

Are we THRIVE-ing? A reflection on the current strategic plan for Macalester and implications for creating a culture of iterative strategic planning

The Strategic Planning and Analysis Committee, 2017-2018

Kathryn Splan, Shilad Sen, Wang Ping, Luyen Phan, William Moseley, Jake Mohan, Liz Jansen, Tasneem Issa '18, Kristi Fackel, Caroline Duncombe '18, Devavani Chatterjea

Ex officio: Polly Fassinger, David Wheaton, Karine Moe

The new Strategic Planning and Analysis Committee (SPA) is charged to "review and monitor the implementation of the existing strategic plan and conduct iterative strategic planning." This year, SPA conducted its first review of progress towards our current strategic plan. Our goals were to 1) inform the Macalester community about the status of each priority as outlined in the strategic plan, and 2) gain a better understanding of how the current plan informs the work of different constituents of the Macalester community.

SPA members identified a group of individuals, offices, and organizations on campus aligned with the stated priorities in our current Strategic Plan (Thrive; 2015-25). We then had conversations with these bodies in small groups with the following three 3 questions as a common framework:

1. We have identified you/your group as aligned with Strategic Priority X. What has your office done in the last 2-3 years that you view as being particularly germane to advancing this priority?
2. What should we be doing around this priority that we are not currently doing?
3. Are there other priorities your work intersects with that you would like us to know about?

Student members of SPA reached out to Macalester College Student Government (MCSG) officers as well as other student groups and identity collectives to ensure that student voices and perspectives are captured in this snapshot of the current strategic plan as it lives on campus.

Our conversations revealed different levels of awareness of the plan and different levels of progress on the eleven strategic priorities. It is not surprising that there have been different levels of progress around each of these priorities. The text of the Thrive Plan states an expectation of dynamism that reflects changing context and circumstances the College can reasonably expect in the lifecycle of the plan. In some cases, our conversations brought to light areas within these priorities that have not yet been emphasized in the first three years of the plan's life. In others, community members suggested redirections of efforts prompted by the understanding that ideas from early in the plan's life have become less relevant with time. What follows is a summary of the deep and rich conversations that brought forth answers, new questions, and shed light on what "strategic planning" means and does not mean in our community.

Internationalism

Strategic priority: Reinforce Macalester's distinctive excellence in internationalism and, more broadly, encourage every department and program in the college to seize and develop opportunities to be distinctive in additional ways that serve our students well.

Internationalism has long been a hallmark of the college. Since 2008, the number of international students at Macalester has grown by more than fifty percent. The International Student Programs office supports these students' academic, cross-cultural and interpersonal experiences. Many of the co-curricular activities in support of internationalism are currently located in the Institute of Global Citizenship. The Center for Study Away has worked with different academic departments to make study away possible for more students, increasing program offerings while reducing financial and other barriers. The International Roundtable continues to draw attendees and involve more faculty, staff and students. There has been no measurable change in the number of courses offered that fulfill the graduation requirement for internationalism. The IGC is leading the College's latest Mellon project that focuses on internationalism and multiculturalism, providing opportunities for faculty to discuss and develop courses that meet Macalester's general education requirements. Some faculty and staff have concerns about under-investment in this area, while others are positive and optimistic. Macalester has been a leader among its peer institutions in its commitment to internationalism and international student recruitment. For example, the college has historically excelled in the recruitment of Davis Scholars (approximately 28% of the international student population) from the United World College high schools across the globe. In recent years, we have faced significant competition for these students, along with shifts in international student interest and changes in recruitment efforts at the college. In the face of growing competition, many feel that we should reaffirm and reinvigorate our distinctiveness in the realm of internationalism, and connect it more closely and interactively to service and multiculturalism.

Students desire cohesion across the priorities of internationalism and diversity and suggested that the college expand and explore internationally-focused curricular programming to include areas (e.g. Caribbean studies) that are currently less well represented in our academic offerings.

Diversity

Strategic priority: Increase the diversity within our student body, faculty, and staff, with a particular emphasis on increasing the presence and retention within our community of traditionally under-served populations.

The general consensus among students, staff, and faculty shows that Macalester is making progress in diversity and inclusivity but could do better. There have been recent changes to the institutional structures that support different kinds of diversity on campus. New administrative structures in the Institute for Global Citizenship (IGC) support the integration of multiculturalism and internationalism. New positions (including one focused on college access) have been created in the Department of Multicultural Life. The Center for Religious & Spiritual Life has engaged with diversity work centered on faith communities and student identity collectives on campus. The administration has made efforts to ensure greater diversity in hiring (e.g., of the 24 tenure/tenure-track faculty hired since 2015, 10 have been faculty of color) and enrollment. At the same time, many community members sense diversity gaps exacerbated by the recent departures of personnel whose work centered on this topic. Many feel that while progress has been made on hiring diverse faculty, we need to do more

to retain diverse faculty and help them flourish at Macalester; create and foster a shared vision and a broader sense of community solidarity through the existing diversity-related programming and organizations; and finally, while we've increased the percentage of domestic students of color since 2015 (from 20% to 23% of the student body), do more to recruit local students from diverse communities in the Twin Cities.

Students point to the creation of the MCSG Diversity and Inclusion Officer position as proof of the student body's strong commitment towards creating a more diverse and inclusion community. Students emphasized the desire to direct energy towards retention of domestic students of color and recruitment of local students from diverse and underrepresented communities.

Issue-Based Programs

Strategic priority: Become a leader in the offering of what might be called issue or problem focused academic programs, similar in nature to some of the concentrations that have been created during the past decade.

While issue-based academic programs exist in multiple forms at the college, for this report we focus on academic concentrations as one form of this idea. Since the 2015 Strategic Plan was published, the number of students and faculty involved with concentrations has increased modestly. We currently have ten concentrations in our curriculum. The numbers of graduating students in the five most populous concentrations—Community and Global Health, Human Rights, Humanitarianism, Critical Theory, Urban Studies and Legal Studies—have held steady since the adoption of the strategic plan. Two new concentrations, Cognitive Science and Food, Agriculture and Society were launched in September 2017. Concentrations, as a whole, have continued to face challenges on campus: First, shortly after the strategic plan was released, EPAG declared a one-year moratorium on new concentrations. Second, concentrations continue to be constrained by limited budgets and personnel support. Third, disagreement persists over the spirit and intent of concentrations (i.e., whether they should they be highly structured or more experimental spaces). Fourth, there is a general lack of awareness concerning this strategic priority. Given student interest in these programs, concentration directors felt that modest or moderate investments could yield positive outcomes in student recruitment, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, and creative vocational exploration.

Students advocated for greater visibility of concentrations and coherent programming across concentrations on campus, especially because concentrations are popular among current students and important in student recruitment. Students further pointed to current problems facing student concentration accessibility: communication gaps among concentrations, lack of co-curricular programs linking concentrations, and recognition of concentrations as curricular entities beyond Macalester.

Location and Urban Sustainability

Strategic priority: Emphasize our urban location, and our historical commitments to sustainability, by focusing on the global city as a means to explore the intersections among such topics as the environment, science, technology, economics, and social justice.

The Educating Sustainability Ambassadors grant has helped fund the development of several courses and/or course modules engaging issues of sustainability, and made possible an International Faculty Development Seminar “Transitions to Sustainability” in Denmark. Macalester overall, however, has not embraced this priority in all of its complexity beyond the successes of this grant-funded series of initiatives. It is generally felt that sustainability initiatives on campus have chosen a narrower focus on campus sustainability (energy usage, waste reduction, etc.) over a broader curricular and co-curricular approach. While we await the results of a recent review of sustainability on campus, Macalester faculty, staff, and students have identified many areas needing improvement. Faculty whose scholarship and teaching intersect are frustrated that this priority lacks coordination and coherence across curricular and co-curricular work on campus. The Sustainability Office would like to see more meaningful collaborations across campus as well. While there is significant faculty and staff effort dedicated to building more relationships off campus to strengthen networks for students, to connect Macalester to its urban community, and to expand our capacity for resilience in the face of climate change, these efforts do not connect with each other as effectively as they might. Staff and faculty agree that urban sustainability could provide a useful framework to both address current issues in our community and connect to our priorities of diversity and internationalism. They believe that *urban* sustainability is the area where Macalester should strive to make itself distinct from its peer institutions, and develop urban sustainability as the fourth pillar of Macalester’s mission.

Students also emphasized a need for enhanced cohesion among faculty, students, and staff with sustainability initiatives that integrate curricular and co-curricular projects. The newly created MCSG positions of Sustainability Officer and Civic Engagement Officer as well as student groups such as MacCares are ready to bring student energy to such cohesive efforts.

Entrepreneurship

Strategic priority: Draw upon the energy of our students, the success of our alumni, and the vibrancy of our urban location to make entrepreneurship, including social, commercial and artistic, an area of distinctive strength at Macalester.

Entrepreneurship has emerged as a prominent focus area at Macalester since 2015. While various academic, creative, and co-curricular entrepreneurial programs have existed on campus for many years, the current strategic plan has given momentum to explicit entrepreneurship-based programming in the form of new staff positions, including an Entrepreneur in Residence, continued and new courses in several departments, programming to support student projects, and new communal space dedicated to free-form creative work on campus. However, clear tensions exist across campus about definitions of entrepreneurship and its role in various departments and campus endeavors. Collaborative opportunities exist that would more fully engage all parts of campus in entrepreneurship programming, to continue to discover new ways of conceptualizing entrepreneurial endeavors across disciplines, and to recognize and support entrepreneurial practices that reside elsewhere on campus, e.g., in the fine arts and experimental sciences. Ongoing development of entrepreneurial programs to intentionally intersect with other areas of the strategic plan—including alumni engagement, issue-based programs, and vocational exploration— could engage a wider community of faculty, students, staff and alumni across departments and disciplines.

Students generally are enthusiastic about entrepreneurship initiatives on campus and feel this is a particularly well-resourced area; however, they pointed to barriers such as a focus on rapid prototyping and emphasis on start-up-style ventures that privilege certain academic

disciplines. Students would like to see a broader, more welcoming definition of entrepreneurship that might not dissuade certain sections of the Macalester student body from participating in this work.

Vocation

Strategic priority: Strengthen the connections between a liberal arts education and vocation by making more obvious and accessible the paths from the student experience at Macalester to eventual careers.

Many ongoing programs that support career and vocational exploration in the Career Development Center (CDC), Civic Engagement Center (CEC), Internship Office, and elsewhere on campus have long histories that predate the current strategic plan. However, much has changed in this area on campus since 2015. The CDC has expanded its staffing (including the establishment of a new Dean position) and developed a new organization chart, and the CEC has continued to expand its programming to cultivate and support vocational discernment and reflective practices in students. Some staff and faculty across campus expressed some discontent with the word "vocation" as it is used in the strategic plan; they are concerned that the plan does not encapsulate the full concept of vocation and is too focused on jobs and careers. There is excitement about finding synergy with other strategic priority areas including entrepreneurship, engaging with the urban location, issue-based programs, and alumni engagement. Many people feel that areas of inefficiency at both systemic and programmatic levels have developed from a lack of coordination of efforts and focus. The Internship Office's program of providing stipends for unpaid summer internships has been well-received in all divisions, although the faculty in the natural sciences would like to see students be able to apply for this funding to support summer research opportunities. Increased collaboration between staff, faculty, departments, and programs across campus is needed to highlight vocational discernment for all students and to fully capitalize on this priority's synergies with other areas of the strategic plan.

Students pointed to MCSG's recent creation of a fund to subsidize graduate school entrance examination fees for those with demonstrated need as an example of greater accessibility to career development beyond Macalester. While they acknowledged the many benefits of CDC programming and departmental support in vocational exploration, students pointed to the need for more information and support for particular professional areas such as engineering and nursing, in addition to better access to knowledge of diverse professional expertise and experiences that current faculty have beyond their more visible academic work.

Technology and teaching

Strategic priority: Become a leader among liberal arts colleges in the use of technology to improve and broaden the reach of teaching and learning.

Note: At the time the current strategic plan was written there was considerable interest in the development of on-line course offerings and other models of "virtual" classrooms. This is no longer an active area of curriculum development at Macalester. Our discussions therefore centered on the development and support of technology in the classroom, the role of ITS in the development of new technologies, the rapidly changing landscape of knowledge infrastructures, and the role of the library.

Macalester has made significant efforts to support the role of technology in the classroom and beyond. There is general consensus among students, faculty and staff that Macalester could be better positioned to capitalize on current technologies and innovate with new methodologies. Macalester has increased support for new teaching technologies, improved Moodle support, and integrated teaching and scholarship, particularly in the digital liberal arts. Recent classroom re-designs and prioritization of flexible teaching spaces in new building projects allow faculty to develop alternative classroom pedagogies. Faculty and staff also agree that Macalester lacks resources dedicated to technology development to keep pace with these rapid changes. Faculty members lack sufficient personnel and infrastructural support to thoroughly investigate and implement technological innovations. Many academic Information Associates have shown interests in being technological innovators and partners with faculty in the classroom, but many have left the college. Those who remain say they have little time to do more than provide basic faculty support. Information Technology Services' (ITS) staffing challenges are exacerbated by the competitive job market in our urban location. Moreover, modern technology is fundamentally changing the way knowledge is produced, shared, and used. Digital literacy has become an essential skill that our students must master to thrive at Macalester and beyond. The library is undertaking various projects to more fully engage with digital information infrastructures in curricular and co-curricular ways. The Serie Center, the library, and ITS are working together to develop both faculty expertise and student facility in this area. However, more support is needed for platforms where faculty can share their work and pursue innovative forms of digital scholarship, and create innovative teaching and learning.

MCSG's initiatives to link the priorities of sustainable practices and academic technology by pushing for projects such as paperless course evaluations is one example of their commitment towards this priority.. Students would like to see Macalester explore formal programming, workshops, or short courses that teach technical and computing skills outside the format of regular credit-bearing classes.

Campus culture and practices

Strategic priorities:

1. Recognizing the limitations of any strategic plan, create a culture at Macalester in which strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making are the norm.
2. Ensure the continuance of a sustainable financial model that will enhance the ability of the college to fulfill its mission.
3. In order to allow for the investment of time and resources implied by our strategic priorities, create both the institutional will and appropriate institutional ability to stop doing some things that we do at present, even while recognizing that everything we do has some value and some community support.
4. Move from a model of divided governance to a model of truly shared governance, in order to facilitate institutional decision-making that is informed, timely, and strategic.

Community members agree on the importance of these cultural priorities but feel that the vast majority of work on these issues remains ahead of us. Financially, the outlook for the college remains stable for now. In the past decade, the college has remained relatively

immune to yearly financial fluctuations, but it lags behind many peers in net tuition revenue and alumni giving. To improve its financial health, the college has begun strategically changing admissions practices to close the gap in net tuition revenue and is planning advancement initiatives that will increase giving.

On governance, faculty members and administration feel that recent changes such as discussions as a "quasi-committee of the whole," before important votes have smoothed adoption of major resolutions but some worry that this has also made it difficult for important concerns and dissent to be heard. The formation of the Faculty Advisory Council was prompted by this desire for shared governance, and to improve communication between faculty and senior administration. While promising, this initiative remains largely isolated from community-wide discussions or debate. The reconfiguration of the former Resources and Planning Committee into the Strategic Planning and Analysis Committee is intended to promote a culture of iterative strategic thinking, but it is too early to know how successful this will be.

Many community members described struggling to understand complex "college-level" decisions. They appreciate programming, such as the Financial Boot Camp and the Fall Academic Issues Retreat that helps them understand institutional tradeoffs. However, they are less familiar with other important issues and are frustrated by the apparent opacity between broader discussions and final decisions. Many faculty members said that they lack time to educate themselves on pressing challenges, and even when they do, are concerned about a lack of safe spaces and venues to discuss these sensitive issues. While these issues persist, community members felt that the College will remain unable to "stop doing things."

Students were particularly concerned about a sustainable financial model for Macalester, the rising costs of tuition, and aim to increase engagement of student in college governance.

Conclusions

The College has demonstrated a strong commitment to certain priority areas in these early years of the current strategic plan. There have been gains in diversity in both faculty and student bodies. Entrepreneurship-related and career/vocation-oriented activities have received a marked and focused infusion of resources. The campus has embraced a range of sustainable practices; and the creation and re-imagining of campus committees have led to increased attention to strategic thinking and new channels of communication between faculty and senior administration.

However, around most strategic priorities, community members interviewed conveyed unevenness in the community's knowledge and acceptance of the college's strategic plan, room for growth in coordination and communication about strategic planning initiatives between various sectors of campus, and a clear desire for a stronger sense of community and transparency in iterative strategic planning as Macalester makes its way into a future marked with significant challenges for small, selective liberal arts undergraduate institutions.

Overall, staff reported greater awareness of the strategic plan with respect to their areas of focus. Senior level staff and administrative officials were highly cognizant of the strategic priorities and often described these priorities as driving their daily work at the College. In contrast, students and many faculty members reported feeling less aware of, and connected to, the strategic plan and its implementation.

On-going and future strategic planning and the implementation of strategic priorities must engage faculty who are critical members of the college community and are central to advancing the mission of the College. Questions were raised about whether and how the college's Curricular Development Plan might support and synergize with the Strategic Plan and the overall mission of academic excellence. Invoking the strategic plan more intentionally in academic program planning at the department level may serve to keep this larger institutional vision and these priorities more clearly on the faculty radar. Several faculty members have noted the lack of direct communication between the faculty and the board of trustees of the college and have expressed a desire for more exchanges and sharing of information. A stronger relationship between the trustees and faculty members is likely to bolster broad institutional perspective and strategic thinking among the faculty.

Students expressed a similar lack of knowledge, and engagement, with the strategic plan overall, although there are newer student initiatives that align well with certain strategic priorities. Students pointed to the inherent tension between their short-term tenure on campus and the long-range thinking and planning that comes with implementing the strategic priority. They suggested that better, richer communication with both trustees and alumni might be a way for some of this tension to be resolved. Students want their voices to be heard and included in strategic planning at the college, and to contribute to the process in sustained and systematic ways.

Finally, we acknowledge that the creation of the SPA Committee signifies a different way of approaching iterative strategic thinking that is in its infancy on campus. The reconfiguration of the former RPC into this body is a call to consider changing the way in which the community approaches and lives the process of strategic planning. Rather than a one-off exercise every ten years, SPA intends to critically and iteratively examine the strategic plan on a regular basis. For example, even SPA's process of collecting information about strategic initiatives has raised the community's awareness of the strategic plan. Given the scope of this initial exploration, we were only able to speak with certain constituencies on campus - individuals and offices that current SPA Committee members identified by consensus as being some of the key players for different strategic priorities. This document, therefore, is a draft of the "state of the college re: current the strategic plan" and is very much a work in progress. Its real impact on the process of strategic planning and the culture of strategic thinking will only be felt when it is shared with the broader campus community and when all community members are invited to participate in this discussion. Throughout this year, we have heard a clear call for better communication and more transparent exchange of information across constituencies and felt a hunger for community and coherence from every sector of campus. To truly thrive, we must heed this call.