Cindy Curtis Interviews Mort Winston – March 13, 2012

CC Good afternoon, Mort, and thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Please briefly review the process that led to the creation of the draft strategic map.

MW The process actually began last fall where we held focus groups that were designed to gather campus opinion about where we are now as an institution and what our strengths and weaknesses, critical issues and strategic priorities ought to be. Over 300 people participated in the focus groups that were held throughout the month of November. I led a small group of people who analyzed records of those focus groups. Each group had a recorder as well as a facilitator. We did a thematic analysis. We grouped comments according to themes under each of the four questions. Then we created an executive summary of all of those focus group comments. That became one of the key documents that was given to the members of the strategic planning task force in early February in order for them to prepare for the strategic planning retreat that was held Monday and Tuesday, February 13th and 14th. There was a briefing book that included those focus group summaries as well as some assessment data provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and some general guidelines and background information for the people to consider.

The retreat was led by our two consultants, Tim Fallon and Stacy Zawel, of TSI Consulting Partners. They began with some introductions and some framing remarks. They began by saying that planning is not an end to itself but a means to becoming a more effective organization. They have a particular way of defining effectiveness. It means to set appropriate goals and consistently achieve them. The emphasis is based on outcomes rather than planning for planning’s sake.

President Gitenstein came to the retreat and gave us an overview of the challenges facing the higher education in New Jersey. What she emphasized was this is a difficult climate but we can find our way through. What we need to do is to prove our “value proposition” - be able demonstrate that we are as good as we say we are and that we are worth the money students and parents have to pay to attend The College of New Jersey. Then she left and we got down to work.

The first exercise was to break up into groups and have each group review the comments from the focus groups and pick out those things that seem most salient to people and which issues and strengths and weaknesses were the most critical strategic issues going forward. Then there was a report out in which people wrote the group responses down and put them on the wall. This was a consensus building exercise. Then there was another small group exercise – a mission and vision exercise – to think about what we would like The College to be 5 years from now, ten years from now – what our aspirational goals are. That was interesting as well.

After lunch on the first day, Tim Fallon presented the idea of a strategic map. He began by suggesting a way of filling in the boxes of challenges and key priorities that he was suggesting. He made it perfectly clear that his suggestion was open to criticism but it was to be a starting point. There ensued considerable discussion among the group on how we are going to articulate the central challenge facing the College, how we are going to articulate the key strategic priorities, how to define the objectives under each area. As we were discussing it, Stacy was continually editing and revising this map. (It was up on the screen – a PowerPoint presentation.) We could all see what changes were being made. We spent most of the rest of the day working on that.

We came back Tuesday and began where we left off – adding detail, arguing about various points, how we were going to present the main priorities, a lot of give and take. I’ve talked to several people who said that by the end of the morning they were thinking “I don’t know how this is all going to come together. We’d still not decided about some important issues, which is an indication of how much genuine discussion there was.

After lunch our consultants, I thought, did a remarkable job pulling this all together. They quickly got us to agree that what we had was good enough, not to be perfect and to not do so much more wordsmithing and tinkering with the language and just sort of let it be. There were a number of other interventions that clarified some issues and resolved some of the controversies.

Next they lead us through this very interesting exercise in which they asked each of us as individuals to rate the importance or urgency of different strategic objectives that were articulated along the map. Everyone assigned numbers to the objectives. We added up the numbers, and lo and behold, it turned out that there was clearly a consensus about which things are really critical to do first and which things were important but not quite as critical and can be done next. What it led to was a way of prioritizing the elements of the maps so that we could figure out what our tracks of work are – that is, which of the objectives were we going to focus on in the beginning of the implementation stage and the sequence of those. And so we did that for the first phase of implementation and then for the second phase as well. At the end of the day on Tuesday, we had a completed strategic map and two pretty clearly articulated phases of work that indicated how we’re going to implement the plan. And everyone left, I think, feeling “Wow! That was neat.” At the end that everybody felt pretty good about it walking out the door.

So that was the basic process that we followed.

CC Thank you. Can you talk a bit about the central challenge? Are we not already doing this?

MW Well, the way we articulated the central challenge in the end was saying it’s to make the decisions necessary to deliver educational excellence in an affordable, sustainable way. I think it does reaffirm what we’ve been trying to do for many years here at the College of New Jersey, which is positioning our self as an excellent primarily undergraduate institution. But it frames it, I think, and importantly, in terms of affordability and sustainability, which is a recognition of a change in the climate of education here in New Jersey and across the United States, with declining state support and the continuing recession. It’s getting more difficult for students and their families to afford to send their sons and daughters to colleges. So in order to prosper, we have to figure out a way of making and keeping TCNJ affordable and doing it in a sustainable, ongoing way. I think that was an important shift of consciousness that happened. For many years, I thought people felt we had a nice niche we had worked ourselves into: best buy, best value higher education. But the world changes and we’re losing that niche; it’s being eroded, and our affordability is being challenged, both by other public institutions and by some very high quality private institutions. This goes back to what the President said: that we have to be able to demonstrate our value proposition, that we are truly excellent and worth the money. But being worth the money also means we still have to be affordable; we have to be a place that families can afford to send their children to.

CC The map calls on the campus to identify points of excellence and distinctiveness and also to identify and prioritize signature experiences. Can you provide some examples of what might be points of excellence, distinctiveness and signature experiences? What did the retreat group have in mind here?

MW I think that is a very good question. I think different members of the group and the retreat task force probably would have picked different exemplars to illustrate this. Some people in the group clearly would have focused on mentored undergraduate research as a signature program and a point of strength. Other people might have focused on the Bonner Program as an outstanding and distinctive engaged learning experience. Other people might have pointed to the performance of particular departments or particular schools, which are recognized nationally as being outstanding programs of their kind. There are probably a number of different things that would qualify as the signature experience. Part of the idea of making it an early priority is to have a conversation on campus, where we really look carefully at our different programs and try to figure out, honestly, which ones are the really outstanding, really excellent, really distinctive kind of education we hope to provide and to distinguish those from others that might merely be good, but not really be excellent or distinctive.

CC Thank you. Box one reads “Reaffirm TCNJ mission and key educational elements or outcomes” and in box two we state “Define key outcomes for TCNJ grads”. Can you differentiate between the outcomes we are reaffirming and what we have in mind that we are now going to define?

MW I was the person who suggested that first box, that we reaffirm the mission and core beliefs. My argument was basically that we can’t at this stage of the game start from scratch, we have to assume something. There were elements in the current mission statement, particularly the statement of core beliefs, that I think are still useful and viable for us, particularly the part about providing education for young people who are going to be leaders and sustainers of the communities in which they belong. As I understand our mission, we don’t aspire to just produce well educated men and women, we aspire to produce well educated men and women who are prepared to take leadership roles in various communities and various institutions and organizations in the worlds of business and science and medicine and law and all the other fields that students that graduate from TCNJ go into. That is a distinctive mission, and my sense is that we should affirm that and embrace that as an overriding goal for our institution.

The second point is to say, let’s actually look at the characteristics of leaders that we want to imbue our students with: what is it that makes a person a leader, and what are the particular experiences or parts of the curriculum that most support the attainment of some of those characteristics? Some of the signature programs, like WILL, are specifically focused on developing leadership skills, through courses in leadership. These would be examples of courses or curricula that specifically targeted this feature of the mission. What we want to figure out is: how do we know that our graduates have acquired those skills? This goes to the sixth strategic priority, the cross cutting one at the bottom of the map, which is to assess outcomes in order to demonstrate our value proposition. We claim that we produce leaders; well what does that mean? How do we account for that? What is that we do to students or for students or with students that nurtures their leadership abilities, and how can we document that we are doing that in fact and not just saying that that is what we would like to able to do?

CC Thank you. In the Big Issues 2012, the Faculty Senate called on the campus to set new academic goals. The academic focus of the plan seems to be in identifying, highlighting, and supporting what we are currently doing well. Do you see room in this map for setting new academic goals and aspirations or creating new programs?

MW Oh, absolutely! I think that is a key feature of the map. I think the reference to having a culture innovation speaks to that, but also assessing our academic programs is a means to improving them. You don’t just assess for its own sake. What you want to learn is which of our programs are achieving their goals and which aren’t, and how can we strengthen existing programs to make them more effective in achieving their goals? So, the whole idea of assessment-driven planning is using an empirical method to identify what our real impacts are on our students, to document and, where possible, measure them with appropriate metrics, and then assess our performance against those standards to see what we are doing well and what we can do better. The idea here is to drive innovation of our existing programs but it is also, I think, to be creative and innovative and think about what else we could be doing that we are not currently doing that could help us better achieve our goals. I don’t think the map itself speaks explicitly to what those ideas are, but I think that is going to be the work of the next couple years: to bring forth ideas from the campus about new programs, new initiatives, that might pan out as viable additions or substitutions for our current academic program.

CC Thank you. You have led the campus successfully through this process, along with the interim provost, can you tell me, in the end, what excites you about the result; are you happy?

MW I am happy so far. I think the process this year has gone extremely well. It has stayed on track and has gotten a lot of engagement from the campus. I have enjoyed working with Susan Bakewell Sachs and the other members of the task force and CPP, and I think what we have produced so far is good. However, you never know how good a plan is until you begin to implement it. The proof of the plan is not, does it look good or do people like it, but does it work. So, even though I think the planning has been sound and successful, I am not ready to say the whole thing is a success until I see how the implementation goes. People who have been at the college for a long time know from experience that sometimes in the past we have planned and then fallen down in the implementation phase. We are determined, or at least I am determined, but I think many other people involved in this process are also determined, not to let that happen this time, which is why we are putting so much attention on planning implementation and assessment. This is not going to be a plan that we put on the shelf and say “ah, here, we planned this” and do business as usual. The idea is we are going to, beginning next academic year, start doing things differently and seeing, honestly, whether what we are doing is working or not working. So, that is what excites me about it. I do see it as moving to the next level of organizational development as an institution in terms of our ability to effectively deploy our resources for strategic positioning.

CC Thank you. And what else would you like the faculty to know, in conclusion?

MW I’d like the faculty to know that their participation in this process is absolutely critical to its success. The faculty perspective, of course, is not the only perspective that was represented in the task force and retreat but it was, certainly, an important perspective and one that was very well represented. Faculty members who were not personally involved in the process should come away thinking, “My interests and the interests of the faculty were spoken for and spoken for well.” When you look at the plan and see the emphasis on support for faculty, support for faculty research, support for faculty development, support for outstanding programs that faculty members are involved in, I think you will see that a great deal of the emphasis of the plan is on faculty work and faculty roles. This is not the only thing the plan contains, but it is certainly an essential element of the plan. The faculty, I think, should feel, “Maybe we didn’t get everything we were wishing for. But we got a significant amount of it, and it’s good”.

CC Thank you very much for your time.