Today’s higher-education environment has become increasingly competitive, and many public colleges and universities have begun to adopt market-oriented strategies as a result. This competitive environment is driven by a number of forces, including the growth in corporate and for-profit institutions, a buyers-market for students, and advanced telecommunications-delivery systems. As a result, most institutions compete with an identifiable group of other public, private and for-profit institutions for students and faculty and for funding from state, federal, corporate, foundation, and other private sources.

In this environment, conventional strategic planning may not be sufficient to provide colleges and universities with a viable strategy for positioning themselves competitively. Such conventional planning typically means seeking broad strategies for advancing institutional interests related to teaching, research and service. Such planning usually focuses on enhancing effectiveness in selected core missions—for instance, improving the quality of undergraduate teaching, increasing research opportunities, and fostering community partnerships.

This emphasis on advancing core missions is commendable; however, the core missions of colleges and universities overlap within higher-education sectors and may not serve to sufficiently differentiate an institution from its competitors. Not surprisingly, a growing number of institutions are adopting planning processes that also focus on the aspects of their mission-related work that have the most potential to
Recently, we participated in the design and implementation of an intensive strategic-positioning process at Georgia College & State University. The institution called its process “strategic focusing” to differentiate it from a branding exercise, on one hand, and from conventional planning, on the other. Its objective was to lay the groundwork for greater competitive distinctiveness and distinction for Georgia College. In what follows, we describe the design of this process and some lessons learned, at times quoting from remarks we made individually during the process.

Institutional Background and Challenges

Georgia College already enjoys a unique niche within the state of Georgia. In 1996, at the direction of the Chancellor of the University System of Georgia, Georgia College was designated as the state’s public liberal-arts university. This important public-policy decision was designed to encourage Georgia’s brightest students to attend college in the state by creating a liberal-arts college that would provide an affordable alternative to the state’s large research universities.
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challenge, “We must demonstrate that we are competitive with out-of-state liberal-arts institutions for Georgia’s most academically talented students, and we must show that we achieve remarkable results by virtue of our low faculty/student ratio and moderate size.”

Although Georgia’s HOPE Scholarship program provided Georgia College with a cost advantage over out-of-state competitors, the university was disadvantaged by not being as well-known academically as some competing colleges. An important part of the institution’s response was to engage in the strategic-positioning process to identify aspects of its core educational mission that it could realistically fulfill in an exemplary way, thus serving as its “pillars of distinction.”

Process Design

As project consultant, John Moore noted that “pursuing institutional distinctiveness can be an exhilarating and stimulating experience as the institution identifies its strengths and defining characteristics.” When accompanied by a commitment to building academic distinction, this pursuit will enhance “competitiveness, reputation, and institutional esteem.”

However, such processes also have identifiable pitfalls. For example, these exercises require a hard look at institutional strengths with an eye firmly focused on the external environment. Participants must understand—and accept—the fact that not all of the valuable things that an institution does have equal potential to gain the college external recognition as distinctive or exemplary. The danger is that such a process will divide rather than unite the campus community as faculty and staff jockey for recognition and resources for their favorite program or project.

For the strategic-focusing process at Georgia College to succeed, the president needed to make a compelling case for the process and also to implement an effective internal political strategy.

Creating a compelling case meant helping the campus to understand how the process would benefit the entire university. It also meant working to counter the potentially divisive notion that the pillars of distinction identified by the process were more important or valuable than the many other excellent things that the institution would continue doing. In introducing the process to the campus, Leland used an architectural metaphor to convey this message: “Pillars . . . provide structural support. They help to hold up an edifice. But they are not intrinsically more important than or superior to other parts of the building . . . and the rest of the edifice cannot be neglected.”

The institution’s internal political strategy included a marketing campaign designed to instill pride in the institution’s potential for being more broadly recognized as an exemplary public liberal-arts university. The institution also developed multiple avenues for campus participation, including a comprehensive Website with an interactive blog, focus groups, surveys, and conferences for stakeholders.

An important initial phase of the process included revealing the institution’s fundamental educational values, which were characterized as those that sustain the institution in good and bad times and tap its passion and creativity. The aim of this exercise was to allow the campus community to rediscover what it cares most deeply about and to ground the potentially contentious task of identifying pillars of distinction in these shared and deeply held values.

Conferences of stakeholders were designed to elicit feedback on preliminary work products at critical junctures and to generate and renew excitement about the process. These conferences engaged faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends of the university in productive and insightful conversations. Robust student participation proved to be particularly rewarding because participants gained deeper insights into the student experience at Georgia College.

The stakeholder conferences also infused a scholarly dimension into the strategic-focusing process. Several conferences featured external experts who helped to educate
participants about other successful strategic-positioning efforts and who presented perspectives, models and options that otherwise might not have been considered.

**Process Focus and Procedural Integrity**

When institutions consider opportunities for enhancing their external recognition and reputation, decisions about where to focus this effort will be linked to institutional mission, history, present circumstances and other factors.

The process at Georgia College focused on two broad educational areas. The initial focus was on the student-learning experience, which was defined as experiences that students have in common, regardless of their major. The objective was to identify features or aspects of that experience the institution could realistically aspire to provide in an exemplary way. To qualify, these experiences needed to resonate with the institution's fundamental educational goals and values and also to have demonstrable potential for enhancing the institution's academic reputation and competitive advantage.

The second area of focus was on distinction of academic programs. This was defined to include specialized disciplines, interdisciplinary programs, and thematic links between and among programs. The objective was to identify a small number of academic programs with the potential to gain national recognition as exemplary.

Because this focus held the potential to create rivalries among academic departments, as well as charges of insider influence and favoritism, the university gave special attention to the integrity of the process.

Proposals went through layers of review and critique by multiple constituencies and were available electronically for comment and critique by the entire university community. As in many other areas of higher education, the transparency and openness of the process contributed to the integrity of it.

By its conclusion, the strategic-focusing process at Georgia College yielded much of what it had been designed to produce. It provided the university with a manageable number of pillars of distinction for future planning and investment.

Pillars of academic program distinction drew on existing strengths and unique attributes—for example, the fact that Georgia College is the alma mater of the acclaimed writer Flannery O'Connor, the home of significant O'Connor archives, publisher of The Flannery O'Connor Review, and also has a nationally competitive MFA program in creative writing. The initiative's focus on the Georgia College student learning experience produced several potential pillars of distinction, including a robust residential college system similar to systems found at private colleges such as Princeton and Yale. Participating students referred to this pillar as the "Harry Potter Model" and recognized its potential for supporting the institution's core commitment to building integrative learning communities.

With appropriate planning and investment, such results hold promise for strengthening the institution's mission and the educational experiences of its students, while also providing the university with viable prospects for enhancing its external recognition as an exemplary public liberal-arts university.

**TIPS AND OBSERVATIONS**

- **Strategic positioning requires a clear focus on identification of institutional features or programs with the potential to create competitive advantage.** Our experiences at Georgia College and elsewhere suggest that strategic-positioning processes within higher education also benefit from the following actions:

  - **Clear and repeated explanations of why the process is in the best interest of the institution and in the self-interest of internal constituencies.** Understanding direct and indirect benefits of the process makes people more likely to want to participate.

  - **Continuous involvement of institutional stakeholders.** The process will benefit from their differing vantage points and creative thinking.

  - **Careful attention to strategies for building effective coalitions of support and for mitigating opposition or divisiveness.** Effective strategic positioning is a long-haul proposition, and the people who can make it happen must be on board.

  - **Insistence on a scholarly approach.** This will help to make the process intellectually exciting, demanding and defensible.

  - **Vigilance concerning the credibility of the process.** When people trust the reliability and fairness of a process, they are more likely to accept its outcomes.

  - **Attention to building pride.** How people feel about an institution influences their willingness to be a part of its future (as students, faculty, staff, and funding partners).

  - **Development of an effective financial strategy.** The campus community will want answers about funding, and the institution must be willing to make focused resource commitments in order to enhance areas of comparative advantage.