

Charge to Strategic Planning Working Group 13: Competition

Thank you for being part of Carleton's strategic planning process by serving on one of the Working Groups that will be at the very core of our deliberations. This memo is meant to give your Group a clear sense of what lies ahead; to lay out some parameters that should shape your inquiries, discussions, and recommendations; and to explain what I expect as the "end product" of your work. Let me reiterate at the very outset, however, how deeply grateful both I and the College community are for your leadership. We shall benefit very much from the integrity, care, wise insights, and desire to help Carleton fulfill its goals that you bring to this endeavor.

The Task at Hand

At one level, your Working Group has a simple and straightforward responsibility. We need you to answer the paired Questions: **"How can we anticipate what our competitors are likely to do? How should we respond?"** Carleton is in a highly competitive arena for talented and diverse students, faculty, and staff; for the attention and affection of prospective donors; and for general visibility. Even if one recoils at an unqualified embrace of market-based models and rhetoric, we must recognize that other colleges and universities, for-profit business, and other actors will aggressively pursue strategies of their own that could adversely affect Carleton. I look to you to set priorities on how the College should address the threats and opportunities presented by this landscape.

I recognize that answering your Question will almost certainly necessitate some deeper or slightly broader inquiries. It is perfectly fine to follow such compelling threads. I do not want to limit the range of your work at the very outset of the process. But it should help to bear in mind that there are other Working Groups answering other Questions, some of which will occasionally overlap with yours. As needed, we can call Groups together for discussion, adjust any particular Group's scope of inquiry based on what other groups are considering, and—later in the process—we are likely to convene "Meta-Groups" to address the broader implications of initial Groups' answers or to resolve differences between those answers. In short, you do not need to explore every possible implication of your Question. I look to you to stay as focused as possible on the task at hand and to develop as clear and concise an answer as you can to your Question.

Recall the Assumptions

A major boost to your efforts should come from the fulsome set of planning Assumptions that were reviewed and endorsed by the campus community last spring. These core beliefs and objectives constitute powerful "givens" in our planning process. You do not need to spend energy and time re-establishing or re-articulating these principles. The full set of Assumptions is attached as an appendix to this charging memo, and you will see that every one of them has direct relevance to the central goal of ensuring that Carleton continues to provide an undergraduate liberal arts education that is among the best in the world. Your Group's work is special, however, in that your Question to be Answered calls on you to flesh out with specificity the meaning of one prominent Assumption--and what it calls for Carleton to do in response. Hopefully the Assumptions will bring direction and focus to your deliberations.

Parameters

It is absolutely essential that our strategic planning be conducted with care, rigor, an insistence upon quality and a solid understanding of the tradeoffs entailed in setting our priorities. As we have discussed on many occasions, Carleton has limited resources (financial as well as time and energy) and must make choices about the most pressing objectives to pursue. Accordingly, your Working Group should observe the following parameters throughout its work and in crafting its Answer to your Question:

Maintain Focus and Set Priorities Your Group's Question to be Answered calls for the identification of specific initiatives or steps that ought to be taken to achieve an overarching goal (see above). But it is not realistic or wise to pursue a diffuse (or worse, confusing or contradictory) set of implementing measures. Therefore, I would ask your Group to make prioritized choices among possible strategies that would support the accomplishment of that goal. Your work will not be complete until you have settled upon a list, in ranked order, of no more than four (4) strategies that you feel will most efficaciously and powerfully drive us in the direction you want Carleton to go.

Consider Opportunity Costs Every initiative we choose to undertake, every activity or program we continue to support, every expenditure of time or money we make, means that we are choosing not to undertake some other work or to make some other expenditure. As your Group forms its Answer and prioritizes strategies, I would ask you to be especially mindful of these "opportunity costs"—the cost of any activity measured in terms of the best alternative forgone. If such an alternative is actually more compelling, it should be the recommended strategy. Conversely, in order to achieve our most pressing goals, we may have to reprioritize even among valuable things we currently do. I would ask your Group to consider explicitly whether any College programs, functions, actions or strategies you examine are no longer core (or are increasingly peripheral) to our mission, such that we should scale back or even cease doing them in order to free up resources to achieve other goals.

Take Financial Implications into Account If your Group proposes initiatives or policies that would require new outlays of money, your work will not be complete unless you also assess how much money such initiatives would require and from whence such funds would come. While we shall never discount the importance of raising new external funds for great ideas (and indeed, we expect that the most compelling priorities identified by the planning process will become linchpins of a next fundraising campaign), it would be irresponsible to assume that new monies will "just appear" to accomplish our goals. Your Group will therefore need to consider sources of necessary outlays. This might entail redistribution of existing budgetary commitments as well as attempts to generate new resources. I'll discuss below how the Treasurer's Office will help Working Groups get a handle on these fiscal questions.

Consider the Impact of Technology We live in a world of rapid technological change, some of which is already reshaping higher education (new providers, new methods of instruction, new ways of doing business). It is safe to assume that the pace and extent of such change will only increase. Therefore, I would ask your Group to consider explicitly how extant or developing technology might change your Answer. While this parameter may feel a bit like gazing into a crystal ball, because Carleton only periodically engages in comprehensive strategic

planning, it is imperative that we try to seize likely technological benefits and opportunities (fiscal, operational--and most importantly, programmatic). Be sure to evaluate whether we could achieve the same goal (or an even more audacious one!) through different, technologically advanced, means.

Measure Results In keeping with the adage that “What gets measured, gets done,” we shall need to bring real discipline and commitment to our emerging goals and priorities. It is essential that we try to measure whether (and how well) we are actually achieving the results we seek. Only then can we assess whether the expenditures of time and money we have directed to any given objective were worthwhile, worth continuing, or worth expanding. Therefore, I would ask your Group to recommend the best, realistically practicable, measures of attaining the goals embodied in your Question. Your work will not be complete until you have settled upon a set of no more than three (3) such measures and have described how the relevant data will be collected.

Resources/Help in Your Deliberations

It may feel, after reading the foregoing, that the Working Groups are being handed Herculean (if not Sisyphean!) tasks. Let me assure you that we want to make your work as manageable as possible and that you will have a variety of resources to draw upon.

First, we shall provide all Groups with basic background information through two “Carleton Seminar” sessions this fall. These meetings—which will be open to the entire College community—will address topics relevant to many of the specific Questions to be Answered: e.g., the economy of the College; student recruitment and the demographics of our student body; learning outcomes and alumni satisfaction; Carleton’s historic and distinctive strengths; and where Carleton stands (and how it compares to peers and competitors) in the firmament of higher education. The Seminars are scheduled for September 19 and September 26, from 3:30-5:00 p.m. in the Weitz Center for Creativity Cinema. Working Group members who cannot attend these sessions will be able to view a recording of them online.

Second, we have already begun compiling more specific background information/readings for each of the Groups; these will be maintained in common files on a dedicated Moodle site for easy shared access. Members will be able to add their own articles or resources to these developing collections.

Third, all Working Groups will draw heavily upon the data and analytic talent of our Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. We are therefore using some one-time “presidential initiative” grant dollars from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to add a temporary staff member so the IRA office can devote the necessary time and attention to strategic planning (which will be its top priority). Specific IRA staff will be designated as a “key resource” to each Working Group.

Fourth, because Groups must be concerned with the financial implications of their Answers, the Treasurer’s Division will play a crucial role helping analyze the likely fiscal and operational consequences of recommended actions. Most Groups will thus also have one or more “key resource” people drawn from the Finance or Human Resources offices.

Fifth, in addition to its formal members and the above-described staff resources, all Groups will also have a set of internal College “consultants” who will share their expertise as inquiries proceed. Thus, for instance, your Working will want to ask questions of and draw support from our Admissions and Financial Aid staff and the Office of the Dean of the College.

Finally, I expect we shall need to tap the knowledge of external experts/consultants as we proceed. In some cases, members of Working Groups may need to visit other institutions to understand what is possible and wise for Carleton. Reasonable levels of funding will be available for such planning activities.

Logistics

All together, there will be 139 formal members of the 13 Working Groups. I have also asked four other individuals—Dean of the College Bev Nagel, Treasurer Fred Rogers, President of the Faculty/Professor of Economics Mike Hemesath, and Board of Trustees Chair Jack Eugster—to “float” along with me between the various Groups, participating and helping wherever needed and bringing an additional measure of continuity, consistency and information sharing to the deliberations. The Tuesday Group (my “cabinet” of senior administrative leaders and the faculty President) will be deeply engaged in this process, and I expect to bring further levels of coordination and synthesis to later stages of the planning (for instance, we may constitute a steering committee to weave the finished Answers into a coherent and concise final document).

But for now, some basic organization and operational details will help your Group get started. I have designated a “Convener” for each Group, who will take the lead in driving discussions and deliberation forward on a realistic schedule. Especially at the beginning of the planning process, I will meet periodically with all of the Conveners to share guidance and offer direction as needed. The Convener for your Group will be Associate Professor of Economics and Associate Dean of the College Nathan Grawe.

I leave it to the collective wisdom and preferences of each Working Group to set its meeting schedules and agenda. Stephanie Huston of the President’s Office will be available to serve as the principal logistical coordinator for all Groups. Group members who are not based in Northfield can participate in meetings by conference call or other available technology. On occasion, it may be appropriate for some Groups to hold joint meetings. Consistent with our College culture and our desire to keep our planning inclusive and transparent, Groups can of course invite guests to participate in sessions, and I would also encourage you to consider opening up at least a part of some sessions to the broader College community and to solicit input at key points from non-members. However, I understand that reaching the best Answers will at times call for especially candid, passionate, thoughtful, and civil exchanges in a non-public setting.

Groups should keep at least rudimentary records of their deliberations (though I am not requiring formal minutes) and may want to provide periodic updates of their progress to the Carleton community. My point is that we do not want our planning process to seem like a “black box.” My office stands ready to assist in this regard.

And Your Work Concludes When....?

Our goal is for the Working Groups to reach answers to their respective Questions by the end of the 2011-12 academic year. While this may prove an aggressive timeline for a few Groups, we very much hope to prevent this process from stretching over two academic years. This means that we need to press ahead with dispatch as well as care.

Because the College community disperses during term breaks and over the summer, it is not realistic to assume that significant planning meetings will occur during those periods. However, the end of each term provides a regular opportunity for each Group to check in with the Tuesday Group on how its deliberations are proceeding and its anticipated activities for the next term. These scheduled “check-ins” will help us keep each Group on track and coordinate work across Groups. They will also help us determine whether and when to convene cross-cutting “Meta-Groups” to ponder overarching questions and resolve differences between Groups (e.g., conclusions that do not fit tightly together or are in conflict). It is obviously premature to set a timeline now for the work of such Meta-Groups.

Of course, we will not compromise the quality of our thinking to meet artificial deadlines; if necessary we can take a bit more time in selected areas to reach better and more widely-accepted results. Expanding on that last point, my expectation is that each Group will forge a consensus behind its Answer. Your work will not be complete if you remain deadlocked over competing visions; in such circumstances, a compromise solution will need to emerge that is consistent with our planning parameters and is sustainable for a reasonable period of time—for we will not continually reopen our planning process and must move forward in support of our newly-endorsed priorities.

And finally, consistent with the parameters and guidance laid out above, your Group’s Answer should be distilled into a relatively brief summary (I’m thinking 2-3 pages) that sets forth your recommended actions/priorities for the College. Should your Group feel the need for a slightly longer position paper, it could take the form of an appendix. The reports of each Group will be brought together into a final report which in turn will come before the faculty, College Council, and the Board of Trustees for approval.

A Last Thought

I know you share my excitement over this strategic planning process. This is a rare opportunity for Carleton to establish a clear set of priorities and expectations that will shape its future. The ideas we generate and then come together to support will ensure Carleton’s health, fidelity to its best self, continued success, and merited distinction as one of the tiny handful of the best liberal arts colleges in the world.

Steve Poskanzer