

# Community College of Rhode Island Strategic Planning

*APRIL 13 - 14, 2017*

## Step 2 - Identification of Strategic Issues

### Introduction

Identifying strategic issues is the crux of the strategic planning process. A strategic issue can be defined as a fundamental policy question or challenge affecting the institution's vision, mission, values, resources, programs, processes, outcomes, financing, structure, or management. Strategic issues can also be defined as the questions an institution must confront in order to succeed.

The outcomes of this step in the strategic planning process are twofold: First, a list of the strategic issues faced by CCRI and second, an arrangement of the issues in some order of priority.

There are several benefits derived from this critical step in the planning process. First, attention is focused on issues that are strategically important and away from the day-to-day operational matters that are of most concern to campus decision-makers.

Second, attention is focused on issues, not answers. Often, institutions are more concerned with developing solutions to problems without any clarity about what the problems/issues are. The "solutions" part of the process (strategic goals) is the next step in the process.

Third, strategic issues identification should provide useful clues about how to resolve the issues identified. By stating what in relation to the institution's mission, values, and internal and external factors (SWOT-C) makes an issue strategic, one also gains insights into possible ways the issue may be resolved.

### Describing Strategic Issues

A strategic issue has three components. For most colleges, a total of seven to ten strategic issues are usually identified. Some colleges can succinctly describe each issue in a few sentences or a paragraph while others provide detail that encompass a full page. For each issue, the following should be noted:

- 1) What is the issue? Phrase the issue as a challenge that the Community College of Rhode Island can do something about and that has more than one solution. If there is nothing the college can do about a situation, then there is no strategic issue. In addition, strategic issues are typically not current problems or crises. If the

question has only one solution, it is probably not an issue, but a choice about whether or not to pursue a specific solution.

- 2) Discuss the confluence of factors (mission, vision, values, resources, SWOT-C analysis) that makes the issue strategic. Strategic issues can arise from different situations. First, they can arise when events beyond the control of the institution (or moves by the competition), make or will make it difficult or impossible to accomplish basic objectives acceptably or affordably. In the SWOT-C analysis, these situations were called threats. Second, they can arise when internal operations such as programs, technology, resources, financing, staffing, and management will change or soon change. These were labeled strengths and weaknesses in the SWOT-C analysis. Third, issues can arise when changes in mission, values or other factors suggest present or future opportunities as noted in the SWOT-C analysis.
- 3) Briefly articulate the consequences of not addressing the issue. The statement of consequences could focus on exposure to serious threats or failure to capitalize on significant opportunities.

### **The CCRI Strategic Planning Committee's Role in the Process**

Identification of SWOT-C themes and strategic issues is somewhat an art and cannot be forced. Thus, the SPC will need some time to think through responses well in advance of the planned open fora. The process begins by the SPC reviewing the outcomes of the SWOT-C exercise conducted on March 23-24, 2017 to become familiar with key responses (provided by consultant). The next step is for the SPC to review and document viable themes each for each of the SWOT-C categories.

During a conference call with the consultants, the SWOT-C responses should be organized by major theme and refined prior to the open fora meetings. SPC members will be asked to review these SWOT-C themes with each group during open fora sessions in April.

SPC members will need to have a working knowledge of strategic issues. The best way to gain familiarity with these definitions is to take a SWOT-C theme and create a strategic issue. The strategic issues statement should be checked with the list at the end of this document (see Operational versus Strategic Issues) to make sure responses are truly strategic in nature.

### **On-Campus Open Fora (April 13-14, 2017)**

During the consultant's next trip to campus, the agenda includes a review the outcomes of the SWOT-C exercise, a brief presentation on visioning and community college trends and the development of strategic issues. From prior experience, the best approach is for the SPC to practice strategic issues and present these issues during the open fora for refinement. In many instances, participants identify and note multiple strategic issues. After some discussion, some are scrapped during the forum setting.

The consultant recommends that CCRI consider three to four open forums spread throughout multiple days so those with scheduled teaching loads can attend. Each forum should be open to faculty, staff, as well as board and community members. At many institutions, an evening open forum is provided with invited guests from the community and business and industry. CCRI will need to decide if this is a viable option and move forward with these arrangements in a timely manner.

### **Open Forum Format**

The consultant, with participation from the CCRI SPC, will begin each forum with a review of SWOT-C outcomes. Any additional insights about Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats will be solicited and recorded.

The consultant will discuss the purpose of a college vision. The Contract Agreement between CCRI and Paulien noted that the vision for the College is to be the best community college in New England by 2020. This vision will need to be validated or operationalized during the strategic planning process. This will start in Step 2 with a review of best practices in community colleges.

After this presentation (or activity), the consultant will provide a succinct overview of strategic issues and questions will be accommodated.

Members of the SPC (one or two per table) will be asked oversee forum participants as they develop strategic issues. Each open forum should be two hours in duration.

The consultant will summarize activities from each open forum and provide the SPC with a comprehensive list of draft strategic issues. After review, an electronic survey will be developed and sent to all CCRI employees asking participants to rank order strategic issues by level of importance. The results will be tallied by the consultant and presented for review in Step 3.

### **Examples**

Several examples of how strategic issues have been identified at other colleges.

### **Example 1:**

**Major Strategic Issue: What processes need to be put in place to ensure that our programs are viable for the future and central to our vision? How do we determine the need for new programs to support local economic development?**

Supporting Issues

- How do we make the liberal arts more meaningful to students as they prepare for transfer?
- Who will our students be and what will they want to learn?

- How can we develop more effective, innovative, and creative programs to meet shareholder needs?
- How can we serve the needs of the underserved student?
- What do we need to do to increase the number of full-time faculty?
- What on-line infrastructure resources are needed?
- How do we maximize our use of resources to promote student learning?
- How much of our course inventory will be offered in different formats in 5 years?

**SWOT-C Themes**

Academic Programs  
 Metrics/ratios  
 Faculty/Staff  
 Supporting Services/Programs  
 Technology  
 Demographics/Economy  
 Competition  
 Marketing/Partnerships

**Major Strategic Issue: What information and processes do we need to be more adaptive, entrepreneurial, and innovative?**

Supporting Issues

- How do we determine what markets to pursue?
- How can we be more proactive in identifying new markets?
- How do we support a creative, innovative, entrepreneurial culture?
- How do we monitor and respond to our changing environments?
- How do we make marketing more systematic?
- How do we adapt?
- How do we get “buy-in” to our vision and mission?
- How will CCRI respond to national educational trends in a timely manner?

**SWOT-C Themes:**

Metrics/Ratios  
 Market/Community/Recruiting  
 Culture/Environment  
 Mission/Vision/Values  
 Market/Community/Alumni  
 Demographics/Economy  
 Marketing/Partnerships  
 Competition