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Planning at Bates, 11-09-2007

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WHY PLAN?

BY ELAINE TUTTLE HANSEN

As a college community, we plan in part for external purposes, for critics and supporters and other interested parties such as accrediting agencies, foundations, donors, lenders, and prospective students and families. Planning shows that we know who we are and where we want to go. It reveals that we have good ideas. It indicates that we understand how to implement them. It demonstrates that we can work together across many disparate disciplines, departments, and individuals to achieve certain shared goals.

At the same time and perhaps more importantly, we plan for internal purposes, for ourselves and our sanity and to produce the best work we can. Some observations voiced during the “random” conversations earlier this semester indicate broad awareness at Bates of this intrinsic value of planning.

"Yet one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another...."

Henry James in the Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*

Other noted that through planning and articulating shared priorities, we can “take walls down.” By setting out goals, moreover, we may more clearly recognize and celebrate our successes in meeting them.

Planning of course has limits, especially in a system that is always changing. As I said in my remarks at Convocation in September, “Great colleges and universities are, in fact, always under construction. They are interesting places—and sometimes confusing and contentious places—to the extent that they are not static. They contain and transmit the lessons of the past, but they are also always in transition toward the future, not only because the students are always changing, but also because the world is always changing, and ways of knowing are always changing.” Change at Bates is particularly visible today; we are engaged in renovations and reorganizations, both tangible and intangible, intended to make more and better room for the free play of ideas.

In an essay examining the limits and possibilities of college planning, “Plus Ça Change,” Stanley Fish argues that strategic planning, which is now demanded of all institutions of higher education, takes place in the face of a paradox: “Planning is necessary and planning won’t work....[because] change cannot be engineered and change will always occur.” In an uncertain environment like this, what is often called long-range planning—seeking a “large-scale, panoptic vision of change” that looks good on paper—is likely to promise far more than it delivers.

Another kind of planning, however, can deliver something we need. Fish calls for “short-term planning,” or maybe at best “medium-range planning,” an “incremental-reform model” that only sets out to make some difference, taking “present conditions as the baseline context in relation to which this or that improvement can be achieved in a relatively short time.” And in the context of uncertainty, he suggests that the most important management principle is not planning, but flexibility. We have to plan, but we also have to build into our plans the ability to shift and adapt to the unexpected, to new information and new opportunities that are always appearing. We have to “scan the environment” for changing trends and needs, and we have to do contingent and strategic thinking all the time.

In a future bulletin, I hope to explore an analogy that may help us understand the planning process we are embarked on as an organic, flexible process well suited to change and growth: the analogy between a certain kind of planning and a certain model of the writing process. Both planning and writing can be approached as developmental and unfolding processes, messy at times but moving through discipline and purposive interaction toward clarity, inclusive but not exhaustive, appropriate when we are not complacent or finished with our becoming, but eager to learn and grow.

Stanley Fish. “Plus Ça Change,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 2, 2004, vol. 50 issue 30, pC1-C4.

ABOUT THIS BULLETIN:

This is the first issue of an occasional bulletin to the community about planning at Bates. Future issues will update readers on the process we are following and make announcements about ways to get involved. If you would like to respond to anything in this bulletin or make suggestions for future issues, send your *letter to the president* to president@bates.edu. President Hansen will share responses in the next issue of *Planning at Bates*.

PLANNING AT BATES

AN OCCASIONAL BULLETIN FROM THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

NOVEMBER 9, 2007

Dear Fellow Members of the Bates Community,

As I said in a summer letter to you, Bates has accomplished a great deal recently, and now is the right time for us to re-examine and reaffirm our purpose and direction. This year, I began a planning process to guide some very important decisions about the future of Bates. In addition to affirming our faith in the College and articulating ideas about moving forward, my aim is to support a highly interactive form of consultation with the community. This work is timely because it will help us think carefully not only about the status quo, but about coming opportunities and challenges as well.

This letter contains a further explanation of the process we are using and an update on progress. It also introduces *Planning at Bates*, a new publication my office is putting out to keep everyone informed about both what we are doing and how to take part.

OUR PLANNING PROCESS

In colleges, most planning processes have the reputation of starting with a wide-open charge and spending a lot of time analyzing a place the planners already know well. I was not eager to call for such a process at Bates, because those types drain away energy and enthusiasm before the substantive work begins. After investigating other approaches to planning, we have adopted a process that I believe is well suited for us—and for this moment in our development. It begins with brainstorming through intense consultation with the community and draws heavily on those who are interested in our future and willing to work hard—for a relatively brief period—to shape our path. There is a place in this process for everyone to contribute, whether you have five minutes, five hours, or several hours over the course of the next five months.

This kind of open planning process will be a new experience for most of us at Bates, and I hope it will be both beneficial and fun. We are using it because it is designed to invite wide participation, stimulate new ideas, come to closure in a timely manner, and complement other recent, ongoing, and emerging planning efforts.

The first step was a series of small group conversations with about 175 faculty members, staff members, and students to talk about the College’s goals and aspirations and about what is and is not working well. In addition to exploring just what it is that makes Bates great and how the experience can become even greater, the small groups discussed external forces that are affecting strong liberal arts colleges and how to leverage those challenges to Bates’ advantage. Most of the participants were chosen randomly to increase the likelihood that the widest possible range of voices and opinions were represented in the information that was gathered.

Then I appointed a steering group to guide the planning process during this academic year. Although all the members will not be named until the working groups (described below) are in place, the box on the right lists those who have been appointed to date.

The steering group is just beginning its work. Now its members are using notes from the small group conversations and their own knowledge of Bates to articulate several timely topics or themes that will frame the planning effort. See page 2 for more about what came up in those group conversations.

After naming the themes, the steering group will invite faculty, staff, and students to form working groups to study them and develop concrete plans to advance the goals and aspirations that fall under each theme. One defining characteristic of this planning process is its openness to new ideas and questions all along the way. To that end, the themes are intended to be specific enough to generate feasible strategic projects yet vague enough to allow for new ideas and directions to emerge. Each working group will consult with many members of the community in the course of this work, and some members of the working groups will join the steering group in the coming weeks.

The first charge to the working groups is to consider the theme they will develop and articulate questions to frame their work. They will be asked to consider previous plans and reports, gather new information, and communicate with those who would be responsible for carrying out recommendations. The steering group and my office will support the working groups aggressively by helping them gather data, learn more about what peer colleges are doing, hold focus group conversations, or have a retreat, for example. We are working within a very ambitious time frame and one job is to support these groups.

In the spring, the working groups will submit their reports, which will consist of draft plans for each theme. When those are in, the steering group will link the concepts into one coherent plan, making judgments about what to recommend and how to sequence the ideas. Then we will produce our plan, vet it with the community, make edits based on that input, and bring the document to the Trustees. That will be a great moment for many people!

Why are we using *this* process? After investigating several ways to go about this work, I chose this approach because it is

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CURRENT STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

- Terry Beckmann**, Vice President for Finance & Administration and Treasurer
- Dave Chirayath**, Research Analyst in Advancement
- Meg Creedon** ‘08
- Sylvia Federico**, Assistant Professor of English
- Tedd Goundie**, Dean of Students
- Ben Hester** ‘10
- Leslie Hill**, Special Assistant to the President and Associate Professor of Politics
- Bill Hiss**, Vice President for External Affairs
- Bev Johnson**, Associate Professor of Geology
- Kevin McHugh**, Director of Athletics
- Wylie Mitchell**, Dean of Admissions
- Jill Reich**, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty
- Gene Wiemers**, Vice President for Information and Library Services and Librarian

WHAT DO YOUR COLLEAGUES THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE OF BATES?

The first step in the Bates planning process was a series of small group conversations that President Hansen held with about 175 faculty members, staff members, and students to talk about the College’s goals and aspirations and about what is and is not working well. Most of the participants were chosen randomly to increase the likelihood that many opinions were represented in the range of information that was gathered.

Here is a sample of comments from those conversations. Drawing on these ideas and their own knowledge of the College, the Steering Group is adopting several themes to serve as a frame for this year’s work. Information about those themes will be announced very soon.

We don’t need glitzy facilities, but we do need adequate buildings and space to enable a vibrant intellectual life.

Class is not just a “mental” thing; it changes people’s views on life. The fact that more Bates grads go onto social work than peer schools is something they must get from the Bates classroom.

The quality of Bates faculty is very high. The senior thesis requirement and the close student/faculty relationships are Bates’ most distinctive qualities. However, faculty are stretched right now; it’s very difficult for a faculty member to teach five courses and advise a group of senior thesis students well. Many peer school professors do not have the added burden of thesis advising.

Dream big. With a unique legacy of graduating “teachers and preachers” and championing service learning, Bates has a chance to take a leadership role in defining the liberal arts. With our legacy, why couldn’t we be a place that serves as a model; a place where the top educators come to discuss liberal arts issues?

How [can] members of the campus community offer ideas on future direction when some of us are not clear on what’s going on or already planned?

Diversity and cultural competency is something Bates is good at, but needs to build on. We need to make stronger links through interdisciplinarity and expand on what it is to teach in any given discipline.



Professors exhibit true enthusiasm toward their students. They value and support their students and are receptive to student ideas.

Education must have places for students to “get it wrong” or say stupid things. This is at the heart of our mission. Only if we’re confident enough to have space for everyone to take intellectual risks will we change minds and make a difference.

[I am] not convinced that Bates as an institution shares the “teacher-scholar” vision. Research causes faculty to become better teachers, and if we’re not committed to this vision, then all of the other changes (i.e. to the academic calendar, course load, etc.) won’t be relevant.

The Bates academic calendar was designed in the 19th century to respond to the climate and the economic needs of its students. Times have changed; is there a better calendar for Bates?

GUEST COLUMN



Professor Dennis Grafflin (History / Asian Studies) submitted the following to a listserv called factalk. It is reprinted here with his permission.

IS PLANNING A WASTE OF TIME?

Since we seem to be about to begin another round of heavy-duty planning, I thought I would share an idea from some recent reading. This is a second-hand derivation of the ideas of William H. Starbuck, who is a management biggie (details in the fine print at the end, for those who like authority figures).

His argument is, very simply, that “long-range, formal planning” is a waste of time in many situations. His meta-analysis of studies of strategic planning (which generally claim that it works) showed that (1) senior administrators who are heavily involved in strategic planning think well of it, and (2) organizations that do lots of strategic planning seem to do no better than organizations that do very little. (He looked at a lot of for-profits where there were nice quantitative measures of success.)

Long-term planning was not universally effort wasted. In the funeral casket industry, it seems to have been extremely successful. The explanation offered is that the size, structure, and mortality rates of the U.S. population are extremely well documented and understood, and these determining factors are not highly volatile. However, in sectors where change was rapid and chaotic (telecommunications is the example used), strategic planning was totally wasted effort because the rate of transformation of the industry far outstripped the predictive capacity of planners.

So, it seems that one question for us is to consider whether we are like casket makers or dot.com hopefuls. Are we guardians of the best that has been thought and written, or are we builders of tomorrow? If we are canon-huggers, then planning for the future as being more of the same seems pretty straightforward. If we are visionary transformers, then we should probably spend more time visioning and less time planning. My guess is that academics tend to be canon-huggers in practice, whose self-image is that they are visionary transformers—and that our strategic plans tend to be endorsements of what we already practice, dolled up in our best guess at tomorrow’s favorite shade of eyeshadow.

The conclusion I derive from this is that there’s probably some value in strategic planning for us, but that we might want to keep an eye on the amount of resources that goes into it, and not expect too much to come of it. Starbuck found that one of the best things about the way organizations deal with strategic plans is that they usually file them away and forget them as soon as the top manager in charge moves on to the next new thing, thereby minimizing the resources wasted in pursuit of a world that is no longer available.

William Starbuck has published over 130 articles, written two books and edited fourteen books, including the *Handbook of Organizational Design*, which was chosen the best book on management published during the year ending May 1982. He is professor-in-residence at the Lundquist College of Business of the University of Oregon and professor emeritus at New York University. He received his M.S. and Ph.D. in industrial administration at Carnegie Institute of Technology, after receiving an A.B. in physics at Harvard. He has held faculty positions at Purdue University, the Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and New York University. As well, he was a senior research fellow at the International Institute of Management, Berlin. He has been the editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, chaired the screening committee for senior Fulbright awards in business management, and served as the President of the Academy of Management. He formerly served on several editorial boards, including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Accounting, Management and Information Technologies*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. He has been elected a fellow of the Academy of Management, the American Psychological Association, the Association for Psychological Science, the British Academy of Management, and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. See <http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~wstarbuc/resume.html>

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always open to new ideas. In fact, it is designed to welcome more and more input all along the way.

As another advantage, projects that come forward in this process lead naturally to major elements in a campaign. Although there are many other (and perhaps more important) reasons to complete a plan, we are accomplishing advance work for future fundraising on a broad scale.

In closing, I want to say a bit about the timeline we are considering, especially two options for the last phase of this work. One idea is for the working groups to spend January through March developing plans for the themes and the steering group to spend April drafting a coherent whole report. In May, many readers in the community will comment on that draft, leading to a final document that is produced over the summer and presented at the beginning of the new academic year.

The second option is for the working groups to spend January through May at their work and the steering group to spend the early summer producing one report. That draft would go to the community in the fall, with the goal of completing a final document in early October. For now, we are deferring this decision to see just how the first phase of our work unfolds.

Thank you for your attention to this letter and to this important process. It is wonderful that excellent ideas and high energy exist in our community for this work. Please come forward and help make this experience a great and productive one for Bates.

With warm regards,