faculty participate in Chicago's numerous ethnic neighborhoods to acquire a greater understanding of other cultures, without travel expenses.

Calling for systematic institutional diversity (with the nomenclature often changed to "inclusion"). While past diversity initiatives have often been folded into the realms of admissions, student affairs, and human resources, the office of the president or provost is becoming the new home for chief diversity officers, with expectations of scholarly training, discourse, and metric-based assessment.

Damon Williams, associate vice chancellor and vice provost for diversity and climate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a terrific example. (Williams, a nationally recognized figure in diversity, leadership, and organizational change, recently left UW-Madison after five years to take on what he called an "epic opportunity" as senior vice president for programs, training, and youth development for the Atlanta-based Boys and Girls Clubs of America.) He also is the author of *Strategic Diversity Leadership: Activating Change and Transformation in Higher Education* (Stylus Publishing, 2013), an excellent guide to the changes hoped for in higher education plans.

The University of North Carolina (UNC)-Asheville is another example. Chancellor Anne Ponder made an



The Digital Scholarship Lab's most recent project enhances a printed historical atlas with 21st-century functionality.

Charting Territory in Cyberspace: Academic Excellence

In 1932, historian Charles O. Paullin pondered multimedia illustration well before its time: "The ideal historical atlas might as well be a collection of motion-picture maps, if these could be displayed on the pages of a book without the paraphernalia of projector, reel, and screen." Since 2007, the University of Richmond's Digital Scholarship Lab (DSL) has made Paullin's vision a reality.

Led by university president Ed Ayers and DSL's director Rob Nelson, the lab works with students and faculty to generate scholarship from mining historical data and text. For example, at the click of the mouse one can observe animated maps charting historical events such as the Great Migration, the Emancipation, or the establishment of colleges and universities across the United States. These digital cartographic creations are not simply illustrations. They are elegant masterpieces that enable further exploration and understanding of the humanities and social sciences in a revelatory and democratic fashion. Visit the Web site <http://dsl.richmond.edu> for additional background.

important decision when hiring Jane Fernandes, former vice president and provost at Gallaudet University, as the provost and vice chancellor of academic affairs. In addition to her expertise in higher administration, interdisciplinary education, and racial justice, Fernandes is deaf (often using an interpreter).

Together, this leadership team models the behaviors it wishes to see. The two have begun to dissect the hiring process.

New positions are crafted to address the expectation of diversity considerations in teaching regardless of subject matter expertise. Advertisements are scrutinized for content and language choice. Ads are strategically placed where diverse applicant pools are likely to view them. Search committees build partnerships with institutions and organizations that educate and support underrepresented populations.

More institutions are willing and ready to change curriculum, administrative processes, and the way institutional values are articulated in order to make campuses reflective of the society in general. For example, while Emerson College has been well known for welcoming the LGBTQ community, further steps have included allowing students to self-identify gender and choose open housing. These practices have found their way into many other institutions' admissions, housing policies, and student life organizations.

FOUR

PRESERVING THE MASTERPIECE: SUSTAINABILITY

Artists endeavor to create works that will endure the test of time. How many times can a work be looked upon with interest and delight? Are the most lasting materials being used so that each generation can look upon a masterpiece and experience the same intensity as when it was first created? Institutionally, art museums are designed to be good stewards in sustaining the vibrancy of the works so that the unique pieces can be enjoyed for generations. Exhibitions are designed to encourage visitors to return to the museum repeatedly to further contemplate and consider the ideas expressed. So too should higher education planning reflect the sweeping concerns about preservation and stewardship.

Like inclusion, the notion of "sustainability" has broadened from scattershot activities such as recycling to a more holistic sense of fiscal and environmental responsibility. While environmental initiatives remain important and are often systemically embraced, changing the overall business model challenges nearly every institution in the quest for additional revenue streams and future stability.

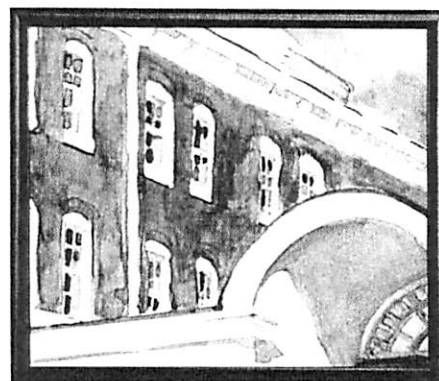
Sustainability has taken on a broader definition, and related activities include:

Reducing the carbon footprint. Campus plans move beyond recycling programs and energy reduction, now focusing on greater commitments to "green" capital projects with LEED certification, the purchase of renewable energy credits, and even campus energy production through alternative methods. You'll find solar power in the West (Arizona State University and the University of Arizona, for example); and in the East, wind turbines at many Pennsylvania institutions (including Carnegie Mellon University and Mercyhurst University); and burning sawdust at Longwood University.

Campus dining halls are focusing on local—and even campus-grown—food and meatless meals. While colleges like Warren Wilson have been engaging students in the production of food for the campus for more than a century, others like College of the Atlantic's Beech Hill Farm are a more recent incarnation. Likewise, with roots in World War I and initiatives of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Meatless Monday international public health awareness campaign was endorsed by the Center for a Livable Future at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health in 2003 and has gained significant attention with students.

Establishing future fiscal stability. A prevalent and urgent consensus centers on higher education's need to change its overarching economic models. The call for initiatives to change the budget model is problematic at best, for many reasons.

- The maxim of strategic planning is that the plan drives the budget, not vice versa. Consequently, changing a budget model for the sake of change without trying to achieve a plan objective is difficult to support.
- The nature of the budget process and the flow of capital are typically built for incremental change, with the not-for-profit budget heavily grounded in fixed costs (50 percent or more in personnel). There is simply not enough capital to make bold transformational changes.
- With few expendable resources, institutions are often risk-averse.



MORE INSTITUTIONS ARE WILLING AND READY TO CHANGE CURRICULUM, ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES, AND THE WAY INSTITUTIONAL VALUES ARE ARTICULATED TO MAKE CAMPUSES REFLECTIVE OF THE SOCIETY IN GENERAL.

Building capability and capacity may hold the keys to growth, so it is advisable for each institution to focus on its own composite financial index, new product lines, and econometric models in institutionally specific ways that relate to strategic initiatives.

Varying fiscal strategies appear throughout higher education. In recent history, Elon University, Stevenson University, and Christopher Newport University have successfully leveraged borrowing for capital projects to transform their campuses. The University of Pennsylvania is one of a number of universities that continues to focus on

responsibility-centered management (RCM) and variable pricing structures. RCM holds promise but presents several caveats: Advancement strategies and structures often suffer because of coordination challenges; it is difficult to determine the percentage of budget to “give back” to core services; and there is little ability to corral large sums to fund large universitywide initiatives or initiatives not yet owned by particular centers.

The University of Notre Dame’s Office of Strategic Planning and Institutional Research is extraordinary for its unflinching embrace of corporate practices such as institutionwide analytic modeling, as well as data-driven assessment. The ability of institutions to provide compelling quantitative data to support their narratives of achievement is more important than ever in securing outside resources and achieving marketplace distinction.

Maintenance of faculty and staff. While some media outlets have focused on the small percentage of institutions that highly compensate presidents and athletic coaches, the challenge of sustaining a qualified workforce through adequate financial compensation overwhelms most institutions, especially public schools, with slashed budgets, and staff who have not seen regular pay increases for more than a decade.

Many strategic plans call for a comprehensive view of compensation. Institutions increasingly seek other avenues for shoring up morale and rewarding employees, including increased employee recognitions (and holding supervisors accountable for providing them); improving physical and intellectual wellness (offering free access to recreational facilities or opportunities for professional development); and enriching quality of life and workplace satisfaction (providing on-campus day care or elder care, flexible schedules, up-to-date tools and technological resources, and more).

Workload is tightly tied to these compensation issues, affecting recruitment, retention, and overall well-being, but it also affects each institution’s ability to fully enact its long-term plans. Academic institutions excel at adding programs,

courses, and processes but fail horribly at doing away with the same. Unless institutions manage to do the latter, the current workforce will be unable to achieve adopted goals.

The lack of affordable housing has a similar deleterious effect. Faculty and staff who live closer to campus are more likely to participate in campus life, be more available to students, and be better able to respond to emergencies. How efficient is it for instructors to experience such lengthy commutes that traffic and weather result in frequent tardiness or deter them from attending campus events? Or for facilities technicians to live an hour away when a water main breaks? Or for grounds crew members to live in remote areas when snowstorms require cleanup?

Affordable housing for all employee classifications significantly affects institutionwide operations and objectives. For example, working with agencies and municipalities, Duke University launched an affordable housing initiative in 2012, by redeveloping a largely abandoned area of south Durham and by providing incentives and subsidies for eligible employees of Duke University and Duke University Health System.

FIVE

INTERACTION BY DESIGN: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

For an exhibition, the curator spends a great deal of time considering how the placement of the works influences the flow and enjoyment of the exhibition as a whole as well as the viewer’s understanding of particular works. The process of intentionally deciding what piece should be placed next to another, called *sequencing*, can help the viewer better appreciate the ensemble.

For example, if you were to see in chronological order a grouping of paintings spanning the career of Piet Mondrian (a Dutch artist famous for his abstract paintings of black lines punctuated by

white, red, blue, and yellow squares and rectangles), you would note that his ideas developed over time. He first painted fairly realistic pictures of trees; each new work showed nearly the same subject but edited down into basic lines. Sequencing the canvases gives contextual meaning to works that might be dismissed for being simplistic or unimportant.

In higher education, placing students within relevant experiences and promoting their interaction within communities is akin to sequencing. The practice illustrates the importance of bringing elements together for the purpose of greater insight.

Higher education always has been a hopeful enterprise invested in the premise that, if one opens the mind to learn and envision new possibilities, lives can be changed. And through one transformed life, other individuals and then communities are improved. This vein of thought is often captured in strategic plans via a phrase such as “preparing citizen leaders for the public good.”

This closely held altruistic tenet is motivational to some, but often criticized as “soft” logic without basis in real application or assessment—elements that become more important in times of economic distress. Policy makers and the public are often skeptical, wanting justification for every dollar and only tangible proof of the real purpose of higher education. So, institutions are making their own cases by taking a visible and direct interest in their communities.

While institutions have for decades provided culture by extending art, music, and theater departments to their communities, and Greek life offices encourage neighborhood cleanups and fundraising events for local nonprofits, institutions are developing centers that focus efforts on leveraging the strengths of academics, student affairs, and economic development.

Real-world applications. One of the most institutionally authentic examples is Guilford College’s Center for Principled Problem Solving. The North Carolina college’s Quaker heritage informs this center’s practice of “applying core values of

community, diversity, equality, excellence, integrity, justice, and stewardship to real problems and situations." The college offers classes and a minor addressing relevant issues such as "Community Problem Solving," "Reclaiming Democracy: Dialogue, Decision-Making and Community Action," and "Change-Making in NC."

Likewise, Swarthmore College's Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility works with many nonprofit community and faith-based organizations; its list of recent projects is exhaustive.

Swarthmore College alumnus Eugene M. Lang established Project Pericles, "a not-for-profit organization that encourages and facilitates commitments by colleges and universities to include social responsibility and participatory citizenship as essential elements of their educational programs."

Workforce and economic development. Towson University's Division of Innovation and Applied Research "serves as a point of entry for businesses, not-for-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and community members interested in collaborating with the university." For example, the university's Center for Geographic Information Systems works with Maryland educators to train teachers and students to use mapping effectively. The departments of art and design, art history, and art education worked with *Word on the Street*, an independent newspaper that provides opportunities for income, social support, and advocacy for the homeless.

An important aspect of such programs is gathering data to support outcomes and sometimes to gain national recognition for excellence. For instance, the Carnegie Classification for Civic Engagement uses data collection and documentation to assess the levels of collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities for mutual benefit. Similarly, the U.S. President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll annually recognizes institutions that achieve meaningful, measurable outcomes in the communities they serve.

SIX

ART IN CONTEXT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE-BASED DISTINCTION

Knowing one's audience and community has significant relevance. Have you ever wondered why some art is controversial in one community and not in another? Why did Cincinnati erupt in 1990 over Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes, while people casually walked by the same works in Los Angeles in 2013 without incident? Timing, place, and identity all played a part, and these elements matter as well to college campuses and their communities.

As the public debate rages on about the validity and efficacy of residential learning experiences, people on the ground (faculty and student affairs professionals alike) will vehemently argue that a college campus is a living laboratory where learning takes place literally everywhere and at all times. Thomas Jefferson's 1814 concept for the University of Virginia as an "Academical Village," seen in the design of the school's central lawn, is the very genesis of this closely held belief. Strategic plans today continue to support the necessity of creating that sense of place for some of the following reasons:

Students need emotionally and physically safe places to apply what they have learned, to test out ideas freely, to debate philosophically and vigorously. They also need mentors who model civil discourse, guide them through tough problem solving (socially and intellectually), and challenge them to consider their place in the world. This doesn't always happen formally; it happens spontaneously and by necessity.

Sometimes that sense of place is a reflection of—and reinvention of—an institution's past. An interesting example is Hampden-Sydney College. The small, historically conservative, men's institution was established in 1775. At an orientation

for new trustees (all men and mostly alumni), President Chris Howard asked, "Why does Hampden-Sydney still matter?" The ensuing discussion was frank and eye-opening, noting that while some may believe a men's college is sexist and obsolete, the need for educating men in a single-gender environment has come full circle. Men's role in society has changed; our understanding of masculinity has changed. What better place than a historically male college to consider these factors and figure out what they really mean?

Hampden-Sydney also provides an example of the way experiencing life together is an opportunity to learn how to act and interact with others. Following the reelection of President Obama, a few students went to the house occupied by members of the black student union, shouting racial slurs and threatening violence. Howard, the institution's first African-American president, handled the situation swiftly, deftly, and articulately to model and insist on what constituted acceptable behavior. The situation was decidedly difficult and publicly embarrassing for the campus; nevertheless college leaders rallied to make it an incredibly important teaching moment, not only about race and public discourse, but the value of campus community.

Clearly, a particular geography creates educational value, especially when institutions develop distinctive programs, then position and market themselves based upon that place. Institutions located in urban areas can focus resources on supporting educational initiatives that explore issues distinctive to city life and train students for careers in urban settings. They also take advantage of their city's cultural resources.

Likewise, institutions in rural settings focus on the challenges and benefits of rural life. Many seek ways of transforming underserved, poverty-stricken communities. Auburn University's work in rural architecture, for example, is renowned. Its pioneering Rural Studio provides students with a hands-on design experience, while giving affordable, well designed, and often recycled housing to people in West

Alabama's Black Belt region (see sidebar, "Community-Compatible Building"). Still others find their niche and distinction in regionalism like the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture.

The Voice of the Critic

Many artists—rightly or wrongly—were dismissed and criticized in their day. Whistler's art was likened to "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Today, he is revered as a great artist, well known for a work originally titled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* and now colloquially known as *Whistler's Mother*.

Institutional strategic plans also can be interpreted skeptically or optimistically. Cynics might say, with a sense of urgency and near-panic, "There is nothing new here. When are we going to do something *real* to make higher education better?" After reading so many plans and talking to so many administrators, I see some credence to that emotional response.

Conversely, during a second visit to Towson University, I experienced an epiphany that made me see the more optimistic side. President Maravene Loeschke explained that she would be meeting with students individually about their experiences in the university's leadership and mentoring program with staff.

Loeschke thoughtfully asked each student, "What is going to be better in the world because of you?" Many students recounted life-changing experiences with mentors and described their future plans to give back to the community wherever they landed. One student wanted to continue working in a hospital and use her training in sociology and family studies to help children and their families deal with illness. Another student planned to use his international studies major to promote governmental stability and transparency in developing countries. Students from different majors conveyed an equally heartfelt and determined view of their place in the world.

And here is the revelation. If all higher education plans are similar and unified by the themes addressed in this article,



AUBURN UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHIC SERVICES

Design training at Auburn University's Rural Studio includes hands-on experience in creating housing within the community's own context and needs.

Community-Compatible Building: Importance of Place-Based Distinction

Can you imagine an awe-inspiring chapel made from old tires and salvaged wood from a barn? How about homes made from carpet fragments, cardboard scraps, or car windshields? If you can't quite picture this, just ask the alumni of Auburn University's Rural Studio. They can show you.

"Everyone—both rich and poor—deserves good design," was the rallying cry for Auburn University architecture professors Samuel Mockabee (1944–2001) and D.K. Ruth, some 20 years ago. They set forth teaching students how to change the face of architecture in a rural, poor, and underserved region of Alabama.

The studio, now led by Andrew Freear, continues its work educating undergraduate students. Providing an alternative to mobile homes, the Rural Studio has launched "The \$20K House" project to help the poor by designing homes that can be built for \$20,000 (the largest size loan for which an individual receiving Social Security benefits is eligible). Go to www.ruralstudio.org and prepare to be awed.

what these Towson students said is likely what students are saying nationwide. Meaning, a whole generation is being transformed—and representing the hoped-for outcomes in every one of the six themes.

Yes, action must be immediate and institutions must be accountable in new ways. But we must remember that higher education strategic planning isn't only about transforming an institution per se but transforming a generation and a nation. In this way, are the plans of today

perhaps like the Whistlers of yesterday? Time will tell.



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