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ABSTRACT

An environmental scanning process was used to solicit opinions about the future of Columbia Basin College, Washington, from various interest groups. The interest groups were formed to research topics and areas important to the future of the college. Ten interest groups, with a total of 37 members, were founded and the scanning process was also used to gather information from experts in the community. In all, more than 160 people completed the scanning abstract form. After the information was gathered and analyzed, core external trends were identified in the areas of: (1) financial trends; (2) sociological and demographic trends; (3) economic and workforce trends; and (4) technology trends. The environmental scanning process was very well received at Columbia Basin College, in part because it was a new effort to gather the opinions of many stakeholders and interested citizens. The environmental scanning process is expected to continue, and it is expected to contribute to a more outward looking, positive, and sharing college environment. An appendix contains two figures illustrating the college's structure and strategic planning process. (Contains 94 references.) (SLD)

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FOCUS ON THE FUTURE: USING ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING TO EFFECT INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

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FOCUS ON THE FUTURE: USING ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING TO EFFECT INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The outward-looking character of strategic planning takes into account a growing awareness and significance of the outside environment...This growing awareness of the outside environment is the single most important contribution of strategic planning to institutional decision-making, and ¾ of all change at most institutions is "now triggered by outside factors."

George Keller, 1983

Introduction

Environmental scanning is a careful and continuous process of tracking and analyzing trends relevant to an institution's goals. It involves making forecasts of changes and assessing their direct and indirect impact on the institution's capacity to achieve its mission.

Scanning is most often conducted to support the strategic planning process. An assessment of the external environment in terms of opportunities and threats is an essential element in this process. The Harvard Policy Model organizes its central theme around "SWOT" analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). Under this model, the organization/college systematically assesses internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. Environmental factors are usually considered an opportunity or threat depending on their positive or negative effect on the organization.

At CBC, an institutional level assessment process includes monitoring the external environment (inputs), the college end states developed from its mission statement (throughput), and accountability, such as value-added learning (outputs). Please see the Strategic Planning Model Chart in the appendix. Another chart follows that depicts the strategic planning process end statement reporting that places the external and internal research at the beginning of the strategic planning process.

Methodology

CBC began the process of developing a strategic plan in the fall of 1999. As the first step of that process, the Institutional Research Director was asked to perform an environmental scan. The process used was recommended by experts in the field as being the most effective way to bring as many people into the process as possible with the goal of developing an outward-looking framework of awareness by those who participated in the scanning project.

Interest groups were formed to research topics and areas important to the future of the college. Chairs of the groups were recruited and an invitation was extended to all faculty, staff, and administrators to participate in an Area of Interest where they either had existing expertise or a desire to know more about the topic. There were ten interest groups with a total of thirty-seven members. The groups participated in an orientation session given by the Director of Institutional Research on what environmental scanning was and how it was to be accomplished at CBC. In addition, research methods, computer links, and written sources were established for their convenience. Steven Badalamente, CBC Librarian, provided individual sessions on research methods and developed computer links and library resources for the interest groups.

A scanning abstract form was developed for the interest groups that provided an organized approach to information keeping. Information has continued to be submitted after the project was officially completed because interest group members say they continue to be more aware of issues and events that might affect CBC. They want to pass on that information to those who can benefit.

As a kickoff to the project, Earl Hale, Executive Director of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges came to CBC from Olympia to relate his thoughts on the future of community colleges in Washington. He gave an overview of the upcoming legislative session and what it could mean to CBC and higher education in general.

An integral part of the scanning project was to talk to experts in the community. This was accomplished by interviewing community leaders. Those interviewed were members of business and industry, national and state elected officials, locally elected officials, members of the health care community, social service agencies, K-12 school administrators, members of the local arts community and professionals who work with literacy issues. Eleven CBC faculty, staff, and administrators interviewed 65 community leaders over an eight-week period. A letter from Columbia Basin College's President, Dr. Thornton, began the interview process and college personnel followed up with a phone call to make an appointment at the community representative's convenience. Most often, the interviews took place in the interviewee's office. All who did the interviewing related how much they had learned from those they interviewed. It was a wonderful opportunity to gain information followed by an opportunity to share information about CBC with the local community.

Vocational Advisory Committees made up of volunteer community members who advise a particular vocational program were included in the interview process through their regular meetings. They participated in focus group sessions led by the Director of Institutional Research designed to gain from the committee member's unique perspective what was happening in the Tri-Cities that could affect CBC in the next 3-5 years. There were four advisory committees who participated over a three-month period. All the groups expressed their thanks in being included in the project. They felt being included was a confirmation of their importance to the college programs they serve.

The project culminated with a public forum where all who participated came together to relate what they learned to those invited which included faculty, staff, and administrators, community leaders who were interviewed, and others who have indicated an interest in the findings of the project. This publication, Focus on the Future: Environmental Scanning at CBC, was distributed to the college community and all others who participated in the project.

Core External Trends

After all the information had been gathered and analyzed at the global, national, state, and local levels by the research teams, core external trends were developed. The "core" trends are those that have the most potential for impact on the college and are the most likely to continue. They are a distillation of the information provided by the researchers and interviewers and will be used by the college in determining strategic directions.

CORE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL TRENDS
COLUMBIA BASIN COLLEGE

Financial Trends

- There will be a continued decline in funding for higher education from the State and Federal levels coupled with an increased demand for accountability in how the funds are used.
- The cost of higher education will continue to be shifted from the responsibility of federal and state legislatures to the student through higher tuition.
- More financial aid will be directed to the middle class through programs such as the Hope Scholarship and tax credits.

Sociological and Demographic Trends

- The local population will be increasingly older with an increasing number of retirees.
- Increased need for ESL programs will continue as the number of refugees and immigrants increases.
- There will continue to be a marked increase in the need for literacy services at all levels--national, state and local.
- Through increased immigration, less skilled workers will be arriving in the Tri-Cities.
- Colleges will enroll increasing numbers of students requiring remedial and developmental work.

- Students will be increasingly affected by various social problems (welfare reform, poverty, single-parent families, disabilities, illiteracy, etc.).

- College populations will become younger with an increasing number of traditionally aged students enrolling in higher education directly from high school and through Running Start.

Economic and Workforce Trends

- The Tri-Cities' economic health report is increasingly optimistic with a continued move towards diversification of businesses and away from a Hanford-dominated economy.

- A bimodal economy is rapidly developing in the Tri-Cities with agriculture on one side (relatively low wages but increasingly large numbers employed) and with Hanford on the other side of the scale (fewer numbers employed accompanied by higher wages).

- Employment will continue to be high and worker productivity will continue to increase.

- There will be increasing market value associated with skill certification (by professional groups) over degrees awarded by colleges.

- Employers and consumers will have higher expectations of a worker's skills, abilities and aptitudes, accompanied by a shift to more self-directed work teams, lifelong learning, creative thinking and problem solving.

- There will be increased pressure by employers for technological skills for employees at all levels with increased need for continued upgrading of skills throughout a worker's career.

- For-profit providers who do not adhere to traditional systems or boundaries will increasingly carry out education and training.

Technology Trends

- New technologies now allow, and students and faculty demand, new ways of interacting.

- Increased competition will be brought to distance education along with a need for associated services.

A Futurist's Look

Although CBC's environmental scan gathered information based on trends and predictions for the next three to five years, a longer look is also useful. Samuel L. Dunn, Vice President for Academic Affairs and a professor of business and mathematics at Northwest Nazarene University, published a future predictions list for higher education. His list of predictions for higher education, said to occur within the next 25 years, was published in the March-April 2000 issue of The Futurist magazine. Futurists are traditionally conservative and a bit gloomy, but his predictions are included because they look further into the future than the scanning project allowed. These predictions may or may not be realized depending on what we do or don't do to support, correct or combat the predictions. Higher Education can and does make its own future.

Predictions for Higher Education By 2025

- The number of degree-granting institutions will continue to grow, while the number of traditional campuses will decline. By 2025, half of today's existing independent colleges will be closed, merged, or significantly altered in mission.

- University degrees and programs at all levels will be available by information technologies from all quality levels of educational institutions.

- Courseware producers will sell courses and award credits directly to the end user, and thus, through inter-mediation, bypass the institutional middleman.

- There will be two principal types of degree and certificate-granting institutions: value-added and certification institutions.

- The distinction between distance and local education will be blurred. Almost all the courses will be digitally enhanced. There will be a small group of colleges that will carve out a market niche by maintaining "live faculty instruction" in their course delivery.

- Seamless education between high school, undergraduate college and graduate programs will be the norm. Incentives will be given to students and institutions to move students through their programs at a fast rate.

- The home-school movement will lead to a home-college movement.

- The remaining campus-based colleges and universities will increasingly move to responsibility-centered management and will outsource many functions now done by the institution.

- Cities will expect colleges and universities to pay taxes or a "voluntary" equivalent for services rendered by the city.

- The U.S. government will continue to certify institutions for access to student financial aid. By 2010, the number of eligible institutions will jump from about 7,000 at present to more than 10,000.

- Faculty in traditional colleges and universities will revolt against technological delivery of courses and programs and against the emerging expectations for faculty. Unionization and strikes will increase as faculty fight a rear-guard action to try to slow down or stop the inevitable.

- Accreditation and program approval will be based more on educational outcomes. Testing programs will be put in place by discipline organizations, federal and state governments, corporations, and testing companies. Large corporations will develop their own approval systems. By 2025, there will not be one national accreditation system, although the U.S. Department of Education will provide a basic safety net for quality.

- The big growth in adult and post-secondary education will be in degree and certificate programs for older adults. To be viable in the information society, the typical adult will need to take at least 30 semester credits every 10 years.

- By 2005, there will be "killer" courseware applications covering the 25 college courses that enroll 50% of all credits.

- Consortia of colleges, universities, and other kinds of institutions will increasingly band together to produce and deliver courses for students in their member institutions. Many of these consortia will seek their own accreditation and approval.

- The distinctions between and among public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions of higher education will largely disappear.

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Through the environmental scanning process, over 160 people were asked to think about the college's future and what trends and events would likely affect the institution within the next 3-5 years. This was a radical change from the traditional college culture at CBC. Prior to the present college president, Dr. Lee Thornton, faculty and staff were not encouraged to travel or be a part of state-wide organizations. Meeting and talking with colleagues across the state was discouraged. The college is somewhat isolated in location and with this type of campus culture was insulated from ideas and innovations by other colleges or organizations within the state. This led to an inward looking faculty and staff whose ideas were not included in decisions made by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, professional organizations (such as the college commissions and councils), and, to some extent, the state legislature.

Programs and processes adopted at other community colleges were not developed at CBC or came later than at other schools. With the arrival of Dr. Thornton, the insulated campus was discouraged and openness and shared decision making were encouraged. He made opportunities available to faculty and staff for professional development, travel and meetings that had not been in place before.

Involving so many of the faculty, staff and community members in the environmental scanning process made those participating make comments, such as "I never realized how little I knew about.... and I want to learn more" or "I didn't realize how many common problems we all share." A core group asked to continue with the scanning on a more limited scale and their information is included in a annual report to the Strategic Planning Committee.

If you are considering using a project such as environmental scanning to produce change within your college, the following are recommended. (1) First assess your institution's culture, (2) incremental change, guided over time by a long-term vision, can lead to fundamental change, and (3) you need a core group committed to the long-term vision and to supporting each other through the incremental steps. These ideas combined with a worthwhile project can lead to an improved campus culture.

Many of those participating in the project expressed thanks and appreciation in being involved because they had never been included before. CBC is continuing to evolve and enlarge its outlook through other projects and thrusts. The environmental scanning project was one impetus to change. It may actually have a longer reaching affect in changing people and their view of themselves and the college within a larger context than what was gained in the way of information for the strategic planning process. In the end, I suppose that is what matters most – a more outward looking, positive and sharing college environment that leads to increased student success.

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Washington Employment Security Department Labor Market Information:
Employment information, including our local area. Use the site map.

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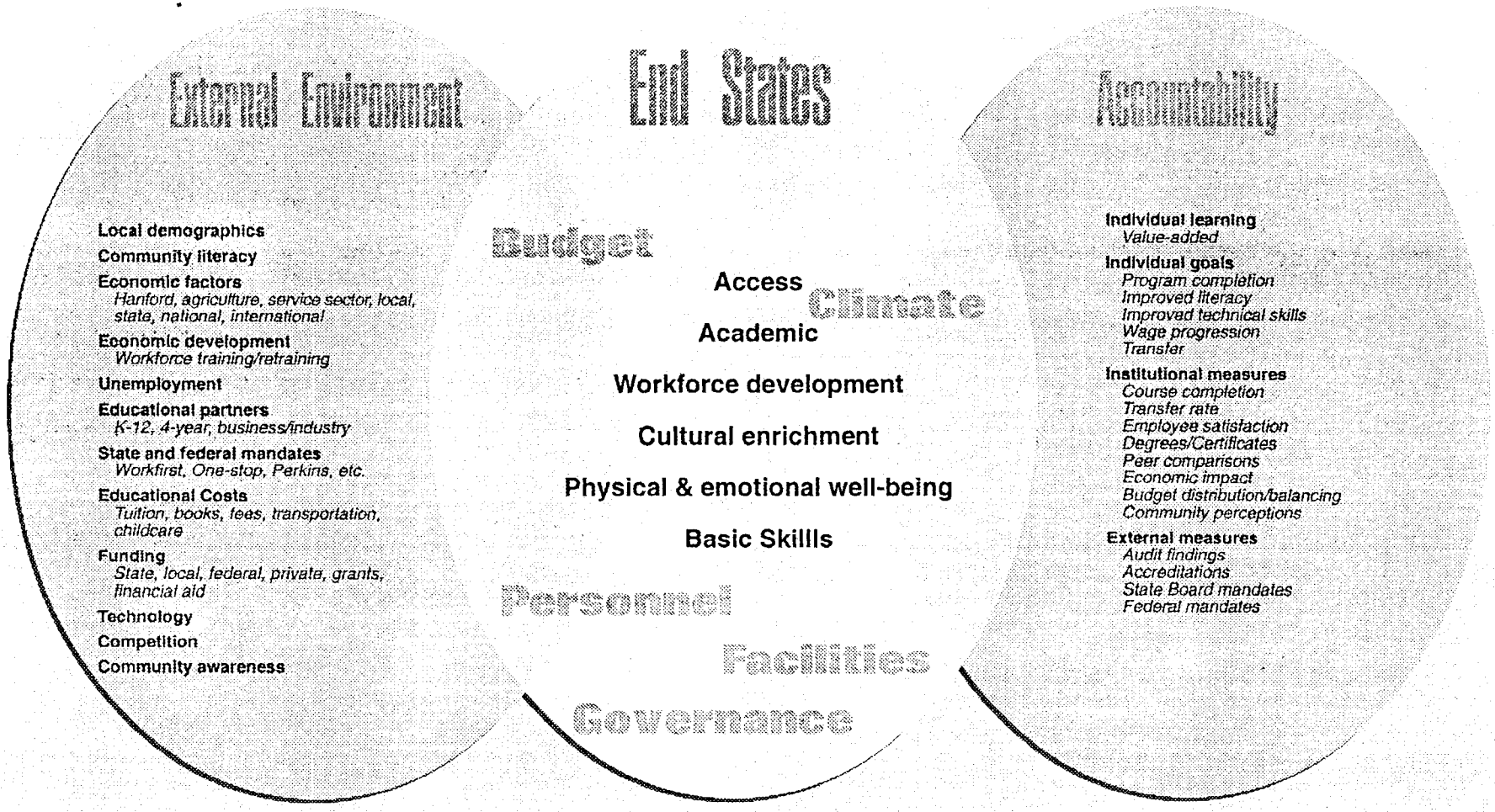
APPENDIX

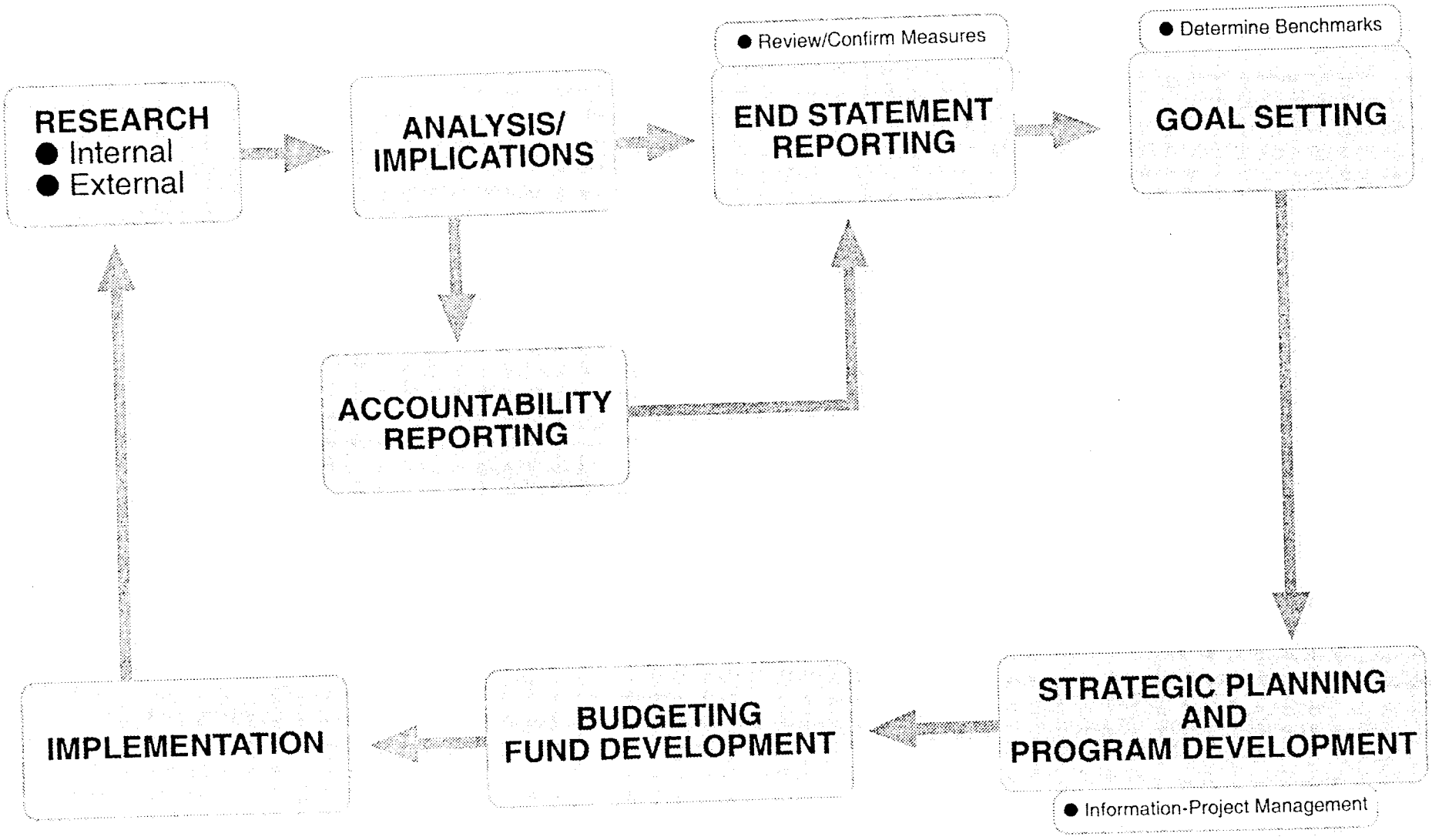
Columbia Basin College

Research Agenda



Columbia Basin College

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS END STATEMENT REPORTING



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