

A man with glasses and a beard is looking at a screen. A yellow sticky note is attached to the screen. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom or office setting.

AN *INSIDE HIGHER ED* SPECIAL REPORT

Smart, Succinct and Agile:

Strategic Planning in an
Age of Uncertainty

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HOW PLANS HAVE CHANGED

In the late 1970s, the Rhode Island School of Design was struggling and seeking a way to move forward in the coming decades. John Stevens, who was a vice president at the institution at the time, started work on his first strategic plan.

The plan, called RISD 2000, covered the next two decades of the institution's life and laid out a goal of growing from enrollment in the mid-1,000s to 2,000 students.

"It was all about how you improve programming, become more effective and efficient, and get economies of scale by getting to 2,000 students," says Stevens.

Today, Stevens is the founder and president of his own consulting firm specializing in managing strategic changes at colleges, universities and schools. He and his firm have done about 40 strategic plans for a variety of institutions, most of them small to midsize institutions.

RISD did make it to 2,000 students, he notes—the school reports a total enrollment of nearly 2,500 today. But Stevens learned from his first plan, conducted at a time when strategic planning was first breaking into higher education.

"The president, the senior staff and the trustees were flabbergasted in a very positive way by it," Stevens says. "What I found was

that the faculty and some staff felt left out. I didn't engage them in the process as I should have."

Therefore, it took a while to convince different constituencies on campus to support the plan trustees had backed, according to Stevens. When planning today, he makes sure to have strong systems in place to build engagement across campuses so that faculty members, staff members, administrators and trustees all feel ownership of the plans produced.

Many institutions still make the same mistakes Stevens did four decades ago.

"They don't effectively account for leadership from the president and the board and engagement from the full campus community," Stevens says. "If you don't do both of those things, it will often not work. If there is no leadership, then the institution will kind of just go off in all kinds of directions and the process will never get completed. And if you have just direction and no engagement, there's no ownership of the process in the end."

The Rhode Island School of Design has been through multiple presidents since the RISD 2000 plan was put in place—its current president, Rosanne Somerson, was appointed in 2015 after serving as interim president for more than a year. The institution was

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coming off of a 2012-to-2017 strategic plan and expected to finalize a new strategic plan in early 2019.

Its library still has a copy of the typewritten RISD 2000 plan, however. A look at the plan, emblazoned with the handwritten date of 1981, is remarkable because it reveals planning practices that have and have not changed—and how some of the key challenges colleges and universities face today are the same ones they grappled with 40 years ago.

The plan begins with a five-page introduction arguing for the school of design enrolling 2,000 students by 2000, increasing housing for students, renovating facilities and also noting an academic affairs reorganization. It then includes 38 pages breaking down data and projections on the student market, RISD budget, capital needs and program needs, plus a special report on a computer system being installed complete with tape drive, disc drive and several cathode-ray-tube video terminals.

RISD 2000 lacks the layers of vision statements, mission statements, strategic objectives, goals and metrics that have become the shared fabric of today's strategic planning documents. But in some ways, it is a more cleanly packaged document, narrating a path for the school of design to follow and providing pages of data to build the case for that path.

Data have changed substantially since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Stevens says.

Outside sources of data have grown much more sophisticated, and institutions can draw on more support to help them predict enrollment, develop financial models, conduct market research and evaluate programs.

Such increasing complexity could be one reason why strategic plans' packaging has changed.

"If we were to use a document like this today, the campus community's eyes would glaze over," Stevens says of the plan from four decades ago. "One of the things we do with our clients is help them put together a fact book, which has all that demographic data that you can rely on, and when you're making presentations at the higher levels of the institution, you can bring up that information as supportive of the process."

Today, strategic plans—what an institution is going to do—are often separated from operational plans—how the institution is going to do it.

Take, for example, the Rhode Island School of Design's 2012-17 strategic plan. Under it, the university worked to hire 10 new faculty lines, says Hermano, vice president of integrated planning. But the plan summary didn't spell out the goal that specifically. Instead, it called for the institution to "strategically increase faculty in academic areas" and "ensure baseline teaching and operating resources—including additional full-time faculty—to support departmental and institutional strategic objectives."

"The external-facing, more public document

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should have a set of very high-level metrics," Hermano says. "There is a set that's high level, and then there are more granular key performance indicators attached to each goal."

Such changes can be effective. Still, they bring their own challenges and elicit caution from experts. A summary document with just a few words to support each goal may be brief and compelling, but at some point brevity makes it hard to convince different constituencies that a plan is sound.

And many institutions struggle to balance accountability and flexibility in their operational planning.

"They'll set goals but they won't develop timelines, responsive parties, operating budgets, capital budgets and metrics for success," Stevens says. "If you don't realize you're living in a dynamic environment and you need to change the operational plan periodically, you're going to fail."

The higher ed landscape changed many times from 1980 to 2000, and then again from 2000 to 2018. Yet some passages from the RISD 2000 plan are notable for just how much they echo challenges institutions face today.

"RISD students must be given skills, experiences, and habits of mind which will enable them to compete effectively in the professional worlds of art and design," reads one passage that seems to mirror the discussion around career readiness percolating today.

"Any increase in a student population goes

against demographic trends and projections," reads another passage, which could be pulled from a write-up of the current student population estimates. "We know that all institutions will not survive. We know, too, that smaller institutions are especially vulnerable."

Comparing the RISD plan to the plans of today also makes it clear just how much shorter time horizons are. The old plan's two-decades-into-the-future goal seems like forever in comparison to today's three- and five-year timelines.

Aside from the case of the Rhode Island School of Design, experts pick out some other developments that have taken shape in strategic planning, many over the last 10 or 20 years.

Today, plans tend to be less aspirational than they were two decades ago, says Christopher Morphew, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Education.

"Most institutions were using them as these sort of aspirational documents," he says. "We're going to move to this Carnegie classification, or we're going to become a top-five university when we're No. 63 right now—sort of delusional aspirational documents."

Morphew co-authored research finding relatively fewer examples of such aspiration in North American research universities' recent strategic plans as compared to plans in Europe.

Strategic plans are also broader today than

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they have been in the past, he says. Earlier, strategic plans would sometimes lay out specific targets, like graduating a certain number of students in specific programs.

"Now what you see more is, 'This is the kind of thing we're going to do, this is our strategy as a broader sort of metadocument,'" he says.

Anecdotally, experts say planning often focuses more directly on finances today than it did a decade or two ago. The stakes also seem higher.

The fixation on solving financial problems through revenue generation has grown, says McGuinness, senior fellow at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. So has a need for more innovation and a dedication to diversity and inclusion.

Not everyone agrees on whether the field has experienced fundamental changes, evolution or is simply putting a different wrapper on old practices.

"I don't detect anything that would say there is great evolution in the idea of strategic planning," says Jones, NCHEMS president emeritus. "There are not a lot of folks who do it well, but I don't think that it's a field that has technically or philosophically evolved very much."

At institutions with a long history of dysfunction, it remains incredibly difficult to convince people to work together effectively.

"Some institutions just want our help to get the process focused on data, rather than

politics," Stevens says. "If you don't have good leadership from the institution, you haven't explained the governance structure, you're going to divert to political negotiations." ■