The Society for College and University Planning

Integrated Planning in a VUCA Environment

Advice You Need in the Age of COVID-19

By Nicholas R. Santilli, PhD

Senior Director for Learning Strategy, Society for College and University Planning
Former Provost and Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, John Carroll University

Introduction

So, how's everyone doing in the *Age of COVID-19*? I started writing a piece on the state of volatility in higher education a few months back. In just several short weeks, the environment turned from volatile to nearly cataclysmic! Military planners have a name for this event: VUCA. Environments are more than just volatile; they are uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—VUCA for short.

The challenges I noted in the earlier draft of this essay included peeking over the enrollment cliff, the arrival of Generation Z, the fragility of the higher education economic model, and attacks on free speech. While still present, those challenges pale in comparison to what the sector faces now: Coronavirus or COVID-19. There is no doubt that the present environment for higher education has become significantly more complex. What makes the current circumstances more difficult is that COVID-19 has intensified the impact of the range of forces already pressing on higher education. The enrollment cliff has become deeper as institutions plan for next year's incoming class. The higher education business model is further challenged by endowment erosion, as well as refunding room, board, and other fees. What happens to the tenure clock? What happens to scholarly activities linked to specialized facilities, like laboratories, that are now closed? How will the most vulnerable on our campuses eat and be sheltered? No campus is immune to COVID-19. However, the effect of the coronavirus and existing forces influencing higher education varies by region, institutional type, student bodies, and institutional mission.

What is needed to manage VUCA?

How do you exercise the change leadership necessary to navigate VUCA? That was a question that kept me up nights during my time as a senior leader on campus. I enjoyed a 34-year career (30 years in private, non-profit,

Catholic higher education) on several college campuses as a faculty member and administrator. Change leadership was one of the most important administrative roles I had. My campus work spanned accreditation, assessment of student learning and development, institutional effectiveness, strategic and operational planning, and serving as VP for academic and student affairs/provost. Leading change was a centerpiece of the work I performed on campus.

The arc of my career provided me with a firm foundation for the position I hold now with the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP): senior director for learning strategy. One of my most important responsibilities is to develop professional development content for college and university leaders seeking to execute *integrated planning* efforts on their campuses. Integrated planning is the Holy Grail—often sought but rarely found. Integrated planning is *a sustainable approach to planning that builds relationships, aligns the organization, and emphasizes preparedness for change*. That approach is exactly what presidents, provosts, and other senior leaders need to lead their institutions through the current VUCA environment.

Promoting integrated planning and managing VUCA

Here is some background to get us started. The practice of integrated planning requires discipline and coordinated efforts that span the institution. In June 2015, SCUP, with assistance from Baker Strategy Group, surveyed more than 94,000 higher education professionals in the United States, and 2,285 responses were received. The survey asked about planning practices on the respondents' campuses and their familiarity with SCUP. Respondents represented the spectrum of campus constituents: faculty, staff, and administrators. Survey results were collapsed into three categories:

» Challenges faced by campus leaders in promoting good planning

» The seven dimensions of successful planning

» Areas where SCUP could support campuses

This essay will focus explicitly on the first two of those three findings.
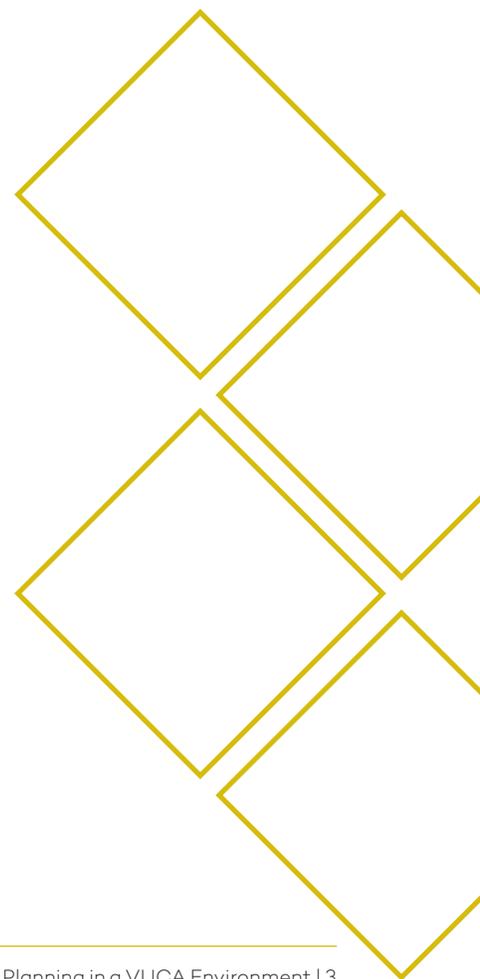
Challenges Faced by Higher Education Leaders

Seven themes emerged from the challenges described by higher education leaders relative to integrated planning:

» **Time Constraints:** There is not enough time to plan well. Time becomes ever more precious during significant crises on campus.

» **Financial Constraints:** There is not enough money to execute the plan. Financial considerations become top of mind during a crisis that significantly interrupts operations.

» **Complexity of Planning:** Orchestrating the planning process is intricate. Good planning requires a boundary-spanning approach that engages the entire campus and external constituents. Executing an integrated planning process becomes ever more important in times of duress. Who needs to be at the table? Which group makes decisions? Recommendations? Informs constituents? Provides input? Planning bodies need clarity regarding charter, roles, and responsibilities.

» **Long-Term Vision/Planning:** Leaders we surveyed suggested that there is often a lack of a clear vision for the future. In times of duress, clarity of vision and purpose for the long-term becomes overwhelmed by what is in front of you now. However, that future will be upon you in an instant if you do not find time to balance present concerns with forthcoming goals. Someone needs to be tasked with asking questions about the future—three to six months out, six to twelve months out— while addressing present realities.

» **Uncertainty/Change:** Plans are easily disrupted when new circumstances arise. Does more need to be said?

» **Action/Implementation:** Executing plans is difficult to do well. Executing plans in times of duress may become paralyzing. Success in stressful circumstances needs discipline and clarity of thought to execute adaptive strategies.

» **Collaboration/Cooperation:** There is often a lack of active collaboration in planning. Integrated planning in the context of crisis demands collaboration and cooperation. Let's face it, squabbling over issues that can wait needs to be set aside. Collaborative governance focused on institutional thriving and student success must rule the day.

I know you recognize those challenges. You are living them now. Senior leaders often remark how little time there is in their day for strategic thinking, vision setting, and creating the culture of collaboration necessary to accomplish institution-wide goals. Now, presidents and their leadership teams are in the midst of continuity planning for a crisis without a clear endpoint. Strategic plans are no longer top of mind. For many of you, institutional viability and health and well-being of your constituents are the most pressing concerns you face. How do you move forward? I suggest the principles of good planning serve as a blueprint for responding to COVID-19.

Seven Institutional Practices of Good Planning

Successful planning efforts, of all types, require thoughtful and disciplined leadership from the top leaders on a campus—namely, presidents, their leadership teams, and opinion-making faculty and staff. Without clear and strong direction by those critical campus voices, most efforts will fail.

Many institutions struggle to leverage planning into lasting change because they create plans in organizational silos. That isolationist approach to planning limits the capacity for institutions to fully explore the strategic issues they face, which are those that lead to a sound organizational vision and value proposition.

What, then, should campus leaders do to cultivate a culture of planning on their campuses?

Our research points to seven institutional practices:

1. **Emphasize Good Planning**

2. **Define Effective Planning**

3. **Agree on Priorities**

4. **Integrate Plans**

5. **Provide Training**

6. **Be Agile**

7. **Manage Change**

1. Emphasize Good Planning

ACTION POINT

Schedule ongoing, continual conversations around integrated planning that include all facets of a campus. Remind your team that planning involves everybody at the table who has a focus on mission, the academic enterprise, and student success and university viability.

Emphasizing good planning is the most important activity leaders can do to ensure success. A good plan is an active, robust, and continual conversation among diverse audiences. There is no such thing as a good plan that ends up on a shelf. Consistently reminding administration and faculty that careful and disciplined planning is critical will raise expectations that time and effort must be spent in a careful process. Many colleges and universities have not cultivated a respect for the role of planning. Survey respondents as well as our members who are tasked with planning at their institutions highlighted the resistance they experience in teaching planning as a process rather than an event. Integrated planning is not a luxury; it's a customary practice in higher education.

2. Define Effective Planning

ACTION POINT

If there is a lack of understanding for what constitutes effective planning, work with your team to bring clarity on how you can measure success. If you have agreement on your definition of good planning, communicate that broadly to your leaders to continue to build wide agreement on what makes it effective on your campus.

It is one thing to emphasize good planning, but it is another thing to define with some degree of specificity what kind of institutional planning is effective. For example, successful institutions establish a common planning vocabulary. It includes a glossary of terms that articulates the essential components of the planning process and the significant outcomes related to the integrated plan. Because there are many concepts, tools, and philosophies related to planning, it is essential for all involved in the process to understand and agree on what it means to be effective. Without wide agreement, planning is fragmented, fails to gather steam, is absent leadership, focuses on immediate goals, and lacks a strategic underpinning.

3. Agree on Priorities

ACTION POINT

Coming to agreement on how time, money, and resources will be prioritized on campus is a difficult and complex process—but one that is absolutely critical. Dedicate extensive time to ironing out differences and coming to a clear understanding on where the priorities lie.

There is no shortage of ideas for what could be done to create a better institution. Departments and divisions struggle to agree on institutional priorities. The difficulty comes when numerous ideas run up against a shortage of time, money, and resources. If a priority can't be resourced, is it really a priority? Do the difficult work to establish your priorities. Once you find your focus, how do you maintain it? Two prominent themes emerged in the data related to the challenges that leaders face while pursuing agreed-upon priorities. One was that the

discipline to execute agreed-upon plans is difficult to maintain. The other was that pet projects or new initiatives enter the planning mix and derail the established planned priorities. It is critical for campus leaders to remain disciplined in the implementation of integrated plans. Try to avoid the distraction of chasing the next shiny thing. Once priorities are determined, it is incumbent on leaders to stick to the plan and resist de facto shifts in priorities without going through an agreed-upon process to make adjustments. Plan alterations are naturally needed as circumstances and the environment change, but care should be taken to ensure that the modified priorities are understood and shared across the organization.

4. Integrate Plans

ACTION POINT

There are a number of planning models designed to facilitate integrated planning. Any real difficulty you might experience comes with an isolation mindset and fiefdom thinking, rather than from the particular integrated planning structure that you use. In your efforts, seek to intentionally incorporate planning that is being conducted outside of your area of responsibility, and regularly refer back to the institution-wide plan into which your activities fit.

Integrated planning and organizational change are synonymous. Leaders tend to look out for the interests and needs of a certain division or department without considering the implications that those plans have on other areas of the campus. Integration challenges leaders to think and act across institutional boundaries to achieve

plan success. Remember, we do not plan to keep the status quo. Planning is a change process. After all, what institution claims: "At the conclusion of our strategic plan, we will remain the same institution"? Integrated planning creates a platform to coordinate all of an organization's efforts to accomplish a common vision that supports student success and institutional thriving.

5. Provide Training

ACTION POINT

To change the planning culture at your institution, make sure everyone is getting the proper training, even those who are only tangentially involved in the process. Offer robust training options, and ensure that new hires, especially individuals in leadership positions (regardless of their place on the organizational chart), receive training in good planning. Follow up by monitoring the training effectiveness throughout the year by using assessments and coaching.

Ongoing training is an essential managerial component of any important area of operations. Our findings suggest that training in planning is relatively strong for traditional planning domains on campus, i.e., master planning, capital planning, and space management planning. It becomes more of a challenge to provide training to campus personnel outside of those functions (i.e., academic and student affairs administrators, faculty, and mid-level staff) for whom planning is not a core aspect of their work. Full-time planners may receive training, but many of the participants on the periphery do not get the training that is so essential for effective planning.

6. Be Agile

ACTION POINT

Intentionally build flexible structures into your planning in order to be a nimble organization. Set up concrete mechanisms for scanning the trends and cultural waves of change that will likely impact your campus, and build into your planning some specific time to review and discuss potential changes. More importantly, use and manage your dynamic planning model so that you can make the needed adjustments quickly and holistically across the campus. You cannot prepare for all changes. But you can be prepared with a flexible planning model, knowing that change will inevitably warrant course corrections.

Much of planning is about developing an explicit way of making choices. A good planning process focuses the campus on how to make those choices in an integrated way, carefully considering the real costs and committing to allocating resources effectively.

When plans are integrated well, a culture of planning is developed that allows institutions to be nimble enough to respond to unanticipated threats and opportunities. Agile and adaptive planning correlates well with overall planning. Survey respondents noted the difficulty in responding to a changing environment and taking the proper action to adjust. The first challenge is to recognize trends and market shifts, understanding the implications those changes have for your campus. Infusing scenario planning into your overall integrated planning strategies helps institutions to be prepared for shifts in the environment. While COVID-19 specifically may not have been in anyone's scenario, a pandemic or related health event might be part of a scenario. The second and greater challenge is demonstrating the institutional will to respond to the signals by making adjustments to planning—and acting to take advantage of the change.

7. Change Leadership

ACTION POINT

Before change has an effect on your organization, you need to effect change within your organization. The deeply cultural organizational trait of being willing to actively change can only develop over time. Regularly show others how colleges and universities must embrace an ever-evolving environment that requires leaders to continually experiment with, test, and evaluate new and better methods for accomplishing its educational mission. Along with the cultural shift, dynamic organizational models are needed. That is so an institution can begin to anticipate change in ways that reduce structural impediments toward achieving durable change while retaining what continues to work in higher education.

Respondents told us that proactively changing—before change is needed—is difficult. Beyond simply responding to a changing market, leaders see the need to make change happen before it becomes a need. The challenge is that many administrators do not see the urgency, and other planning groups do not see the need to change to stay relevant. In fact, there is often even direct resistance to change. Change is inevitable. If you are actively working through your planning model and are ensuring integration across your institution, you can begin to have an orientation toward change that is predictive rather than reactive.

If your planning is integrated, you can accommodate new external developments, and quickly anticipate the implications those developments have on all other aspects of your institution.

Dr. Santilli may be reached at nicholas.santilli@ scup.org.

The full report, *Succeeding at Planning*, may be found on the SCUP website: https://www.scup.org/ resource/succeeding-at-planning-survey-report/.

If you are interested in learning more about SCUP's Planning Institute, consult this document: https:// www.scup.org/resource/the-arc-of-integrated- planning/.

© 2020 The Society for College and University Planning
www.scup.org

About the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP)

At SCUP, we believe that by uniting higher education leaders, we can meet the rapid pace of change and competition, advancing each institution as it shapes and defines its future. Through connection, learning, and expanded conversation, we help create integrated planning solutions that will unleash the promise and potential of higher education.

Our community includes colleges and universities (two-year, four-year, liberal arts, doctoral-granting research institutions, public, private, for-profit, and private sector). Individuals we serve include planning leaders with institution-wide responsibilities, such as presidents, provosts, and other senior roles, to those who are in the trenches, such as chairs, directors, and managers.

What is Integrated Planning?

Integrated planning is a sustainable approach to planning that builds relationships, aligns the organization, and emphasizes preparedness for change.

The Society for College and University Planning

Where planning comes together.