

# ACADEMIC Leader



## Developing a Game-Changer: A Lehigh University Case Study, Part 2

Alice P. Gast and Patrick Farrell • December 4, 2023

Part one of this two-part series focused on [a major game-changer effort at Lehigh University](#)—developing a new College of Health. The article noted that many of the critical processes and relationship norms that turned out to be important in the creation of the new college were developed years before in the initial stages of implementation of a new strategic plan.

In this installment, I am joined by Alice Gast as coauthor. Dr. Gast served as president of Lehigh from 2006 until 2014. We will describe some of those early efforts, which were not only valuable on their own but also proved to be critical for taking on bigger initiatives, like the new college. In what follows, we discuss a few aspects of these efforts: how the style of development for the strategic plan forecast the style of implementation, how the board of trustees was engaged in developing the plan and the new thinking needed to implement it, and one example of an early effort to take one of the pillars of the plan—interdisciplinarity—and expand it in a new way for Lehigh.

## Lehigh strategic thinking

A key to a successful game-changer strategy is getting the community fully engaged and gaining a sense of ownership. In an academic setting, this can be challenging as everyone has their own vision of the future and their own parochial view of what is most important. Taking care of one's own research group and department is paramount. Some in the community will decline to be involved more broadly, focusing instead on their own needs and work.

At Lehigh in 2007, since there had not recently been any significant, university-wide strategic planning, we had the opportunity to attract attention and gain traction if we developed an inclusive and open planning process. We approached this by first launching a “strategic thinking” initiative. The goal was to step back from the busy day-to-day world and think about the future. “Thinking” was less intimidating than “planning.”

Following the work of CFAR—originally the Center for Applied Research, which grew out of the University of Pennsylvania—we adopted a campaign approach to our strategic thinking process (Hirschhorn & May, 2000). This approach emphasizes a fairly intense and time-limited effort and mobilizes people through active engagement in a theme so that all can interpret and discover its ramifications.

Our theme was to build on what we saw as one of Lehigh's strengths in interdisciplinary work across both research and teaching. We took the view that although working across fields was easier in research and in bilateral collaborations, we could excel at interdisciplinary work in research, teaching, *and* community service.

The campaign approach involved an aggressive schedule of meetings and online discussions with new leaders (“shepherds”) rising to the challenge of guiding forward-looking conversations. The chair of the faculty led the campaign and arranged sets of small and large meetings. We repurposed existing meetings and forums so we would not add to the burden of busy schedules. We convinced departments and other groups to use one or two of their regular time slots to escape the “tyranny of the immediate” and think about and discuss the future. We sought “found pilots,” where examples of good practice and future direction were already in play.

We used approaches to encourage strategic and outside-the-box thinking. One approach, “backcasting,” involved defining a goal—for example, having each student participate in an open-ended interdisciplinary or international experience—then deriving what would need to happen today to make that goal achievable. Another approach, “histories of the future,” had participants write what they imagined they would see when walking around campus in five or 10 years and how things would have changed.

One of the strongest themes to arise in this work was enthusiasm for a truly multidisciplinary approach to health. This involved science, engineering, humanities, social sciences, business, and education. Everyone

could think of a way to engage in health and healthcare. There was little appetite for a conventional medical school, as we wanted something more collaborative and interdisciplinary.

The outcomes of the campaign approach were an energized, engaged academic community with a 2009 strategic plan to guide departmental planning. From the strategic plan came a campus master plan and a fundraising campaign. The themes from the early strategic thinking were clearly present in major donations for entrepreneurial “maker space” on our mountaintop campus and in open-ended international internships supported by Lee Iacocca, former Ford executive and CEO of Chrysler and one of Lehigh’s best-known alumni.

## **Bringing the board on board**

While momentum was growing on campus, there was the challenge of bringing the board of trustees into the discussion and having them support the plan without trying to own it.

We disrupted trustee meetings by replacing presentations with more discussion. We worked hard to meet trustees halfway to help them understand how universities work (Gast & Smith, 2011). We asked trustees to make analogies to situations in their own experiences. In one notable aha moment, a distinguished Wall Street banker compared tenure to partnership in their firm; it was an important decision granted after years of experience and contribution to the team. Through this focus on their own experiences, trustees gave us high-quality guidance on issues of communication, diversity, and financial and space planning.

Excited about the strategic thinking work on campus, we set held our summer 2008 board meeting as a retreat where we could engage the board in some of the same campaign approach discussions. We invited the faculty chair, who was not normally invited to the meeting, as well as some of the shepherds who were working with the community. Enthusiasm was high, and board members contributed their own views of the future to the collaboration. The board approved the plan, which was published in 2009.

One risk of actively involving the trustees is that they become too engaged and enthusiastic and, as a result, start to micromanage the university leadership. Over time, our discussion-focused meetings became a significant burden to the leadership team, and the president and provost found themselves having weekly calls with the board leadership.

Individual trustees reacted differently to the opportunity for new thinking; some held strong views that the university was better in their time (“the good old days”), while others were supportive of the academic work and leadership bringing the university forward in the present. Trustees who were parents of current students were often the most challenging as they extrapolated anecdotes from a few students to the entire university.

Balancing the campus strategy development with appropriate board of trustee oversight is one of the most challenging parts of a game-changing environment. Ultimately, the board must approve resource allocation, and campus leadership needs to involve them and listen to them. Channelling their enthusiasm into the right priorities for the community deserves significant attention.

## **Implementation**

In the wake of the excitement and energy of the campaign approach to developing a strategic plan, implementing that plan might seem straightforward. As readers might glean from the previous

discussion, diverse perspectives and expectations coalesced into a written plan, and those diverse expectations reemerged as we began to implement the plan. Among the many initial issues for implementation would be what to do first, how to deploy resources, and what good ideas would have to wait. An academic community of smart people can easily forecast that those choices will be contentious, and the community will worry that the glow of collaboration may disintegrate when choices need to be made. That concern can immobilize.

Even while many of the discussions coming from the formation of the strategic plan, such as those with trustees, continued, it was clear that beginning implementation was important. This beginning would involve choosing some priorities over others but would hopefully model a process for selecting those priority initiatives, putting them in play, and later returning to other concerns that were not part of the initial efforts.

To make this beginning concrete, senior leaders suggested a list of proposed “frontrunners.” The idea was to name a small set of initiatives (we ended up with five) that were clearly priorities in the new strategic plan and that could build on current campus projects. The intent was that these would be the starter projects from the strategic plan. The focus would be on initiatives that were substantial but that we were confident we could achieve in the next 12 months or so.

As an example, one of the frontrunner initiatives was an idea named in the strategic plan—the cluster hiring of faculty. The idea was to identify areas of interdisciplinary opportunity and, when recruiting faculty, seek out candidates who wanted to work in that area in an unusually interdisciplinary way. This might involve making shared appointments across departments or colleges, creating new interdisciplinary institutes, and perhaps developing new interdisciplinary degree programs. Recruiting these candidates would require an interdisciplinary faculty search committee with a focus on the area of interest as opposed to a traditional focus on departmental homes.

The idea of cluster hires had been used at a number of institutions, with varying levels of success. An additional challenge for implementation at Lehigh was that budget constraints didn’t permit creating new faculty positions for these clusters. Open positions had to be culled from normal retirements and replacements.

A key part of the effort was choosing the topics these clusters should focus on. We asked a number of faculty with substantial interdisciplinary experience to form a selection committee that would solicit proposals from faculty groups. We created some baseline requirements for existing groups to ask for the addition of a cluster of new faculty, such as that proposing groups needed to explain how the addition of a cluster could thrust both current and new faculty into prominence in this area.

The proposal and review processes were public. All proposals were posted, presentations were open to anyone wishing to hear them, and the faculty committee’s decisions were shared across campus. In the end, we chose two areas of focus: Africana studies and interdisciplinary smart grid studies. Each had the ability to recruit three or four new faculty in the area. One benefit of this process was that in developing proposals, many new internal interdisciplinary groups were formed, and some existing ones grew stronger. Even if they did not “win” the new faculty hires, some of these stronger groups have persisted and substantially increased the quality of their work.

This cluster hiring effort had a significant impact in terms of elevating the level in a few areas of teaching and scholarship at Lehigh, and those areas remain prominent. Perhaps equally important was the

community learning to create an engaging and transparent process to do something we had never done before.

## Summary

We have illustrated a few of the approaches we took in creating the campus strategic plan and beginning implementation. While the practical goal was to produce a plan, the equally long-lasting effect of the effort was practice in developing broad community engagement, developing an appreciation of the different kinds of engagement needed from different stakeholders, and building experience in taking interesting ideas and putting them in play even in a resource-constrained environment.

## References

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