

Integrated Strategic Planning in a Learning-Centered Community College

by Susan Kelley and Roger Kaufman

Planning at Valencia Community College (FL) uses the Organizational Elements Model (OEM) to keep its performance- and learning-centered focus.

A Learning Revolution is sweeping across the higher education landscape... Placing learning first in every policy, program, and practice is the rallying cry, as institutions strive to remove the time-bound, place-bound, role-bound, and bureaucracy-bound models of education that shackle innovation and transformation. What this means in practical terms is that every action in a college should be analyzed by asking the simple question: Does this improve or expand student learning? (O'Banion and Milliron 1998, p. 1)

To this question we might add, "And does it expand student performance?"

A learning revolution is at heart a performance revolution, addressing both the performance of individual learners and of institutions. The performance and value that learners add in college and in later life become the drivers for all planning and doing.

Since a performance- and learning-centered college is one that makes a conscious choice to place useful learning first in all practices, what does planning look like at a community college committed to the performance and learning revolution? How can a college ensure that its involvement goes beyond semantics? How can a college determine whether its planning process and its products improve or enhance learning? How can we determine that learners add measurable value to our shared society? This article examines these questions based on the experience at Valencia Community College, which enrolls over 52,000 students annually and serves a two-county district in the greater Orlando, Florida area, and based on the concept of "mega planning" that puts societal value-added as the primary driver of everything an organization uses, does, produces, and delivers (Kaufman 2006).

During 2005–06, Valencia Community College examined its strategic planning process through a learning-centered lens, and a new process has been designed that will yield a new strategic plan for 2008–13. This work has its roots in Valencia's decade of leadership among community colleges involved in what has become known as the "learning college" movement. This movement, with its focus on achieving, measuring, and documenting learning results, has gained a significant following among the nation's community colleges, giving impetus to the transformation of the processes that are at the heart of each college. These colleges are focusing on learning and on improving processes as a means of improving the learning results that matter to the communities and those whom the colleges serve.

The Learning College and the Organizational Elements Model in the Literature

The learning college movement is well documented in the literature and continues to be the subject of scholarly research. Among the earliest scholars addressing the learning college movement were Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995), George Boggs (1995–96), Patricia Cross (1998), and Terry O'Banion. O'Banion (1997) traces the roots of the movement:

Armed with new insights from brain-based research, Continuous Quality Improvement processes, and new developments in technology, a second wave of educational reform emerged in the early 1990s, preparing the way for the most profound change in education since the invention of the book. The second wave places learning as the central value and the central activity of the educational enterprise. An American Imperative, published in 1993, ten years after A Nation at Risk, is representative of the reports that frame the issues for the second wave of educational reform. An American Imperative calls for the "redesign of our learning systems to align our entire educational enterprise with the personal,

civic, and work place needs of the 21st century” (Wingspread Group on Higher Education 1993, p. 19). The report goes on to say that “Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses” (Wingspread Group on Higher Education 1993, p. 14). This new wave of reform is not tweaking a system to fix a few broken parts; it is a fundamental overhaul, destruction of much that is traditional and construction of much that is new.

The changes called for will not come easily to education...But islands of change are emerging across the higher education landscape, and those changes are increasingly evident in some of the nation’s leading community colleges. (p. xiv)

The learning college is based on six key principles articulated by O’Banion (1997):

- The learning college creates substantive change in individual learners.
- The learning college engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- The learning college creates and offers as many options for learning as possible.
- The learning college assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners.

We add to this formulation that learning must deliver useful results both in school and to the communities to which the learners will go after program completion.

The League for Innovation in the Community College hosts an annual Learning College Summit, now in its fifth year, that brings together educators from around the nation and world who are committed to a deliberate, powerful focus on learning at their institutions. That focus is achieved by asking two questions about everything these colleges do: How does this enhance or improve learning? How do we know? (O’Banion and Milliron 1998).

The league’s Learning College Summit Web site notes:

In the early 1990s, community colleges, building on their student-centered and teaching-centered values, began to add learning-centered values to their mission and program statements. Many community colleges embraced the concept of the Learning College, which places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners anyway, anyplace, anytime. Almost all the respondents (97 percent) to a 1997 survey of over 500 presidents of the League’s Alliance for Community College Innovation indicated that their institutions will move toward becoming more learning centered in the next three to five years. Many community colleges have made a commitment to become more learning centered, a commitment that represents a significant dedication to changing the traditional architecture of education. (League for Innovation in the Community College 2007, unpaginated Web site)

In January 2000, the league, with support from a major grant, selected 12 “Vanguard Learning Colleges” from the 94 applications it received from the United States and Canada. Valencia Community College was one of the 12 selected. Among those serving on the initial international advisory committee for the league’s Learning College Project were George Boggs, president, American Association of Community Colleges; Alfredo G. de los Santos Jr., senior league fellow, League for Innovation in the Community College and research professor, Arizona State University; K. Patricia Cross, senior league fellow, League for Innovation in the Community College and professor of higher education, emerita, University of California, Berkeley; John E. Roueche, Sid W. Richardson Regents Chair and director, The Community College Leadership Program, The University of Texas at Austin; and Michael Skolnik, William G. David Chair in Community College Leadership and director, Doctorate in Higher Education for Community College Leaders, University of Toronto.

Prior to its selection as a Vanguard Learning College, Valencia used Roger Kaufman's Organizational Elements Model (OEM) in its planning efforts (Kaufman 1992, 2000, 2005, 2006; Kaufman et al. 1998; Kaufman et al. 2003). The OEM is a conceptual as well as mental model that enables an organization to view itself as a system with three levels of results (mega or societal, macro or organizational, and micro or operational), providing a practical and theoretically sound framework for strategic thinking and planning (figure 1). If planned and accomplished, the three levels of results described in the OEM meet the requirements of the organization's internal and external clients. Organizations use the OEM to plan and align the three levels of results to create a measurably better world. The OEM also encourages institutions to compare current results (what is) with desired results (what should be), and the gaps between the two are defined as needs. Using the OEM, results become the focus of planning and doing.

The OEM is widely cited in the literature, including a special invited issue of Performance Improvement Quarterly in 2005 that is based on research and application of the OEM (see www.ispi.org/publications/piqtocs/piq18_3.htm).

What Does Planning Look Like at a Community College Committed to the Learning Revolution?

Valencia's strategic planning process was redesigned in 2005–06 with two aims: (1) to make both the planning process as well as the products of the process more learning

Figure 1 The Organizational Elements Model

Name of the Organizational Element	Brief Description, Level of Focus, and Community College Examples	Type of Planning
Mega	Results and their consequences for external clients and society (shared vision) Examples: - Learner and client success over time (5 years +) - Positive quality of life - Organizations (including clients and customers) are successful over time	Strategic
Macro	The results and their consequences for what an organization can or does deliver outside of itself Examples: - Completers/graduates - Newly licensed professionals (nurses, for example)	Tactical
Micro	The results and their consequences for individuals and small groups within the organization Examples: - Course completed - Assessment or test passed - Entrance into successive level of study or professional work - Competent employees	Operational
Process	Means, programs, projects, activities, methods, techniques Examples: - Learner orientation - Education and career planning - Registration - Clinical placements - Internships - Strategic planning	
Input	Human, capital, and physical resources; existing rules, regulations, policies, laws Examples: - Money - Facilities and equipment - Accreditation criteria - Time - Employee skills, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities	

centered, and (2) to achieve the first intentional integration of the various college plans by aligning them in terms of their contributions to achieving specified learning results.

In the new strategic planning process launched in the 2006–07 academic year:

- learning provides a focus for strategic planning;
- the planning process is a means for the college to learn more about the needs that it might help to meet in society and about its capacity to address those needs (with needs defined as gaps in results, not the more usual and destructive “needs” as gaps in resources or methods); and

- the focus on learning is a vehicle to meaningfully integrate the various plans of the college with the new strategic plan, enabling the college to align plans from various levels and of various types in terms of their contributions to achieving learning results that make a difference in (and that therefore matter) to the community the college serves.

Over the past decade, the college has paused several times to reflect on what it has learned about itself as it continued on its learning-centered journey. During each of these periods of reflection, Valencia has noted the importance of conceptual models to guide its thinking and work, including the OEM.

Valencia began using the OEM for planning in 1991, and the model's focus on results that matter to society helped the college continue to grow in its ability to concentrate not only on teaching, but also on the results of the teaching process: learning. A clear focus on learning was present from the earliest days of the college, provided by the founding faculty in 1967. The OEM continues to inform the college's learning-centered journey, providing the basis for the latest strategic planning redesign.

In the early 1990s, the college began to have deep and extended discussions involving both internal and external constituencies. Those discussions led to choosing a learning-centered path, a path that in turn has led to significant improvements in the learning results of at-risk students. The college was recognized by Time magazine in September 2001 as among the best colleges in the nation at helping first-year students excel (McGrath 2001).

Throughout the 1990s and continuing today, Valencia has found the OEM, with its focus on strategic planning and on results that benefit society, well suited to assisting the college in planning to improve learning results, thereby meeting student and community needs. The college used this model to develop its first comprehensive strategic plan in the early 1990s and to develop its 1995 plan to transform itself to a more learning-centered college.

Using the OEM to guide the college's planning in the 1990s enabled Valencia to gain greater clarity about the needs (or gaps in results) that the college wanted to address in fulfillment of its mission. This fueled a tremendous amount of good work during that decade that propelled the college into the new century. The OEM provides a means of clearly relating the college's work to meeting society's needs:

Strategic planning focuses on the survival, self-sufficiency, and quality of life of all stakeholders. This societal frame of reference is called Mega. Strategic thinking is the process for defining and achieving positive societal and organizational results. Both are essential ingredients of success. (Kaufman 2006, p. 37)

During the 1990s, the college identified gaps at the mega level such as too few nurses and teachers to meet demand; baccalaureate and associate degree college graduates who did not meet employer expectations and their own career goals; and a lack of skilled, college-educated technicians required by the companies that the community sought to attract to meet economic development and quality-of-life goals. At the macro level, the college was concerned that too few students were completing degree and certificate programs, although it was pleased to find that the quality of those who did complete Valencia's program was quite high. At the micro level, the college found that too many students were not successful in key courses at the front door of the institution, particularly in mathematics, and that this failure led to lower-than-desired graduation rates.

Based on this analysis of the gaps, resources were focused on systems aimed at improving student learning and performance as well as persistence to degree. Chief among those systems was a new developmental advisement

system known as LifeMap, jointly designed and implemented by faculty and student affairs professionals; a three-credit Student Success course, which provides at-risk students with the tools to be successful as learners; and the development of new core competencies for students (Think, Value, Communicate, and Act) and the infusion of these throughout the curriculum and the cocurriculum. These efforts combined to yield significant improvements in the success rates of at-risk students.

In 2000–01, the college developed a multiyear Strategic Learning Plan (Valencia Community College 2000–01), which continued to emphasize providing a learning environment that places learning first, specifically seeking to improve the results students experience during their first courses at the college; increasing completion rates; and understanding and supporting the role of every college employee in contributing to learning results. The redesign of the strategic planning process in 2005–06 took place as the college was in the final developmental phase of activities from the 2000–01 plan. Recognizing the need for a new strategic plan, the college also recognized its obligation to challenge itself to ensure that the new plan would advance learning results in measurable ways.

Importantly, the OEM supports the college in making reasoned choices about the investment of resources. Like many of the nation’s community colleges, over the past 20 years Valencia has been a hotbed of innovation, with dozens of major projects being pursued at any given time, nearly all aimed at improving learning results. Yet, the college’s assessment of its work in 2002 led to the conclusion that these efforts continued to lack sufficient focus. The OEM clearly supports an organization in understanding how processes and inputs align (or do not align) with achieving results and thus provides a means to organize and focus the college’s plans. The 2006–07 strategic planning process represents a continued maturation of the college in using the OEM to focus on results. Simply stated, the college is continuing to learn and grow in its capacity to say “no,” as well as “yes.”

As Valencia has measured its results over the past 15 years, it has been both heartened and frustrated. While student success rates have improved significantly (and Valencia now ranks number one in the nation among community colleges in the number of associate’s degrees awarded), the changes have been incremental rather than the desired leap forward to achieve a “big, hairy, audacious goal” (Collins 2005, p. 35). Far too many students continue to fail to meet their stated goals despite the college’s belief that all of its students are capable of learning. The strategic planning process for the 2008–13 period will examine current needs (gaps in results) and support the college community in selecting the most promising ways to close those gaps.

Developing a Plan for Planning

In preparation for designing a new strategic planning process, the College Planning Council constructed a “learning agenda” for itself. The 2005–06 academic year was devoted to learning about strategic planning so that the council might recommend the best process for Valencia. The council, with representatives from faculty, staff, and administration, meets nine times per year and in 2005–06 devoted a portion of its meetings to a learning activity aimed at preparing the council to design and provide guidance to the strategic planning process. In short, the council addressed its own learning needs first.

The following learning activities were selected to assist the council in the redesign:

- Study of the college’s fund-accounting-based financial statements, led by an accounting professor, which supported the council in linking planning to budgeting and in understanding the financial statements as an expression of the college’s plans in dollars and cents.
- Review of materials provided by the Society for College and University Planning’s Planning Institute Steps I and II. The institute was attended by members of the council, who returned to the college to create learning activities based on what they had learned at the institute. This supported the council in understanding the process and products of strategic planning as currently practiced.
- Review of the OEM and its use in Valencia’s Learning-Centered Initiative to date, which supported the council in focusing its planning on learning results and in avoiding the trap of circular logic (i.e., defining the problem or need as the lack of a solution, rather than as a gap in results).
- Study of a wide variety of strategic planning processes and plans from other institutions in the United States and Canada, which supported the council in customizing Valencia’s process, understanding that there is no “one size fits all” process or “cookie cutter” plan.
- A review of the accreditation criteria of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), which supported the council in structuring a process that would go beyond merely

meeting the requirements for accreditation to one that would add depth and meaning to the accreditation process, thus propelling the college toward its strategic goals.

- A study of building trust in organizations, using the work of Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores of The University of Texas at Austin (Solomon and Flores 2001), which supported the council in structuring the planning communication process and in ensuring that planning yields mutual commitments, thus building trust and increasing the likelihood of actually achieving the plan's goals.
- A study of the "hedgehog concept" as expressed in Jim Collins' monograph *From Good to Great for the Social Sectors* (Collins 2005), which supported the council in considering the metrics that might be used to measure success as results gaps are closed.
- A review of the means of using qualitative and quantitative data in planning and evaluation, which supported the council in making meaning from the data that are available during the early phases of planning and in projecting effective ways of evaluating the success of the plan in future years.

In the spring of 2006, drawing upon the learning activities in which it engaged during the 2005–06 year, the College Planning Council developed design principles for the new planning process, summarized as follows:

- The planning process and the plan that it yields will be learning-centered.
- The planning process will be strategic by affecting the results the college aims to provide to society and to students as they progress in their programs of learning.
- The planning process will be collaborative by operating within the shared governance structure that ensures broad-based participation internally.
- The planning process will provide a means for stakeholder groups to be heard and to influence the plan.
- The planning process will build trust through effective communication and negotiation by making it safe to identify and challenge assumptions and by supporting agreements on shared values and the making of mutual commitments that are the basis for the strategic plan and that are honored as the plan is implemented.
- The planning process will be meaningful in that it will help the college to establish a vision of the future that shapes, defines, and gives meaning to its strategic purpose and in that it will help to shape decisions, some of which are identified in advance.
- The planning process will be data-driven, using qualitative and quantitative data routinely reviewed as the plan is implemented, with the aim of continuous improvement.
- The plan will include formative and summative evaluation components that evaluate the planning process itself, as well as the implementation of the plan, using agreed-upon performance indicators.
- The planning process will have a clear cycle of activities with a beginning and an end and be timed and structured to coordinate well with SACS accreditation requirements.
- The planning process will be as simple as possible while yielding a viable plan, avoiding the trap of imposing more order than the college can tolerate, and integrating planning into permanent governing structures and collegewide meetings, rather than creating a separate set of activities removed from the governance and life of the college.
- The planning process will support the integration of fiscal, learning, and facilities plans with the strategic plan of the college through careful timing and by clearly connecting each of these plans to achieving the college's vision and mission, in keeping with college values.
- The plan will be useful to and therefore used by councils, campuses, and departments as they prepare their plans and will encourage a future orientation to their work.
- The planning process, its language, its products, and the results of the plan will be communicated to all employees internally.
- The plan will be expressed clearly, with language that is understood by stakeholders and with clear means of measuring progress.
- The planning process will be comprehensive and will have clearly assigned roles for individuals and groups, including students.

The council named the following products of the strategic planning process:

- a needs assessment/situational analysis/environmental scan, providing a common understanding of the present and the anticipated future, including information about competitors and clearly defined gaps in results at the mega, macro, and micro levels, as defined by the OEM;
- reviewed/revise vision, mission, and values statements;
- a set of strategic issues, college strategies, goals, measurable outcomes objectives (expressing how much the college will change specific results at the mega, macro, and micro levels), and related activities to achieve the objectives within an agreed-upon time frame;
- an evaluation plan and a means of assessing the extent to which college decisions are consistent with the plan;
- a recommended assignment of responsibilities for objectives to the four governing councils (Faculty Council, College Learning Council, College Planning Council, and College Operations Council);
- a list of major decisions to be affected by the plan, including:
 - academic program plans for new campus(es) and evolution of programs on existing campuses,
 - the goals in the college enrollment plan,
 - future Valencia Foundation fund-raising goals,
 - the focus of the Quality Enhancement Plan for SACS in 2010–2012,
 - the professional development multiyear plan,
 - the multiyear financial plan and annual budgets,
 - major external funding requests with collegewide impact, such as Title III and Title V grants from the U. S. Department of Education,
 - community relations priorities and programs,
 - efforts designed to support student learning and to maintain academic excellence, and
 - strategic facilities plans; and
- the final proposed planning document for submission to the president and trustees.

The council designed a planning organizational chart (figure 2) and time line (figure 3). The organizational chart provides for a group that oversees the planning process (the College Planning Council) and a group that makes decisions about the content of the plan (the Planning Committee). Five task forces will facilitate the process. The task forces will use a combination of meetings with the senior leadership team, governing councils, and constituency groups, as well as “big and small meetings” to arrive at recommendations. (Big and small meetings have become a part of the college’s collaborative decision-making style, with big meetings typically involving a representative group of up to 300 people and small meetings involving between 35 and 50 people.)

The council also projected three planning cycles into the future (2008–13, 2014–2019, and 2020–2025) to understand and integrate planning as a predictable part of its work and to coordinate well with the accreditation processes.

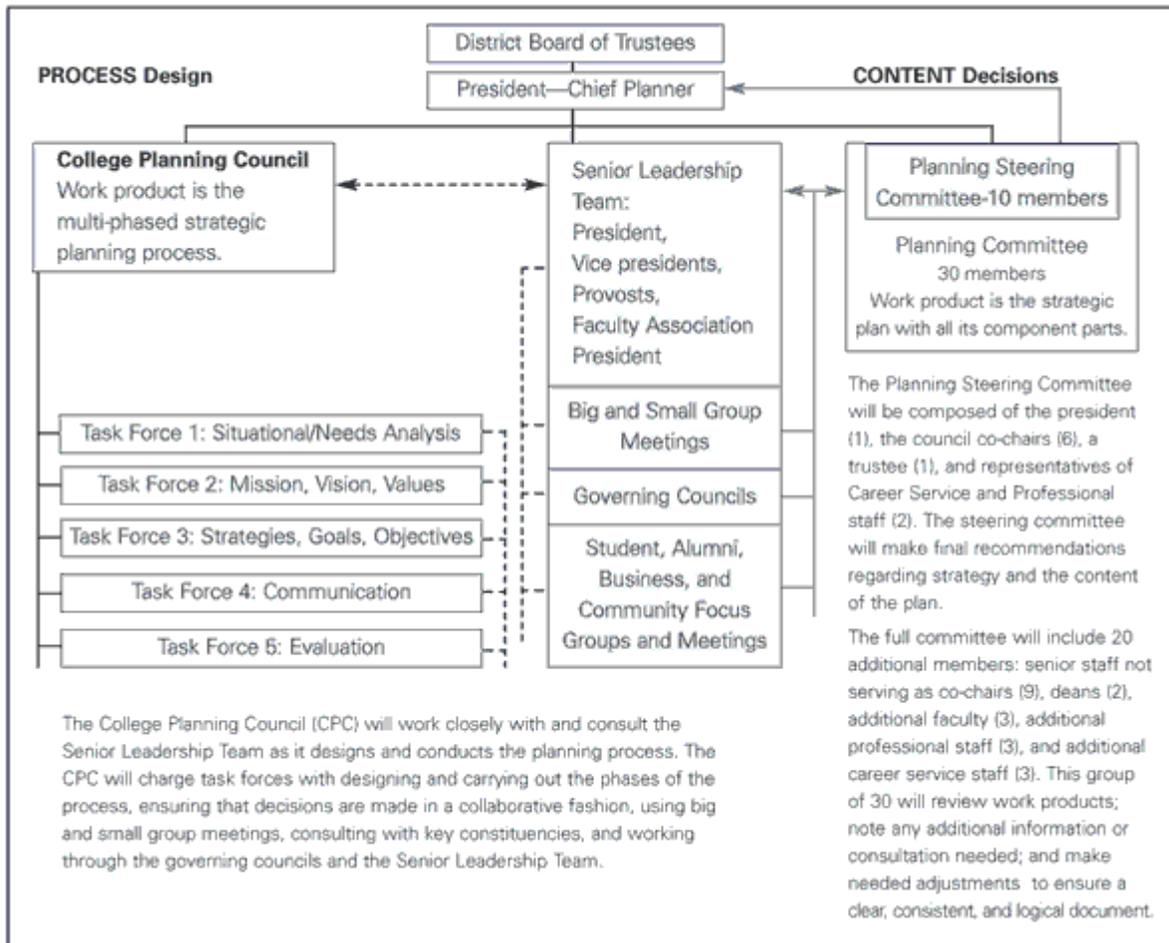
As this article goes to press, the “Plan for Planning” is well into its implementation and on schedule. Task forces have completed proposed revisions to the college’s mission, vision, and values statements and have written a situational/needs analysis that addresses gaps in results at all levels of the OEM. These documents will be reviewed and discussed by the college and by community stakeholders in the spring of 2007 before final versions are recommended to the Board of Trustees.

How Can a College Ensure that its Involvement in the Performance/ Learning Revolution Goes Beyond Semantics?

Some critics of the learning college movement have charged that it is simply the latest fad and that all that is really changing are the words used to describe what colleges do. However, the choice rests with each college to change more than its language. The use of the OEM is a good way to ensure that a learning-centered approach goes beyond words to actions that achieve performance results that can be measured, thus meeting societal needs.

However, the OEM also respects the power of words. While learning colleges seek to change much more than language, those changes begin with precision in the selection and use of words. The college must understand words as planning tools and must recognize the pitfalls of ignoring words and their meaning.

Figure 2 Valencia's Organizational Chart for Strategic Planning

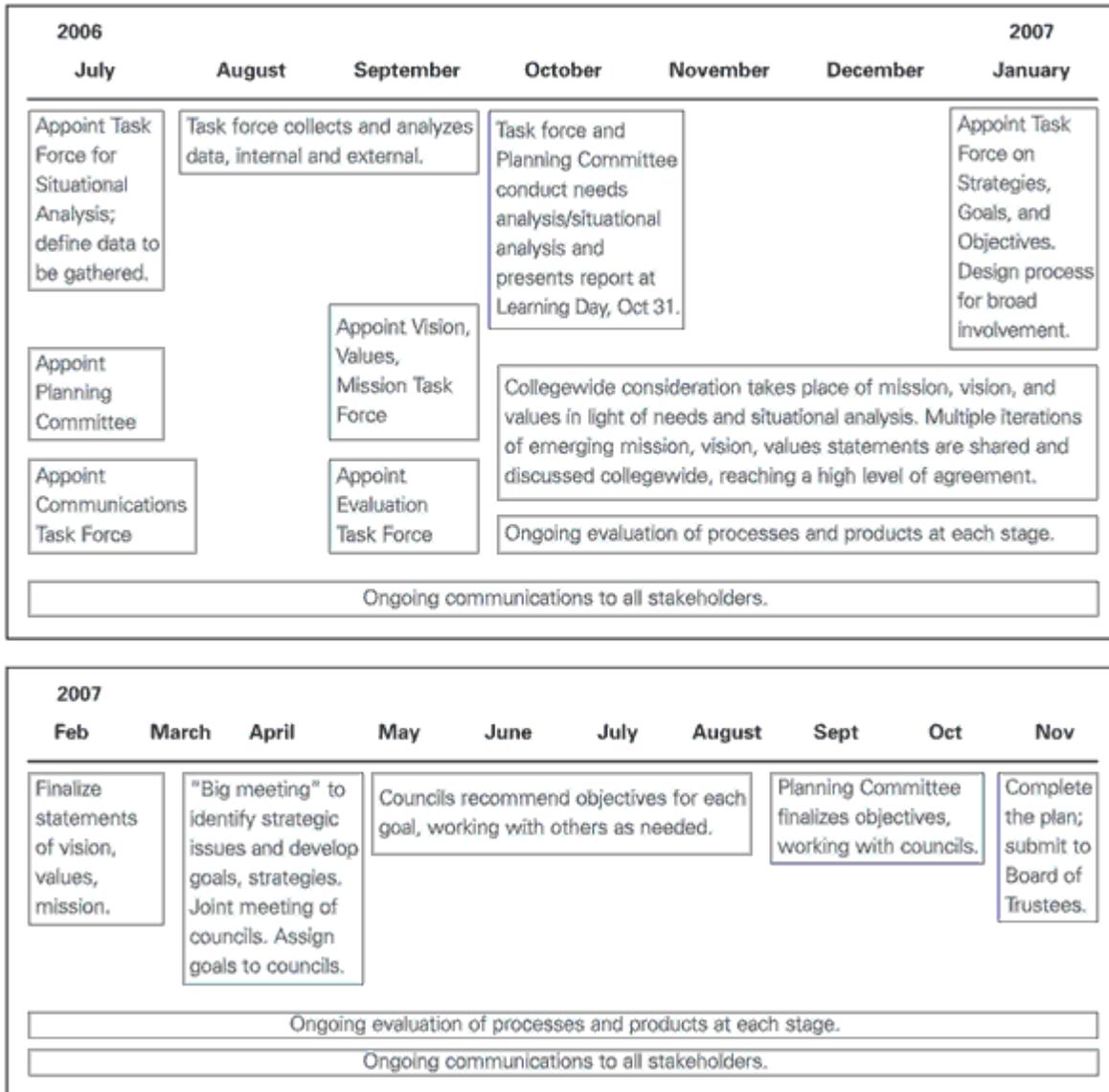


Is all of this making too much of a big deal about words and definitions? It might seem so at first, but the answer is "no." Precision and rigor are keys to defining, achieving, and proving success. ...Words stand for realities, and we want to make sure we agree on what we are talking about. Because we make decisions that impact us as well as others, we must care deeply that we are headed in the right direction, and that we are very rigorous and precise in choosing our methods and criteria for evaluating our success. (Kaufman 2006, p. 25) In the spring of 2007, the College Planning Council will offer a guide to terms used in planning so that those involved might understand each other clearly. A similar guide was developed for the college's learning-centered initiative and has proved helpful in advancing Valencia's work (Valencia Community College 2002).

How Can a College Determine Whether its Planning Process and its Products Improve or Enhance Learner Performance and Competence?

Valencia's planning process will yield an evaluation plan to answer this question, examining the extent to which problems or needs (defined as gaps in results) have been

Figure 3 Valencia's Strategic Planning Time Line



targeted with solutions that show promise of closing (and over time actually do help to close) performance gaps.

The alignment table (figure 4) is used to ensure that any program or process aligns with all organizational elements and determines the "fit" with existing policies and procedures.

As programs, projects, policies, regulations, and activities designed to meet the goals and objectives in the strategic plan are considered, they can be sorted into the OEM to determine where each fits, thus ensuring that their successful completion will link and align all elements. When the OEM focuses on learning results at the mega, macro, and micro levels, this ensures that the strategic,

tactical, operational, and related plans for processes and inputs are aligned with improving and expanding learning with an impact at the societal level (Kaufman 2006).

Much is being made these days about the importance of integrated planning, yet questions continue to be asked by practitioners about how that is achieved on a practical level. The OEM provides a practical

way to integrate plans in the way that matters most to the organization and the society that it serves. By aligning plans in terms of their contribution to results at the societal level, all parts of the organization are integrated in terms of the way they enable achievement of strategic goals.

In the closing words of his monograph, Jim Collins asserts, "Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline" (Collins 2005, p. 31). Using the OEM as a tool to improve planning and performance is a means for learning-centered colleges to make that conscious choice to achieve greater results for students and the communities served.

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