Macalester's Culture of Strategic Thinking & Planning

Strategic Planning and Analysis (SPA) Committee

Fall Semester, 2019

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Executive Summary

This document offers perspectives and guidance on bolstering a planning culture at Macalester. Taking its cues from the 2015 report *Thrive: Our Next Ten Years*, the Strategic Planning and Analysis (SPA) committee set forth to investigate planning practices within specific areas of the college. We sought the views and opinions of many individuals within many different administrative and academic units. Understanding that those interviews, amplified by our analysis of them, provide only partial glimpses rather than a comprehensive portrait of planning as it happens at Macalester, we offer these recommendations and observations.

Certain steps still need to be taken before we arrive at the goal, expressed in the *Thrive* report, of "a thoughtful, adaptive, and self-aware planning culture."[1] Among the steps that we recommend within and across all divisions and departments on campus, we prioritize these:

- To institute a tiered, iterative planning cycle that helps distinguish between and balance urgent items needing immediate attention, with important items of long-term significance.

- To align the planning process around a shared, aspirational vision linked to and mindful of the college's broader mission, culture, and history.

- To identify concrete objectives, thus focusing the planning process. These objectives should take into consideration the overall shared vision, data, evaluation of resources, and associated risk and uncertainty.

- To create an implementation plan, moving objectives from goals to actions through phased timelines, identified leadership, and evaluation.

Knowing that gaps in communication and participation put any planning culture at risk, we emphasize the value of soliciting input in order to achieve meaningful levels of buy-in. Collaboration itself is a process—rather than an outcome—and requires serious consideration on the part of planners and the individual participants.

- *Collaborative planning processes* intentionally foster broad participation by: engaging the appropriate constituents early in the planning process; providing participants with the tools needed to meaningfully contribute to the planning process; prioritizing transparency; and communicating clear timelines and expectations for participation.

- *Collaborative participation* in planning means that individuals: understand their role in the process; be mindful of how they participate, ask questions, and provide feedback;

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[1] *Thrive: Our Next 10 Years* (2015), 24.

reflect upon the degree to which they can participate; trust those that do choose to participate and assume the best of them; and commit the time and preparation that are necessary for meaningful participation.

1. Introduction

1.1 SPA's charge and study topic selection

The Strategic Planning and Analysis committee is composed of six elected faculty, three elected staff, two students, and three ex-officio members: the provost, the vice president of administration and finance, and the director of institutional research. Per the Faculty Handbook, SPA is charged with two main tasks during each academic year: 1) to monitor implementation of the most recent strategic plan; and 2) to engage in iterative strategic planning.

During its 2017-2018 session, SPA conducted a broad review of all 11 priorities in *Thrive: Our Next 10 Years,* the current strategic plan, authored in 2015.[2] This review motivated subsequent deep-dive studies into selected priorities during the spring 2019 and fall 2019 sessions. *Thrive* groups the 11 strategic priorities into two groups: those pertaining to the **quality and distinctiveness of the student experience** (seven priorities); and those pertaining to the **institutional culture and practices** necessary to create and sustain excellence (four priorities). Together then, the first group addresses *where* we want to go as a college; the second group addresses *how* we plan to get there. Throughout the committee's deliberations on potential study topics in spring 2019 and fall 2019, focusing on *how* over *where* emerged as a priority. Ultimately, a solid foundation of institutional culture and practices is (1) required for meeting the *Thrive* "quality and distinctiveness" priorities, and (2) critical in guiding the ongoing process by which we identify, implement, and assess any present or future strategic initiatives.

In spring 2019, SPA conducted a deep dive into the *Thrive* priority of moving to a model of truly **shared governance**. The report that followed, entitled "Shared Governance at Macalester College: Tracking Progress and Reimagining Possibilities," defines shared governance as the "structures and practices by which diverse voices across campus can and should be heard."[3] Shared governance is therefore central to everything we do here at Macalester. The report emphasized that "finding effective means of sharing information with all sectors of the community, while also **empowering and engaging stakeholders to share ideas, discuss**

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[2] While *Thrive: Our Next 10 Years* (2015) has been described as a collection of priorities rather than a plan, per se, this report uses the terms *strategic plan* and *strategic priorities* interchangeably when referring to that document.

[3] "Shared Governance at Macalester College: Tracking Progress and Reimagining Possibilities", SPA report, spring semester 2019.

strategic issues, and provide expertise and input for informed decisions, will be critical to the college's success in the years and decades to come." It naturally follows, then, that SPA's deep dive in fall 2019 was into the *Thrive* priority of creating a culture in which "strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making are the norm"—or, for short, of **building a *planning culture*** at Macalester.

Thrive's priority on strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making (Appendix 5.1) offers the following aspirational working definition of a planning culture [emphasis SPA's]:

> A true planning culture would exist on a number of levels. It would be informed by a clear set of **strategic objectives**, but also would enable us to react with both appropriate care and appropriate speed to **unanticipated changes and challenges**. It would be **reflected in governance**, which would be designed to ensure meaningful input from important constituencies and the ability to make smart and timely decisions; in **channels of communication**, which would be broadly understood and would enable anyone with a good idea to find a way of conveying that idea to others; and in **campus climate**, which would be receptive to creative and challenging thinking about the way we do our work.[4]

Note then that, though complementary, SPA's spring 2019 and fall 2019 studies are distinct. Whereas shared governance is *necessary* to sustaining a planning culture, it is by no means *sufficient*. Shared governance mainly provides the structure and charge for engaging "important" constituencies in conversations and decision-making around strategic thinking and planning. A planning culture then turns these conversations into actions. In other words, a planning culture *operationalizes* strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making.

1.2 Goals and process

The strategic plan offers three tactics toward building a planning culture at Macalester:

1. **Replace the Resources and Planning Committee with the Strategic Planning and Analysis committee.** As the writing of this report suggests, this task was completed.

2. **Create a Strategic Directions Committee on the Board of Trustees.** This has not yet been done. It is possible that the incoming president will reconsider committee structures.

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[4] *Thrive*, 24

3. **Alter the format of President's Council—a monthly gathering of administrative directors—to include regular discussions throughout the year about all areas of the college.** The President disbanded the President's Council in 2018.

Given their stages of completion, SPA's focus turned past these specific tactics and toward *Thrive*'s much broader charge to "establish a thoughtful, adaptive, and self-aware planning culture" at Macalester. Specifically, the committee focused on two goals: (1) to better understand how strategic thinking and planning currently happen within and across departments at Macalester; and (2) to provide a guide for operationalizing strategic thinking and planning at the departmental level, as inspired by the following *Thrive* charge:

> We can ensure that we openly challenge everyone in the community to think seriously about the strengths and weaknesses of what we do; we can ensure that we reject complacency and bring a healthy skeptical attitude to every assumption we examine; we can ensure that we are open about the presence of risk and uncertainty; we can ensure that we acknowledge regularly that plans can and almost always do change in response to unforeseen circumstances and that any Macalester plan will surely do so.[5]

Though the guide presented in Section 4 of this report focuses on department-level strategies, its themes generalize to broader campus-wide and cross-divisional initiatives, including the development of the college's next strategic plan.

To inform its work, SPA invited a broad range of constituents to participate in discussions around Macalester's planning culture. At the administrative level, SPA met with President Rosenberg as well as the VPs of Admissions and Financial Aid (Jeff Allen), Advancement (Andrew Brown), Student Affairs (Donna Lee), Academic Affairs (Karine Moe), and Administration and Finance (David Wheaton). For the student perspective, the SPA student representatives led sessions with Macalester College Student Government (MCSG). Throughout these discussions, members of several smaller units continued to pop up as "planning role models." Two of these were Jenn Haas, associate VP for Information Technology Services (ITS) and Donnie Brooks, director of Athletics. Both Haas and Brooks, having recently stepped into their positions at Macalester, were able to share the strategic and planful thinking that they carried into these new leadership roles. SPA also met with faculty and staff from two academic departments: the History department and the Mathematics, Statistics, and Computer Science (MSCS) department. We narrowed in on these two departments for different reasons. History recently introduced an innovative program requiring strategy and planfulness. MSCS, being the largest academic department on campus, offers the perspective of a department that could not function, let alone thrive, without a strong planning culture.

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[5] Ibid.

SPA shared a set of common prompts with each discussant (Appendix 5.2). However, the eventual conversations were naturally guided by the discussants' unique institutional perspectives.

It is important to emphasize here that, though SPA met with individuals within many different administrative and academic units, the views of these individuals provide only partial glimpses into Macalester's planning culture. Though these conversations can elucidate broad themes, they do not provide sufficient granularity to identify the distinct planning practices within each department / unit / line nor the experiences of distinct voices within the planning culture.

Finally, discussions around planning within our own campus community were complemented by broader research on strategic thinking and planning on college and university campuses. To this end, Karen E. Hinton's *Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in Higher Education* sponsored by the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) provided a valuable resource.[6]

1.3 Roadmap

This report is organized as follows. Section 2 elaborates upon the importance of building a planning culture at Macalester, and hence motivates the present study. Section 3 provides an overview and analysis of Macalester's current planning culture based on insights gathered through our discussions with individuals spanning the administration, staff, faculty, and students. Section 4 presents background research on the best practices in effective strategic planning. Informed by the insights in Section 3 and best practices in Section 4, Section 5 provides a guide for operationalizing strategic thinking and planning at the department level. Supporting documents are provided in the appendix, Section 6.

2. Motivation

Any planning process starts with the simplest of questions: "Why?" Why are we taking this on? What is our objective? What does success look like? Therefore, we begin this report by addressing why, at this moment, SPA chose to study strategic planning and timely decision-making over the other priorities in *Thrive*. Foremost in our mind is the upcoming presidential transition. We believe this document can help orient the incoming president to the strengths and character of the campus community. Likewise, this transition will surely be followed by a season of change in which the campus will respond to the ideas and priorities of a new college president, and vice versa. We must enter this season with optimism, energy, and purpose. Second, planning culture ties directly to SPA's study of shared governance in spring 2019. The current study could help guide the implementation of that report's strong

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[6] Karen E. Hinton, *A Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in Higher Education* (Ann Arbor The Society for College and University Planning, 2012).

recommendations aimed at empowering and engaging all community members in Macalester's strategic thinking and planning practices. Third, this study is an opportunity to recognize planning improvements and successes in recent years, and to discuss the process behind those positive changes. Fourth, this was a good time for SPA to connect with senior leadership on campus, many of whom were hired within the last five years. Finally, and most broadly, it is valuable, from time to time, to focus on our high-level values and principles, so that we can appropriately align specific initiatives. To this end, we offer a set of principles that are both **required of** *and* **fostered by** a culture of strategic thinking and planning.

Reflecting on the past, present, and future. In strategic thinking and planning, we must put effort into making meaningful observations and asking meaningful questions. Planning requires reflection on where one has been and where one wants to go. What worked in the past and how do we know? What has been the impact of this work? What does not work now? What are some goals and hopes that could be achieved? What, or rather who, has not been considered?

Counteracting the "tyranny of the now." In recent years, people have described the thrall of an always-on society as the "tyranny of now": the intense competition for our time, energy and attention that results from over-full inboxes and relentless social-media feeds. This is a repurposing of an existing phrase for a new context. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck coined "tyranny of now" and its counterpart "the power of yet" to describe the difference between a fixed mindset (being limited by what you are capable of doing now) and a growth mindset (being unlimited in how much you can improve in the future). In our always-on workplace setting, the "tyranny of now" is the conflation of urgent (needing immediate attention) and important (having long-term significance). If Macalester wants to grow, change and improve, then we must find a balance between taking care of what is urgent and paying attention to what is important. In other words, we must balance tactical responses with strategic planning.

Strengthening dialogue and communication. As we strengthen our planning culture, we must also nurture our channels of communication. Strategic thinking thrives when information flows vertically within a unit and circulates horizontally between units. It is borne from a culture that rewards and empowers a planning process steeped in dialogue. This creates the opportunity for a more successful outcome, and enables a smoother and more productive process. Dweck's research supports these claims. For example, one of her studies used a novel game to show that planning increases effectiveness in the face of adversity: "The usual ... game rewards you for getting answers right right now, but this game rewarded process. And we got more effort, more strategies, more engagement over longer periods of time, and more perseverance when

they hit really, really hard problems."[7] In other words, a planning culture increases resilience and prepares us for unforeseen future challenges.

At Macalester, one senior staff member guides their line with sayings such as: "Sharing is caring. Changing is amazing." It is easy to overlook the depth of this homespun wisdom. The language is simple, but the meaning is complex. "Sharing is caring." For the listener: when someone offers negative feedback, it's because they care and they want things to be better. For the speaker: offer your criticism generously so that your message can be heard. "Changing is amazing." No one should be insistent on keeping the status quo. We should aspire towards a growth mindset rather than defaulting to a fixed mindset. Following this advice is not easy, especially when the stakes are high, but this is all the more reason to ground ourselves in an ethos of planning and dialogue.

Aligning around a common process and goal. We don't plan for the sake of planning: we plan so that we can improve. Before we plan, we dream and we aspire to make things better. In other words, the dream is "why" and the plan is "how." After identifying an aspirational goal, planning begins. This process that cannot be done quickly or in isolation. We gather input and we refine the dream until it turns into a well-defined and achievable goal. Because we have planned together, this is a goal that other people can rally behind, believe in, and, ultimately, work toward. Collective planning gathers the power within each individual into a united force. The plan is the path and the opportunity to turn a dream into reality. Planning together creates shared purpose and resilience, but it also requires structure and process.

3. Background

In Section 3, we summarize the themes regarding Macalester's current planning culture that emerged throughout our discussions with various constituents, committee deliberations, and reevaluation of the original *Thrive* priority.

3.1 How strategic thinking and planning occurs at Macalester

Planning at Macalester is shaped by the preferences and leadership styles of department / division leaders. For example, the department heads within one division meet annually with everyone in their areas to discuss what is working and what is not. These department heads then share that information with one another and the department VP, then develop their plans for the year. In contrast, another division meets as a whole division at an annual retreat to articulate a shared direction for their division and discuss how they will move forward with it. Many leaders start the year with planning retreats, but this is not done uniformly. Recent

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[7] Carol Dweck, *The Power of Believing that You Can Improve,* TEDxNorrkoping. November 2014.

planning in one division relied on a team to clarify and specify the division's mission, vision, and values; a different group fine-tuned these ideas. Another staff member expects their direct reports to have a one-year plan. Their line developed the basis for these plans during a retreat where small groups brainstormed about ideas. The MSCS faculty meet by area (i.e., math, statistics, computer science) once per month. Ideas raised in these meetings percolate up to the monthly full-department meeting. However, MSCS prefers to discuss big issues at the department's annual retreat in May where they focus more deliberately on strategic thinking and planning.

Department / divisional plans have different lifespans at Macalester. Planning cycles vary from one-year plans, which are very common, to two- to three-year plans, four- to five-year view of planning, and 10-year plans. To make space for long-term planning and reflection among the immediacy of our day-to-day activities, it is common to hold an annual retreat. Similar planning cycles among the senior staff provide opportunities for cohesion across offices. To this end, the senior staff meet at an annual summer retreat to align their line-specific and institutional priorities. Zooming out, each December, the President typically identifies and delivers to the Board of Trustees a list of one to three of the most important priorities in the next calendar year. Progress toward these goals is assessed the following May.

Planning at Macalester is iterative and ongoing. Annual plans are not an end in themselves; they are touchstones that enable departments and divisions to monitor their progress toward various goals. One division's leadership team meets weekly to discuss strategic thinking and planning. In addition, planning must remain open to emerging issues, such as when Student Affairs recently recognized the need to place even greater emphasis on student mental health. Between annual retreats, most offices hold monthly or bi-weekly meetings. These more frequent meetings encourage iteration, assessment, and short-term planning throughout the longer planning cycles.

Planning at Macalester is facilitated by self-studies. Department self-studies assess the strengths, weaknesses and needs of a department and look ahead to the challenges that the department may face. This process looks different from unit to unit. For example, multiple discussants integrate SWOT Analysis throughout their planning cycles to identify their divisions' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In Academic Affairs, self-study plans are developed by the department and approved by the Provost. More specifically, academic departments and external-review committees are charged to consider general topics, such as departmental goals and objectives, strengths and concerns, curriculum and pedagogy, student life, and faculty and staff in assessing the current state and future challenges of a department and its programs.

Further, several units mentioned the **utilization of data** throughout self-study and planning. For example, the VP of Student Affairs worked in conjunction with Institutional Research to gather data (eg: on emerging issues around a shift in the student population, student health and wellness, diversity, and inclusion) which helped inform their decisions and direction. Advancement and Admissions have utilized student and alumni data as well as external-research recommendations for their planning. The MSCS department routinely and rigorously utilizes student demand data in their course and curriculum planning.

One of the important functions of planning at Macalester is to encourage reflection on current practices and to ask, "What's working?" and "What's not working?" Or, as in the case of the one staff member, to ask, "What needs to change over time?" and "What needs to change right now?" Reflection is sometimes built into the culture of a department. In one line, new employees are asked to question why Macalester does things the way it does. Another concludes gatherings with comments about what went well and what needs to change in future meetings and planning.

A great deal of reflection often occurs when new people step into leadership positions. For example, when one senior staff member stepped into their new position, they wondered if the structure of their line could be reorganized to better enable their staff to thrive. Out of that questioning came much discussion and structural change. Other critical thinking is spurred by new department members as well as new chairs, as was the case for the History Department, which recently spent a great deal of time, including weekly meetings, planning for a new curriculum. Critical thinking used for planning can also stem from the feedback groups receive from their colleagues.

Planning at Macalester seeks to help develop a shared, aspirational vision for our college, departments, and divisions, and the missions and goals of each. It identifies where we want to be in the future, provides a rationale for why we want the future we've identified, and articulates strategies for how to get there. The need to develop this shared vision was discussed by one senior staff member, who early in their time at Macalester assumed that the strategic plan was a reflection of their shared understandings. However, they later discovered that most members of their division did not feel connected to the plan. Because of this, they used a divisional retreat to help clarify and reaffirm the division's mission, vision, and values, which then laid the groundwork for further discussion of its goals and aspirations. Another division is developing a 10-year plan to identify a shared, aspirational vision. This planning requires working with all the VPs on their priorities, understanding our environment, and assessing the college's strengths and weaknesses so that the division can unite around a vision that will guide its work. **This planning also enables our college to be transparent about its goals and objectives.** Several leaders we spoke with seek to be increasingly transparent about their

planning, in order to help the campus community better understand their department or division's shared vision. An example of this occurred when one senior staff member sent an email to all faculty and staff explaining changes in structure and personnel for their division in fall 2018.

Because the strategic plan is designed to provide an institutional-level understanding of the college's goals for (usually) a decade, **planning encourages reflection on the strategic plan.** One senior staff member noted that the strategic plan was essential for formulating the college's recent capital campaign. When another senior staff member began at Macalester, they thought a lot about the future of their division in terms of the strategic plan. Examples of priorities that have been catalysts for change in their division include strengthening connections between liberal arts and vocation and increasing diversity within our student body, faculty, and staff. Their division's planning is guided, but not limited, by the strategic plan. Another senior staff member indicated that their division reflects on the strategic plan, but acknowledged they could link more directly to it in the future. A department or division's reflection on the strategic plan can be quite focused. Some leaders have found, though, that the strategic plan does not seem to include their areas. Others see the strategic plan as aspirational but a less than clear guide for planning as it lacks deliverables or measurables.

Planning at Macalester encourages preparation for the future, particularly for addressing the presence of risk and uncertainty, because especially at the Senior Leadership level, it calls us to identify the most pressing challenges and opportunities the college faces now and will face in the future. As a result, some departments and divisions of the college are thinking about the challenges of our financial model and demographic challenges to future enrollments, and considering opportunities to think anew about Macalester's relationship to a vibrant city. One senior staff member pointed out major challenges and realities Macalester is facing, such as the financial viability of our model; the increasing difficulty of student enrollment due to declining populations of students in the northeast and midwest; and increased unaffordability, as the comprehensive fee may exceed $100,000 within the next decade. Another noted that understanding the shifting demographics and needs of our students, and the expectation that demographics will continue to shift in the future, has been central to their division's planning for how to serve students' needs. In addition, Advancement is planning around the changing demographics and engaging the college's alumni to initiate programs and strategies that will help build our donor base.

3.2 Participation in strategic thinking and planning

SPA's inventory of planning at Macalester suggests that abundant energy and effort is put into planning and strategic thinking. While the committee's interviews and discussions highlighted strengths in the college's current practices, they also identified challenges. These challenges

center largely around participation and communication. Indeed, any institution of Macalester's size faces inherent obstacles to thorough and timely participation from all community members, and effective communication around strategic planning can falter for any number of reasons. The principles below respond to some of the more critical themes that emerged throughout the committee's study.

Effective planning processes should be transparent and facilitate appropriately broad participation. Decisions made without transparency or careful solicitation of input risk unfavorable consequences. An **opaque, black-box style of decision-making** promotes mistrust, frustration and, occasionally, fear. Sometimes the result is that policies made without campus input are simply ignored. **Planning cycles designed to be quick at the cost of participation** (i.e., speedy but opaque) ignore the unique perspectives of the broader college community. At risk is a lack of community buy-in and omission of critical perspectives and expertise. In fact, this often creates more work on the back end, countermanding the very efficiency sought at the front end.

Then to what extent and under what conditions does feedback need to be solicited, and in what phases of planning? If, as Karen Hinton explains in her *Practical Guide*, colleges and universities are plagued by a split between professional administrators such as the Board of Trustees (whose concerns and responsibilities are financial and fiduciary) and faculty (whose concerns and responsibilities are scholarly or intellectual), then it would follow that the feedback or input that one side (administration) seeks from the other (faculty) might not fully coincide with the feedback that the other side has to offer. Furthermore, the two "sides" are not necessarily equal in their capacities to shape and influence the overall strategic plan. Nevertheless, we find that planning processes are more successful when they make the effort and take the time to incorporate substantive input, including dialogue, reflection, and deliberation.

Our study identified instances of both missteps and successes in communicative, participatory planning. The 2016-17 Dewitt Wallace Library second floor remodel was one example of a process that felt less transparent to faculty, staff and students, because they were unsure of who was making the decisions. The result was fear about books disappearing, confusion about the use of space, and general resistance to the programming of the space. An example of more inclusive strategic planning is the library's 2019-20 space study, which sought input from all faculty, staff and students. Their request for input was genuine and took many forms, such as signs posted in multiple locations, multiple notices in the Mac Daily, and snacks as incentives to complete the survey.

Finally, any attempt to solicit input is probably better than no attempt at all, *with one possible exception*: what we call the "disingenuous solicitation of input," a pro forma gesture at collecting input in which responses are ignored, or solicited so poorly that participation is

minimal. When input is insubstantial or incorporated in a pro forma way, people feel demoralized and disregarded. Despite a call for shared governance in the Strategic Plan, SPA's spring 2019 study revealed that some staff continue to feel left out of important decision-making and planning processes. Similarly, some faculty report feeling demoralized that their input and participation is not sought often enough; rather, they become passive recipients of information about processes that are already underway. This feeling is perhaps especially acute among pre-tenure faculty and faculty off the tenure track line. In this regard, siloization and the priority placed on time and efficiency rather than on a more collaborative process has sometimes created a sense of being devalued or undermined, and has led to other after-the-fact and resource-consuming results. For example, the naming of Neill Hall in 2013, currently called Humanities Hall, illustrates a disconnect between the highest levels of planning and decision-making and the staff, students, and faculty.[8] Its *unnaming* in 2019 demonstrates that decisions can sometimes be made: very quickly while in consultation with broad constituencies; with consideration upon Macalester's urban location and its relationships with local or indigenous communities; and with reflection upon Macalester's past, present, and future.

Successful planning cycles communicate a clear timeline and expectations for the participation process. Participation in planning processes can break down if input is solicited on a poorly timed schedule, collected through confusing or inefficient channels, or drawn out with no clear timeline. Specifically, these inefficiencies can create either (1) feedback loops which result in indecision and inaction, or (2) constituents' surprise at the eventual outcome.

Those soliciting feedback should strive to give all community members a clear understanding of when and how they can participate. An ideal planning process would be iterative and involve a consistent feedback loop, with regular updates, feedback opportunities, and clear parameters explaining who gets to participate and when. *Clarity* about who gets to participate and how they get to participate is critical: Many of us have asked, upon the announcement of an important change, "Why wasn't I consulted?" Often, we *were* consulted, however ineffectually, which diminishes our ability and willingness to participate in the future.

Effective planning processes equip and empower participants with the tools needed to meaningfully contribute. As a most basic first step, the campus should encourage each community member to engage in Macalester's planning culture by providing thorough orientation, ongoing mentoring, and opportunities for professional development. With respect

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[8] The Humanities building bore that name until 2013, when the Board of Trustees voted to name it after Macalester founder Rev. Edward D. Neill. In 2019, after the student organization Proud Indigenous People for Education (PIPE) and the *Mac Weekly* drew greater attention to archival materials in which Neill displayed extreme racism toward indigenous people, the Board voted to strip his name from the building.

to specific planning processes, all participants should be provided with relevant information on the corresponding background, context, and motivation.

Effective planning processes facilitate both horizontal and vertical participation. *Who* collects input, and from whom, is also a crucial consideration. In Macalester's culture of strategic planning, this process generally happens in a top-down fashion, where division heads and supervisors spearhead the planning process and solicit input from those below them. Throughout the process, communication should flow vertically, as input is given to leaders and their attempts at planning are shared with and workshopped by all stakeholders. Our conversations with various community members revealed that Macalester is fairly good at this vertical flow. However, we're perhaps less effective at the horizontal circulation of information between departments and divisions—the silo effect lamented by many. For example, academic departments often plan by conceiving of the past, present and future in terms of their individual disciplines or departments, rather than in larger institutional terms. Possible new avenues for fostering a culture of planning might be pursued through efforts in which departments / units / divisions strategically come together more often to plan collaboratively and share best practices.

Planning in silos *could* be acceptable and theoretically fruitful as long as an overarching direction is shared. However, *without* an overarching direction, siloed top-down planning creates problems for the institution. Some of these problems only show up months or years later, and require extensive work to correct or reverse.

We identified multiple examples of where good planning and communication across divisions facilitated a successful change. First, by creating faculty liaison positions, the Admissions office allowed faculty to give input into the college's admission policies, and in turn benefited the admission process, making it less opaque and creating a sense that faculty belong in the admissions process. Second, the 2019-20 Dewitt Wallace Library renovations again offer a fascinating example. The planning committee for this renovation includes the Library Director and Associate VP for ITS. The Library Director, who is responsible for the physical facility, is taking the lead. At this early stage, there is also faculty and student representation, and Facilities Services has two people at the table. The Provost and VP for Administration and Finance are also part of the planning committee, reflecting the importance of the academic program decision-making and the potentially significant cost. Yet with the library leadership taking the lead role, the *programming* is certainly central to the work. This planning design represents the best practices used in other major building projects, where key stakeholders are central to the discussion but key experts and advisers are also at the table to help guide the team regarding practical considerations.

Individual participants carry a unique set of responsibilities in the planning process. The above principles broadly highlight the responsibilities of those *leading* planning cycles. Yet even those planning cycles which go to great lengths to solicit community input on an issue or proposed policy change are sometimes met with silence. This lack of participation can be interpreted as apathy, causing planners to diminish or forego any subsequent efforts at solicitation. Thus it is important to note the critical responsibilities of the individual participants alongside the genuine and accessible requests for input from leadership.

At the individual level, it is important to reflect upon the time and energy one can give to the planning process on top of other existing commitments. If one does choose to participate, they must commit the time and preparation necessary for *meaningful* participation. If one opts out of the planning process, it is important that they trust those that *do* choose to participate. Finally, as individuals, we must reflect upon how we respond to, and can embrace, necessary change and transition introduced by planning processes.

4. Qualities of Plans

Section 3 offers a glimpse into the strengths and weaknesses of Macalester's current planning culture. Turning these observations into recommendations requires context. To this end, Hinton's *Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in Higher Education* offers a set of best practices. Hinton suggests that the foundation and first component of any strategic plan should be a concise **statement of purpose or mission statement** that clearly states: "this is what we are here to do."[9] Exhaustive or historical information may be appended to the mission statement if desired. An institutional **vision statement** is developed after the mission statement and clearly articulates institutional values, goals, and vision. This vision statement describes what an institution hopes to become, outlines a timeline for doing so, and aligns "mission, vision, goals and resources."[10] Vision statements clarify for everyone, especially those asked to implement a strategic plan, a clear sense of the institution's future.

Hinton notes that the vision statement should be regularly reviewed and revised by members of the community tasked with monitoring the strategic plan. If the mission statement and vision statement outline and describe the present and envisioned state of the institution, the **strategic plan** is "used to bridge the gap between the two"[11] and to direct resource allocation. In Hinton's view, a strategic plan includes goals and objectives and a clear implementation plan. It should allow for phasing, recognizing that one goal or objective may be predicated upon the completion of another. This is especially true when a strategic goal involves more than one area of the institution. Hinton cites the example of an upgrade in student services; if an upgrade in

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[9] Hinton, 8.
[10] Hinton, 10.
[11] Ibid.

technology is required to meet this goal, what's the involvement from ITS and how much planning time is needed? Will these changes and upgrades require staff training or space adjustments that fall under the purview of Facilities Services? The recognition of phasing in a strategic plan is important for two reasons: it allows members of the planning committee to engage in institutional-level thinking, and it requires consideration of implementation alongside the planning process.

The **implementation plan** should provide a blueprint and timeline for realizing strategic goals and objectives, and should broadly outline all resources required. For the purposes of strategic planning, Hinton suggests that resources should be defined broadly to include people, time, space, technology, and funding. Unlike the mission and vision statements and the goals and objectives section of the strategic plan, the implementation plan should be frequently revised and modified in response to environmental factors. For example, Macalester's previous strategic plan (*Thrive's* predecessor) did not anticipate the Great Recession or advances in technology. An effective implementation plan should clearly indicate who is responsible for implementing action toward a goal, when it will occur, and what measures will be utilized to determine successful completion of that goal. Hinton also suggests that it is "wise to identify one and only one person to be the agent accountable for overseeing completion of an action."[12]

5. Guide for Operationalizing Strategic Thinking and Planning

Macalester's strategic plan provides a shared framework for strategic thinking and planning at the College level. It can help orient, but not entirely direct, the actions at the division or department levels. To this end, the general recommendations below provide a working guide that can be tailored to operationalize strategic thinking and planning within each individual department. This guide places positive value on: integrated **planning practices** that are aligned around a shared vision and identify a clear process for implementation; and **planning cultures** which foster broad participation in the planning process and prioritize communication within and across departments. Together, these recommendations encourage departments to ask *what, who, how,* and *why*: *What* is to be done? *Who* will do it? *How* will it be done? and, most importantly, *Why* will it be done?

A. Planning practices

Institute a planning cycle

The immediacy of our day-to-day activities often interrupts more sustained strategic thinking and planning. Instituting a planning cycle is critical to balancing *urgent* items that need

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[12] Hinton, 13.

immediate attention with *important* items that have more long-term significance. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Create a tiered planning cycle:

    - Multi-year plans orient planning around long-term goals; while

    - Annual plans can be more flexible, iterative, and responsive to emerging issues.

- Link the timing of your department's planning cycle to institutional planning cycles (e.g.: academic calendar, budget cycle, assessment cycles).

- Dedicate time and space to strategic thinking and reflection throughout the planning cycle, using:

    - annual retreats or workshops committed to broad visioning;

    - monthly meetings that facilitate iteration and assessment; and

    - as relevant, monthly sub-group meetings that provide space for refinement.

- Utilize your precious time together by focusing meetings on substantive topics over day-to-day details that can otherwise be communicated over email.

Identify a shared, aspirational vision

Effective planning processes are aligned with and motivated by a vision that is shared within and across departments. It is this vision that identifies not *what* we want to do, but **why**—*why we are here and who we seek to become.* Our recommendations are as follows:

- Develop and validate a vision with all department members by:

    - workshopping as a group;

    - recognizing that good ideas can come from anywhere; and

    - facilitating and inviting broad participation.

- Avoid a fragmented and siloed vision by building collaborative relationships outside your office/department/division/reporting line.

- Link your department's vision and planning to:

    - the college's mission and current strategic plan;

- the college's culture and history;

- environmental factors outside your department and outside the college;

- the quality and distinctiveness of the student experience; and

- other department specific guiding documents (e.g., for academic departments, the curricular development plan).

Identify concrete objectives

Whereas a shared vision articulates *why* we want the future we've identified, a set of concrete objectives identifies **what** we plan to do to get there. Thus, objectives provide necessary focus to the planning process. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Engage in reflection. With respect to the shared vision, objectives should be informed by asking:

  - What is working? What is not working?

  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of what we do?

  - What are the current opportunities? What are the current threats/obstacles?

  - What needs to change over time? What needs to change right now?

- Ground your objectives in evidence and data.

- Critically evaluate the tradeoffs, and the new or restructured resources, that will be required to pursue any new objective, including people, funding, time, space, and technology.

- Consider the inherent risk and uncertainty associated with any potential objective.

Create and follow an implementation plan with phased goals

Moving objectives from goals to actions requires a directive and documented implementation plan. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Set specific timelines for addressing each objective.

- Sequence and phase objectives throughout the planning cycle in order to:

- ○ balance resources (people, time, budget) across the planning cycle;

  - ○ build in the opportunity to learn, iterate, and perhaps pivot.

- ● Split each objective into a set of smaller, supporting actions.

- ● Foster ownership for implementing each objective: Who might lead the initiative?

- ● Develop an evaluation plan for monitoring progress: How will we know when we've met an objective and how do we prove it? Who is responsible for monitoring progress and stating when a goal is met?

B. Planning culture

Successful implementation of the **planning practices** above requires a broader **planning culture** which prioritizes participation, communication, and individual responsibility.

Foster and value broad participation in the planning process

An informed and effective planning process requires a strong model of shared governance, healthy channels of communication, and a shared, aspirational vision. Simply put, the quality and successful implementation of any planning process will be diminished without broad insights, collaboration, and buy-in. Our recommendations for fostering participation throughout the planning process are as follows:

- ● Identify who, both within and outside the department, you should engage in the strategic thinking and planning process. To this end, those leading the planning process should ask:

  - ○ Who, including those closest to the work and expanding outward, will be "impacted" by your work and decisions?

  - ○ Who has expertise, experience, insights, and history to share?

  - ○ With whom should you collaborate and cooperate in order to make your vision a reality?

- ● Equip participants with the tools needed to meaningfully contribute to the planning process. Leaders should:

  - ○ Provide orientation and mentoring to new colleagues.

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  - Share information relevant to the planning process (context, history, motivation, guiding documents, and timeline).

  - Advocate for more professional-development opportunities for participants.

- Prioritize transparency and communication. Leaders should:

  - Clarify the participants' role in the planning process and be transparent about how their input will be utilized.

  - Communicate relevant timelines for the planning process.

  - Update participants on relevant decisions and actions.

  - Be mindful of people's time. Don't seek participation if you don't plan to use it.

- Identify and communicate clear timelines for participation. Leaders should:

  - Avoid back-loading participation, i.e., inviting people into the planning process when it's too late to meaningfully contribute.

  - Avoid endless feedback loops. Participants can become disillusioned and ultimately surprised by outcomes resulting from a vague and drawn-out participation process.

Engage in the planning process on an individual level

Any individuals participating in the planning process should:

- Reflect upon the degree to which you can participate in the planning process. Given your schedule and competing commitments, how can you make the space and time for participation in Macalester's planning process?

- Trust those that do choose to participate and assume the best of them.

- Planning processes introduce iteration and change. Reflect upon how you respond to, and can embrace, necessary change.

- Commit the time and preparation that are necessary for *meaningful* participation. If you feel that you do not have the necessary background or context for meaningful participation, be emboldened to request this information from others.

6. Appendix

5.1 *Thrive* Priority on Strategic Thinking and Careful, Timely Decision-Making (2015)

Recognizing the limitations of any strategic plan, create a culture at Macalester in which strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making are the norm.

Rationale

The mistake made by most organizations when engaging in strategic planning lies in defining the goal chiefly as the production of a "plan" that will capture the best ideas of the moment and act as a touchstone during the ensuing five or ten years. If one accepts this definition, success in this exercise would presumably mean the creation of a document that is both thoughtful and bold and that pushes Macalester to new levels of excellence. Such an outcome is powerfully attractive and remains, in some sense, the desired endpoint of our efforts, but like many powerfully attractive things, it can lead to some less than clear thinking.

Here is the problem. When setting institutional goals, it is important to define success in terms that one can largely control, which is why, for instance, it makes little sense to define success in terms of any system of rankings (one cannot control either the methodology or what other colleges are doing). At the end of the day, there is much about a final "strategic plan" over which we have relatively little control, regardless of how hard we work or even how brilliantly we think. We cannot control the evolution of public policy regarding higher education. We cannot control the use of "merit aid" by our peers and competitors. We cannot control the rate of growth in the global economy or the distribution of wealth. Maybe most important, we cannot control the future and cannot therefore reliably judge the level of accuracy or risk in many elements of any fixed plan. This last point is of course true for virtually all organizations, but it seems especially germane to colleges and universities at a moment when so much about the road ahead for American higher education seems wreathed in fog and when those who most confidently claim prescience are so often uninformed.

This absence of control, even more than timidity or overly conventional thinking, is why most strategic plans are unimpressive when produced and more or less useless two or three years after their creation. It is not because people at other colleges or other organizations are less smart than we are, but because they assume a level of foreknowledge and a command of events that are unrealistic.

Compounding our difficulty is the fact it is nearly impossible to be clear about the precise problems we are trying to solve. Planning processes are easiest when their goals are most

evident: a business faced with a loss of market share or a college confronted by an ongoing structural deficit may not be able to solve its problem, but at least it has an unambiguous awareness of what it must try to do. It must deal with an existential threat. Macalester (happily) faces no such threat within the time frame being considered in this particular planning exercise. We know that there is serious pressure on our operating budget and that economic forecasters predict that this pressure will intensify. We know that technology is doing something to higher education, though whether it is good or bad, disruptive or evolutionary, is far from clear. We suspect that being distinctive would be a good thing, though we are aware that too much distinctiveness at the expense of general appeal is risky. We want to improve the way we are perceived even as application and retention levels suggest that we are perceived more positively than ever before. In short, we are trying to come up with answers without being able precisely to articulate the questions.

All of this leads to the following conclusion: we should think about the outcome of our work more in terms of the process than in terms of a final product, or, put another way, more in terms of planning than in terms of a plan.

We have far more control (though not absolute control) over the nature of strategic planning at Macalester than we do over the utility or feasibility of any plan we actually create. **We can ensure that we openly challenge everyone in the community to think seriously about the strengths and weaknesses of what we do; we can ensure that we reject complacency and bring a healthy skeptical attitude to every assumption we examine; we can ensure that we are open about the presence of risk and uncertainty;** we can ensure that we acknowledge regularly that plans can and almost always do change in response to unforeseen circumstances and that any Macalester plan will surely do so**.**

In short, we can do a great deal to establish a thoughtful, adaptive, and self-aware **planning culture** at Macalester. The persistence and pervasiveness of that culture will be more important to the future of the college than any document. To cite President Dwight D. Eisenhower, "the reason it is so important to plan [is] to keep yourselves steeped in the character of the problem that you may one day be called upon to solve—or to help to solve."

A true planning culture would exist on a number of levels. It would be informed by a clear set of strategic objectives, but also would enable us to react with both appropriate care and appropriate speed to unanticipated changes and challenges. **It would be reflected in governance**, which would be designed to ensure meaningful input from important constituencies and the ability to make smart and timely decisions; in **channels of communication**, which would be broadly understood and would enable anyone with a good idea to find a way of conveying that idea to others; and in **campus climate**, which would be receptive to creative and challenging thinking about the way we do our work.

Tactics

- As a first step toward more truly shared governance, we recommend replacing the current Resources and Planning Committee with a standing Strategic Directions Committee whose members would include (but not necessarily be limited to) the president, the provost, the VP of Administration and Finance, and elected members of the faculty. This would be a forum within which chief administrators and faculty representatives could discuss in confidence any and all matters of institutional importance. (See section on governance.)

- Alter the committee structure of the Board of Trustees to allow for the creation of a Strategic Directions Committee of the Board. This might be done through the addition of a committee or through a more thorough revision of the current slate of committees. The Strategic Directions Committee of the Board and the campus Strategic Directions Committee would meet together during each board meeting. (See section on governance.)

- Alter the format of President's Council—a monthly gathering of administrative directors—to include regular discussions throughout the year about all areas of the college. The goal of these would be to share information, to seek feedback, and to ensure that natural areas of either overlap or inconsistency are identified.

5.2 Discussion prompts

In the spirit of learning from and brainstorming with you, we invite you to share your insights on this topic with the Strategic Planning and Analysis committee. We hope that our conversation will touch on some of the following topics, whether through broad observations or specific examples.

1. How does planning happen within your reporting line?

    a. How are new visions or priorities identified, implemented, and assessed?

    b. What priorities do you try to balance when planning?

    c. What are the greatest constraints?

    d. How does information flow up and down your reporting line?

    e. If relevant, how and why has this process changed over time?

2. When planning, how and when do you engage constituencies outside your line (eg: other departments, staff, faculty, and students)?

3. When planning, how do you consider the role your line plays in the broader liberal arts learning environment?

4. Can you think of any examples in which:

    a. Your planning around a new initiative required you to "stop doing" something else? How did you make these decisions?

    b. Your planning around an issue could have benefitted from a different culture of strategic thinking and planning at Macalester?

5. More broadly, what do you see to be the strengths and vulnerabilities of how planning happens at Macalester?

    a. What do we do well?

    b. Where are the vulnerabilities? What are the barriers to strategic thinking and planning?

    c. How might we improve?

    d. Do our planning processes/practices support innovation and thinking outside the box?

    e. Does our planning process reflect/consider our mission as a liberal arts college?

6. Do you have any role models on this campus with respect to planning? Why are they role models for you? Alternatively, can you name a few people (inside and outside your department) that:

    a. support or inspire the work that you do?

    b. have a positive impact on the college?

    c. with whom you would like to collaborate on a project or initiative?

    d. whose work you admire?

7. Are there people in your area in peer colleges that do planning really well? What do you admire about their planning process?