

# **Strategic Planning – The NCAA Experience**

## **The NCAA Experience**

From the moment Myles Brand accepted the NCAA presidency in October 2002, he emphasized strategic planning. In the first minutes after his October 10 selection Brand said, “Over the next year, I will bring about a planning process with wide involvement that will help map the future of intercollegiate athletics.”

Strategic planning is not new to NCAA. As far back as the late 1980s, the NCAA Presidents Commission carefully planned multiyear athletics reform initiatives. In the 1990s, the staff was asked to plan strategically, and after membership restructuring in 1997, Divisions II and III developed plans that they continue to use. But the current effort is by far the most ambitious and systematic effort ever to frame the membership’s vision and to make it happen.

And the plan is truly strategic rather than tactical. Strategic planning contrasts sharply with organizational planning, which typically becomes a “job description” of ongoing functions. Strategic planning needs to be about the future — about what will have been accomplished (and for whom) as a result of the organization’s work.

What is the discipline of strategic planning all about and why is it important and relevant in a constantly changing environment, such as the NCAA? Why did Dr. Brand view it as an imperative for a successful NCAA? What long-term benefits have institutions and organizations reaped from a strategic planning effort? What lessons have been learned, and how can NCAA member divisions, conferences and institutions take advantage of NCAA experiences in this effort to help their own organizations successfully navigate the future?

## **The Process**

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### **Getting Started**

In January 2003, Myles Brand chartered an Association Strategic Planning Committee, with representation from all three divisions and all major staff functions. The charter of this group was to design and oversee the implementation of a strategic plan.

### **The Consultants’ Role**

In March 2003, the NCAA retained Tecker Consultants, LLC, to assist the committee in planning and thinking strategically. Tecker Consultants is an international consulting firm specializing in not-for-profit organizations and the design of effective strategy and governance solutions. The role of the Tecker Consultants (TC) during the process included:

**Documentation:** Throughout the project, TC authored drafts of the evolving strategic direction from data and deliberations executed in each step. To effectively capture written themes that emerged from group dialogue, TC associates were onsite at many sessions to provide documentation support.

**Refinement:** In documenting the work in each step and building the evolving strategic plan draft, TC worked with the Association Strategic Planning Committee to refine session drafts and “wordsmith” content to ensure consistency and accuracy.

**Communication and Consultation:** Any opportunity to gather input from stakeholder groups was used as a two-way communication process. At key points, TC provided summaries of important themes, issues and “talking points” to assist NCAA staff communication efforts. TC also provided periodic counsel about ongoing communications strategy.

## A Generic Framework for Planning

Tecker Consultants brought to the NCAA planning process a proprietary framework of strategy development. The four planning “horizons” enable the creation of effective strategy and ensure relevance of an organization’s long-range direction over time. The model adapts a model originally articulated by Collins and Porras to achieve a balance between core ideology and envisioned future into a comprehensive model for association planning.



In general, the concept consists of crafting a comprehensive strategic direction that is based on the balance between **what doesn’t change** (that is, the timeless principles of the organization’s core purpose and core values) **and the vision that drives change** (what the organization seeks to be or become within a **10-30 year horizon**, characterized by the articulation of an envisioned future).

The articulation of the envisioned future guides the organization in the consideration of the next set of factors that will affect the **5-10 year horizon** — a set of preliminary judgments about future conditions affecting the organization and its members. Elements of the strategic plan built here include **assumptions about the relevant future environment**. Those assumptions provide an underlying set of factors, both likely and uncertain, upon which the organization will define its 3-5 year goals. When conditions change, strategy should be adjusted. These statements provide a basis upon which the organization can purposefully update its strategic plan annually and ensure the ongoing relevance of its strategy.

The linkage of strategic judgments continues into the **3-5 year horizon** through the development of formal goals and objectives in which the organization must articulate the outcomes it seeks to

achieve for its stakeholders. How will the world be different as a result of what the organization does? Who will benefit and what will be the likely results?

**Finally, the articulation of outcome-oriented strategies and determinations of the organization's** annual operational allocation of discretionary resources are represented in the 1-2 year planning horizon. To make sufficient progress toward its envisioned future, an organization must employ strategic judgment and measurability. The long-range strategic plan must systematically link to annual planning, budgeting and evaluation to enhance long-range strategy and judgments about what must be done each year.

The overall goal of the NCAA strategic planning effort was to develop a plan that would enable the Association over the next 1-30 years to meet member and stakeholder needs. The plan would be clear and easily communicated and would lend itself to establishing annual program priorities and operational plans that could be easily translated to committees and staff. Also, the plan would be easily updated.

### **Customizing the Framework and Process for NCAA**

Throughout the process, all parties sought to ensure that this model was sufficiently flexible to reflect the unique dynamics of the NCAA environment.

The NCAA project design was developed collaboratively with NCAA leadership and Tecker Consultants beginning at a design session in March 2003. At that time, the NCAA senior leadership team and the consultants sought to determine **“What will success look like when this project is completed?”** Themes included the following:

- Increased ability to anticipate the future.
- Greater trust and collaboration, strengthened partnerships, increased understanding, and improved communication.
- Clarity of purpose, direction and accountability; agreement on strategic initiatives and priorities; and a focus on the most important things. The process was to be conclusive, with the discipline to follow through.

The team also identified attributes of the process by answering the question, **“What should the process be like (or not be like) to achieve success?”** Themes included the following:

- Involvement of all constituencies.
- A sense of staff and members working together staff.
- Inclusion (all ideas are important; all contributions matter and are valued).
- Proper communication.
- Support at the top and the resolve to achieve results.
- No predetermined outcomes.
- Ongoing commitment.
- Bold and aggressive outcomes.

## The Process Steps

- The NCAA strategic planning process included 25 planning sessions involving more than 1,000 people. Also, about 10,000 student-athletes, administrators and other interested parties provided input through surveys.



The NCAA process consisted of four phases:

1. Data collection.
2. Direction setting and strategy.
3. Strategy development.
4. Internal analysis and implementation strategy.

**In data collection**, the key activities were **input sessions to** collect information and obtain support from various leadership groups and members. These strategic thinking sessions advanced ideas and concepts. A TC consultant facilitated each group through the development of trends and assumptions about the relevant future, core purpose and values, envisioned future, and NCAA “mega” issues.

Between March and August 2003 all NCAA stakeholder groups were asked:

- What does the Association stand for?
- What should the Association seek to be over the long term?
- What near-term objectives will help the Association achieve its goals?

Later, a **Web survey** was conducted (stratified by division and position) of divisional presidential governing bodies, Management Council members, faculty athletics representatives, athletics administrators, student-athletes, coaches’ organizations, NCAA staff, commissioners, the Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, higher education organizations and media. More than 3,000 responses were received.

In the second phase, **direction setting**, drafts of the strategic plan were circulated to Management Councils, divisional presidential governing bodies and the NCAA Executive Committee. Those groups used the cumulative feedback to develop new drafts, which in turn were considered by chief executive officers and other constituent groups from outside the NCAA governance structure.

In the third phase, **strategy development**, the strategic plan came together. It included goals relating to academics, the student-athlete experience, informed governance and decision-making, effective national office administration, and perceptions of the Association and intercollegiate athletics.

This data-collection exercise underscored the diversity of the NCAA. Different groups envisioned distinctly different futures. Goals viewed as vital to one constituent seemed unimportant to another. But through the process, consensus began to emerge and the organization as a whole began to embrace a common vision.

The final phase, **internal analysis and implementation strategy**, included an internal analysis of programs, processes and competencies intended to lead to successful execution of the NCAA strategic plan. Activities were include a strategic program portfolio analysis, key process review and identification of implementation issues that will be critical to integrating strategic plan work within the budget and resource allocation scheme.

## **Key Challenges for NCAA in this Process**

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In the process, the NCAA quickly discovered that the name of the Association meant different things to different stakeholders. Therefore, the following definitions were designated to be used throughout the process and the Association as follows.

*This plan involves all NCAA entities, defined as follows:*

- *The “Association” is the “corporate entity” comprising member institutions, conferences, the governance structure (for example, boards, cabinets, committees) and affiliated entities (for example, coaches associations), as well as student-athletes, coaches and athletics administrators.*
- *The “membership” of the Association is primarily the colleges and universities. It is campus-based.*
- *The “national office” represents the employees in Indianapolis who make up the infrastructure of the Association.*

Another challenge was in gaining consensus on critical issues from members with very different philosophies.

## **What NCAA Stakeholders Told Us**

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### **Members and Other Stakeholders**

During the data-collection phase, the Web survey gained broad input on draft elements of the strategic plan. The survey included several open-ended questions, and the last one asked respondents to offer the NCAA “one piece of advice for the future” as it continued its strategic planning process.

Individuals took great care and time to provide us with helpful suggestions. Most importantly, respondents were grateful to the NCAA for conducting an inclusive strategic planning process. Many respondents thought the NCAA was doing a good job and should stay the course.

Following are a number of best practices that the NCAA identified throughout the process:

### ***Stakeholders and Participation***

- Be as inclusive as possible to increase broad-based participation in discussions and implementation strategies. Continue a dynamic communication flow with membership and external constituencies. Encourage multiple conversations from all areas that have an interest in sport-governing bodies, regulating bodies, institutions, faculties, higher education organizations, high school governing bodies and so on.
- Institutionalize annual membership participation in the process, such as an annual meeting at which stakeholders discuss goals.
- Don't attempt to be everything to everyone, but be different things to different constituencies. Carefully distinguish the differences and issues among each of the three divisions and see how these differences can be addressed in the overarching goals.

### ***Goals and Measuring Success***

- Set realistic goals with realistic deadlines; always keep in mind the potential for a significant gap between what the Association says it wants to accomplish and what actions it takes. Don't attempt to do everything at once; slowly establish the goals, analyze the results and measure progress. Put resources into the most attainable goals.
- Be willing to revisit "short-term" goals to measure success (progress). Be willing to change emphasis, if necessary.
- Focus on the things that the NCAA can do that individual institutions cannot do alone. Acknowledge that the goals and priorities may differ from one division to another and accept such differences. Encourage institutions to align themselves within the division that best reflects their own institutional philosophies.

### ***Communication and Understanding***

- Good communication is vital in the process of planning strategically.
- Keep everyone informed. Share visions and goals — and the progress made toward realizing them with interested constituent groups. Help student-athletes, coaches and administrators understand what the NCAA is trying to accomplish with each step of the process.
- Improve the level of understanding about how the NCAA operates.

### ***Vision and Leadership***

- Be even bolder in proposing new paradigms. Keep the Association open to fresh ideas. Solicit new concepts. Push toward the ideal but recognize the realities. A grand vision of the future is fine, but make sure the short-term goals are reachable, measurable and practical.
- Look to the real world and plan accordingly. Always be cognizant of ongoing changes that will affect the plan. No amount of planning will be effective if it does not have the capacity for flexibility. Be prepared to understand that the landscape surrounding the NCAA and its members is constantly changing and evolving. Quickly assess changes (financial, educational, rules compliance and so on) and adapt. Do the best possible job of planning so that things do not have to operate in crisis mode.

- Set a course toward integrity and follow through no matter what the cost. Show the courage to lead and, most importantly, engage presidents as advocates and allies. The Association cannot replace the responsibility that is placed on the institution nor should the Association attempt to do so.

### ***Implementation***

- Goals and objectives should continue to have ongoing review and improvements. Use the planning model to educate the membership, which can integrate the process into its systems.
- Measure the success and be accountable. An action plan should provide a schedule for assigning the goals, objectives and responsibilities for measuring the plan's progress and for making necessary adjustments to meet the demands of organizational and environmental changes. A tracking system should be implemented to account for the goals being completed and achieved in the prescribed time frame. Issue regular report cards of goal attainment.

### **NCAA Staff Observations**

#### ***Most Effective***

*What activities worked most effectively in the planning process?*

- Formal in-person meetings with various stakeholders — in particular, groups that traditionally have not had opportunity to provide input into affairs of Association.
- In-person meetings of governance groups.
- Membership Web-based survey and broad input.
- Meetings with the President's Cabinet, which allowed staff to find the common ground for framing the content of the strategic plan. Also, the various meetings with the membership helped the overall design process.
- Bringing some organization to the process. The NCAA team was helped enormously by adopting a structure for doing its work. Helping to define principles and targets was also effective. Developing core values as a way to evaluate planning suggestions was critical. Facilitation by independent individuals was critical to a dispassionate review of data and membership feedback.

#### ***Least Effective***

*What activities worked least effectively?*

- Some of the internal project team meetings were too "small" in thinking. The proofing duties overshadowed some of the strategic thinking. Wordsmithing was too common. Also, some did not assign the required time to the effort.
- One size does not fit all when working with a diverse level of input from an enterprise as varied as higher education.

#### ***Success in Plan Implementation***

*What has worked most successfully in the NCAA process of strategic plan implementation?*

- Support of the plan by the national office's president.

- Improved communication around key issues and needs of the organization and its membership. The dialogue and solution orientation have been positive.
- Constant communication and linking to the plan.
- Initial designation of individuals assigned to specific goals within groups in office.
- Accountability measures embedded in the plan.
- Having a strong internal team that worked well with a knowledgeable consultant who took the time to get to know the Association.

### ***Challenges in Plan Implementation***

*What has worked less successfully?*

- The internal tracking system initially was too detailed.
- Too many smaller groups worked without accountability.
- We listened too closely to all of the constituents and tried too hard to meet everyone's needs. We should have focused more on large issues rather than individual group comments.
- The plan is viewed more as the national office plan. The membership may not be aware of the plan's impact.

### ***Fundamental Change***

*What has changed for the NCAA as a result of this strategic planning process? What happens differently now because of consensus on identity, vision, direction and outcomes across the organization?*

- The plan has allowed the organization to gain consensus on its direction. Constituents are easier to engage now that the plan has been approved and accepted.
- Staff knows what needs to be done. It knows what the goals are and develops initiatives that are tied to those goals.
- Decision makers use the plan to take action.

### ***Lessons Learned by Staff***

*What lessons have been learned? What advice would you offer to other large organizations with complex stakeholder groups seeking to execute a strategic planning process?*

- Ensure broad stakeholder input into the plan's development. Provide constant communication throughout process and, more importantly, through execution.
- After allowing every stakeholder to have his or her voice heard during the collection of information stage, next bring together the membership's senior leadership and ask those individuals to identify the deliverables *they* want.
- Pay attention to how thoughts are evolved during the input process to avoid management/executives/stakeholders losing interest because they believe they have heard it all before.



- Assign clear accountabilities to staff groups. Ensure accountability and oversight, including the coordination of the work of smaller groups into the larger organization.
- Be aware that strategic planning for a large organization takes time. It requires a commitment of both time and effort that may not be anticipated.

## **KEY LEARNINGS, BEST PRACTICES FROM THE NCAA EXPERIENCE**

### **Issues and Challenges**

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A number of issues became problematic as the process unfolded. For example:

- **The process was too long, had too many steps and had too many opportunities for input.** While stakeholder input was built into various phases in the process, many groups were asked to provide input at multiple steps in the process. Some individuals who serve the NCAA in multiple roles were asked to provide input multiple times.

Because of the many constituent groups, the staff steering committee was challenged to find commonalities and themes and to choose among strategy options (something perhaps in which the Executive Committee should have been engaged).

- **No single governing body within NCAA had overall ownership of and engagement in the process.** The NCAA Executive Committee was involved at various times; however, many of those opportunities were designed as a brief review and update of the process. There were limited opportunities to involve the Executive Committee directly in defining direction and strategy. The results were that (a) the Executive Committee did not have a strong sense of ownership and (b) a staff group working with the consultant was responsible for crafting the strategic plan document and, ultimately, for defining the strategy for the organization rather than having the governing body drive the process and set direction.

### **Six Best Practices from the NCAA Experience**

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1. **Engage the Executive Committee in designing the full plan from start to finish.** Ask the Executive Committee to devote several days to the effort and create a full draft strategic plan (stopping short of tactics and actions). This approach creates consistency, ownership and buy-in. Stakeholder input from multiple groups can be gathered before the creation of the strategic plan draft so the leadership team considers perspectives of key groups. At an interim point, additional input can be gathered from the stakeholder groups. If the NCAA were to begin its process again, it might engage its governance groups more fully in the process, suggesting to Executive Committee members that strategic planning is an essential part of their leadership role.
2. **Design the plan-development process so it isn't so long as to outlive the terms of board members or key decision-makers.** Building the initial plan should take no longer than 6-9 months. Annual plan reviews and phased implementation can then be spread out to provide continuity and ability to readjust for relevance as conditions change over time.

3. **Institutionalize an annual process of strategic plan review and update. Renew ownership with new board members, assess progress to date and set priorities for the coming year.** Conduct an annual review of the plan, engaging the governance body directly (along with the staff leadership) in evaluating progress and setting priorities for the coming year. The session might include dialogue around these key questions:
  - Has the organization accomplished this goal yet?
  - Are we as leaders satisfied with progress toward accomplishment of the goal?
  - Have contextual conditions (assumptions) related to this goal changed, and, if so, in what way?
  - What has been the organization’s experience in executing work related to this goal?
  - What implications are there for work toward this goal in the coming year? Do we want to prioritize work in this area and, if so, what do we want to see accomplished?

This practice builds ownership and improves continuity in leadership groups where leadership turnover exists.

4. **Do not attempt to embark on implementation of the full strategic plan at once. Set meaningful priorities on an annual and incremental basis.** Using the NCAA framework, the vision and outcome-oriented goals span a timeframe of 1-30 years. The long-range vision (envisioned future) is composed of outcomes to be achieved in 10-30 years through shorter-term incremental progress. The short-term goals must be linked to their ability to achieve progress toward the long-range vision. But they must also be linked to what is appropriate in the relevant environment, which is why an annual strategic plan review, environmental scan and priority setting are essential.

Best practices suggest that all of the goals are equally important over the life of a strategic plan, but conditions that change and evolve may affect when it is advisable or advantageous to work toward particular objectives — statements that describe what progress the organization seeks to achieve regarding issues impacting successful achievement of its goals. For example, the following criteria may be used annually to set priorities among strategic plan objectives:

- **IMPACT:** A measure of breadth of importance. How basic is this objective? How many other things depend on it or are related to it?
- **CONSEQUENCE:** A measure of “depth” of importance. How bad or good will it be if we
  - take advantage of the opportunity to execute work toward this objective?
  - adequately address the issue it represents?
- **IMMEDIACY:** A measure of the importance of time
  - to take advantage of this opportunity before it disappears;
  - to implement this objective successfully before it’s too late?
- **LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS:** How likely is it that we will be successful with work toward this objective?

One of the most important elements for successful strategic plan implementation is to set priorities effectively. After all, when everything is important, nothing is important. When the

tasks seem overwhelming, they will not motivate excellent performance. And when staff organizations have multiple sets of priorities, they don't know which ones to address first.

- 5. Ensure a clear and focused link from implementation to performance management systems.** The institutionalization of a management accountability system that merges planning and evaluation activities is critical. In successful organizations, the planning process determines the standards to be used for measuring accomplishment of individual performance objectives. Developing standards helps to clarify the objectives and test the feasibility of plans proposed to achieve the objectives. The organization can use the standards, suggested by the staff responsible, to judge whether it has implemented plans successfully *and* whether the implemented plans have achieved their purpose.
- 6. Promote ownership and enfranchisement among all key stakeholders.** Ensure that the process of building the strategic plan makes the best use of leadership's time but ensures they have the opportunity to participate directly in creating strategy and selecting strategic options. Also, ensure the staff organization is an active and engaged partner and that work is not merely passed down to them.

## **One Organization's Experience Implementing Best Practices: The Southern Conference**

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The **Southern Conference** used a prototype of the NCAA process in 2005. The conference, in its 86th season of intercollegiate competition in 2006, has become known as one of the nation's leaders in emphasizing the development of the student-athlete and defining the league's role in helping to build lifelong leaders and role models. It has excelled as a premier Division I-AA football conference since in 1981. The conference currently consists of 11 members in four states throughout the Southeast and sponsors 19 varsity sports and championships that produce participants for NCAA Division I championships.

In initiating this project, Danny Morrison, then commissioner of the Southern Conference, expressed the importance of planning while also honoring the conference's core values and long history of success. Morrison also wanted to take advantage of the NCAA process and learnings. Jean Frankel of Tecker Consultants and project manager for the NCAA project was engaged to design a process for the Southern Conference.

The steps included:

### **1. Athletics Directors Strategic Planning Retreat, followed by the Long-Range Planning Committee Meeting**

In the first part of this step, the full team of Southern Conference athletics directors, plus Southern Conference senior staff, participated in a 2½-day planning retreat facilitated by Frankel. In this meeting, the athletics directors used the NCAA Strategic Plan as a template to create a first draft of a comprehensive strategic plan for the conference, including assumptions about the relevant 5-10 year future, core purpose and values, envisioned future and 3-5 year goals and objectives. After seeing the process through all the elements, the ADs

provided their input to the future of the conference, gained a broader perspective of the challenges and opportunities facing the conference as a whole (and not just their individual school) and developed a sense of ownership for the process and its products.

After the AD planning session, the Southern Conference Long-Range Planning Committee planned its next steps of refinement. The conference's Planning Committee represented the conference's membership, including a broad cross-section of stakeholders, such as presidents, SWAs, FARs and ADs.

## **2. Web-Based Survey of Stakeholder Input on the Draft Plan**

The next step was a **Web-based survey** that was executed to generate feedback on the conference's draft strategic long-range plan. Notification of the survey availability and Web address was sent to key intercollegiate athletics personnel at all member institutions. Those individuals were encouraged to solicit broad participation from their stakeholders. A total of 285 participants responded to the survey. Twenty-five percent of the respondents described their position as coach or member of the coaching staff. Sixteen percent were student-athletes, 14 percent were with the media, 10 percent were alumni supporters and other respondents had positions such as college or university CEO, athletics director, faculty representative, athletic trainer or conference staff member.

The survey sought input on the conference's draft core purpose, core values, audacious goal and short-term goals with scaled questions measuring degree of agreement and degree of importance. For each plan element, an open-ended question was included, soliciting respondent comments on the draft plan. At the conclusion of the survey, an open-ended question giving participants the opportunity to offer advice to the conference as it plans for the future was also included. Most respondents expressed support for the draft plan. The conference also gained valuable input on the needs, wants and preferences of its constituencies about the areas that the plan addressed.

## **3. The Long-Range Planning Committee Revisions and Presentation at Spring Meeting**

The Long-Range Planning Committee reviewed the results of the survey, made the final revisions to the plan and prepared the draft for the conference's spring meeting, during which it would seek final review of the plan by the membership and approval of the plan by the conference presidents.

After acceptance at the spring meeting, conference staff began work on first-year implementation strategies. At a staff retreat soon after the spring meeting, the staff identified metrics to help the conference meet its short-term (3-5) year goals.

## **4. To the Future**

The conference experienced a change in staff leadership during the first year of strategic plan implementation, but it has continued to work through the typical challenges of implementation expressed elsewhere in this document. But by taking advantage of what the NCAA learned in this area and the implementation of best practices, the Southern

Conference's process of creating a strategic plan was cohesive, participative, engaging and more succinct in duration. It preserved the conference's past, and helped prepare for its future.

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