

DISSERTATION

OPERATIONALIZING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESSES  
IN A HIGH PERFORMING COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### OPERATIONALIZING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESSES IN A HIGH PERFORMING COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This study assessed the effectiveness of the strategic planning processes in a high performing community college. Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI) in Watertown, South Dakota was identified as a high performing institution based on earning the 2017 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The study utilized a qualitative, single site, case study to provide insight into the elements that led to a successful strategic planning process. The data collection included interviews with twenty-three employees including faculty, staff, and administration. A document analysis of relevant planning documents was conducted, as well as an observation of the college's strategic planning session, and observation of the institution's strategic planning and Aspen Prize related artifacts. The results of this study provide strategic planners insight into how a high performing institution created and successfully implemented a strategic plan. Four *a priori* codes, or main themes, were developed prior to the study to guide my research. These four themes included: employee perceptions of strategic planning, employee participation in the strategic planning process, implementing the strategic plan, and linking budgets and resources to support the strategic plan. Within these themes, findings suggest that the following factors contributed to successful planning efforts at LATI. Theme One indicated that an inclusive planning process that values employee engagement and a positive culture throughout the institution generated extensive support for the planning process. Theme Two indicated support

for a cross-represented group of employees and external stakeholders in the process and most importantly, valuing the input received from those participants. The results from Theme Three indicated several steps that led to successful implementation: conducting an annual planning process, assigning responsibility to the initiatives that comprise the plan, utilizing committees or teams implement the initiatives, communicating the details of the strategic plan to the campus community through multiple methods, and regularly assessing the plan. Theme Four discusses the ongoing resource allocation process that occurs throughout the fiscal year that supports the strategic plan. The research also explored the impact of winning the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence on the institution and how the Aspen process impacted the strategic planning process.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family who have been with me and supported me all along the way. I especially need to thank my mother and father, Cathy and Tom Garstecki who have always helped me with anything I ever needed. Thank you to my sister Leigh Ann for all of your encouragement during this process. Joanie, Carol, Pat and Nancy....your support was incredible. Every summer when you asked about my research or the progress of my writing, you motivated me to keep going no matter how impossible it may have felt at that point.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background

“Strategic planning is one of the most pervasive and, arguably, most important management activities in higher education at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Welsh & Nunez, 2005, p. 20). Colleges and universities are complex organizations facing many challenges including those caused by global economic conditions, shifting competitive forces, continuing calls for accountability, and uncertain funding streams (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011). The future success of colleges and universities may be greatly impacted by how well they develop and implement strategic plans to navigate these challenges.

The roots of strategic planning can be traced back through military history, with the primary objective being to gain a competitive advantage (Dooris, 2003; Lerner, 1999). Strategic planning exercises then became a part of the culture within businesses throughout the nation. Mintzberg (1994) noted that planning was initially implemented mostly as a budget exercise in the 1950s for businesses; however, those practices continued to evolve in the 1960s and eventually became an obsession among American corporations. Mintzberg went on to add business leaders at that time proclaimed strategic planning as the one and only way to develop and implement strategy and to increase competitiveness through a set of steps that would ensure success. Porter (1998), a leading expert on strategic planning, stated:

The emphasis being placed on strategic planning today in firms in the United States and abroad reflects the proposition that there are significant benefits to gain through an explicit process of formulating strategy, to ensure that at least the policies (if not the actions) of functional departments are coordinated and directed at some common set of goals. (p. xxi)

The strategic planning process can play a pivotal role in the success of organizations. Despite this, there has been very little research to examine how higher education institutions have successfully implemented strategic planning. This study focuses on the strategic planning process at one institution that has received national accolades for its successes so that other leaders in higher education can benefit from the results of the research.

### **Strategic Planning in Business and Other Organizations**

Business organizations have had a significant influence on the historical development of strategic planning. Speaking on the importance of planning within an organization, Fogg (1994) stated that the external environment for organizations can be very harsh, difficult to understand, and challenging to control. There is a constantly changing economic, regulatory, political, and social world. Furthermore, there is also the challenge of convincing customers about the value of services promoted. To develop and implement a successful strategic plan, organizations must gain as much information about the external environment as possible as these factors affect the future.

Evidence exists illustrating employees believe strategic planning initiatives are critical to organizational success in the business sector. One study found 79% of managers claimed formal strategic planning processes played a significant role in developing strategy and were satisfied with the planning approach used in their organizations (Dye & Sibony, 2007). Sull, Homkes, and Sull (2015) surveyed more than 400 CEOs and found that executional excellence is the biggest challenge that corporate leaders face today.

As the private business sector realized the impact of strategic planning, this trend became more popular. Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1997) discussed that over time, as businesses experienced success through strategic planning efforts, other organizations such as government

agencies, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions joined the planning movement. The importance of strategic planning in higher education is discussed in the following section.

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1999) identified 10 schools of strategic thought developed from a historical perspective of the strategic planning literature. The authors noted that the literature related to strategic management is wide ranging and continues to grow. Within the strategies, each strategy has strengths and weaknesses, and has played an important role in the development of the strategic planning theory known today. The authors noted organizations often search for the newest trend to lead the development of their strategy and went on to add that the purpose of their work was not to define the best process for strategy, but rather to provide planners with an analysis of how planning has evolved over time.

### **Strategic Planning in Higher Education**

While strategic planning processes may face challenges in the business sector, planning in higher education is even more complex due to various factors. The ever-changing environment surrounding higher education has helped push leaders in this sector towards more formalized planning practices. Gorman (2016) noted these complexities include the rapidly changing landscape of education as well as resistance to change displayed by many faculty and staff with long tenures. According to Dooris (2003), from the 1960s through the mid-1970s, while strategic planning was popular in the private sector, higher education leaders were not as concerned about the need to focus on planning. Institutions were growing without formal strategic planning efforts and public confidence in higher education was high. That began to change in the mid-1970s as higher education experienced demographic, economic, and technological changes. Keller (1993) described his experience of higher education planning practices during that time:

When I first wrote about strategic management, no more than a dozen of the thirty-four hundred colleges and universities in the United States were practicing strategic management. Today, if I were forced to guess the number of academic institutions engaged in thinking and acting strategically, I would estimate that number to roughly one-fourth of all colleges and universities. Adoption has been widespread and swift. (p. 9)

Keller's perspective concerning the growth of planning during this time period is supported by other scholars. Dooris, Kelley, and Trainer (2002) recounted how strategic planning emerged in higher education in the late 1950s with a focus specifically on facilities and space utilization to meet the demands of significant enrollment growth. This focus on facilities continued to be the primary focus of planners until the 1970s, when that focus began to shift to encompass the complexity of higher education, due to changing demographics, economic uncertainty, and technological advances. Vaughan (2006) further explained it was during this time that community colleges experienced significant growth. This expansion was observable both in the number of institutions as well as number of students being served. This growth was the result of several factors including the authorization of the Higher Education Act in 1965, which provided additional funding for higher education, a peak in the number of baby boomers reaching college age, and the end of school segregation, which promoted increased access to educational opportunities.

Since that time, the landscape of higher education has continued to evolve, which has created additional challenges for institutions. Because colleges and universities are experiencing a new competitive environment, those best equipped with information about their operations will be the most effective (Keller, 1993). Change is no longer an option for institutions; it is necessary as demands have increased and resources have diminished, forcing institutions to cut costs (Rowley et al., 1997). Universities face numerous challenges that require planning, including the growth in adult learners and new teaching methods for the diverse student

population, as well as the need to align pedagogy, faculty, facilities, and technology with these challenges (Willson, 2006). Today, there is more scrutiny within higher education for accountability and transparency from regional accrediting agencies (Spiers, Kiel, Hohenbrink, & McCurdy, 2010). Higher education professionals evaluate trends regarding pedagogical needs and methods, student values, student preparation, and educational technology advances. To address these issues, educators need to develop planning processes that include methods that scan the environment for continuously changing trends (Hines, 2011). Gorman (2016) noted, “When planning in higher education is done well, it can be transformative; when it is done poorly, it can be disastrous” (p. 1).

### **Strategic Planning for Community Colleges**

Community colleges are a key player in higher education and face the same significant challenges described above in today’s landscape. The turbulent external environment has a major impact on community colleges, as does the large turnover in leadership positions. When new leaders come into their positions facing the challenges of student preparedness, workforce demands, increased accountability, and shifts in funding, the leaders must thrive in the face of shifting resources and challenges to the existing mission (Garza Mitchell & Maldonado, 2015). Community college leaders must make difficult decisions in order to maintain a strong, financially sound institution to serve its constituents (Israel & Kihl, 2005). While the United States continues to recover economically from the recent recession, the spotlight is on community colleges to address the needs of postsecondary education. Two-year colleges are being asked to train and retrain the workforce to be more competitive in the global economy, to support students who enter college underprepared to obtain a degree or other credential, and to



prepare transfer to students to succeed at the four-year level (Lattimore, D'Amico, & Hancock, 2012).

These increased demands on the education system have caused institutions to shift from an emphasis on quantity to a focus on quality. Recently, the performance of American public colleges and universities has been a major topic of conversation nationally. There has been specific emphasis among politicians to seek solutions that will improve the performance and cost-effectiveness of public institutions (Conner & Rabovsky, 2011). This was evident in the development of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). The VSA was established following the Commission on the Future of Higher Education's recommendations to create a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education (Keller, 2014).

### **Research Problem**

Researchers have identified the need and relevance of strategic planning for higher education institutions (Garza Mitchell & Maldonado, 2015; Hines, 2011; Welsh & Nunez, 2005). Addressing the challenges that come with strategic planning, such as how to develop and successfully implement these plans, has proven to be a more challenging endeavor. Keller (1993) stated that strategic planning, while perceived as an asset, has often not attained the desired outcomes for institutions. Strategic planning has not always been successful in higher education because of soft campus leadership, faculty politics, academic resistance to marketing, financial controls, and management, as well as lack of information on many items from demographics to faculty workload. Rowley et al. (1997) similarly stated that unfortunately, the success of planning seen in the business sector has not translated to not-for-profit, government, or higher education venues. Despite this commitment to developing strategic plans, evidence of successful implementation and completion is lacking (Janaro & Bommer, 2005). Traditional strategic

planning models have become ineffective in today's ever-changing and unstable academic environment (Burgess, 2008). Woodworth (2009) further noted:

The process of adapting business models to academic culture has caused friction in higher education. Issues that plague higher education include the complex structure of colleges and universities based on traditions and individual silos of expertise and the failure to adapt to new environmental demands while assessing internal achievement; the latter makes it difficult to pull together a formalized strategic plan. (p. 1)

VanDenBerghe (2010) added the following perspective:

Educational leaders need to address environmental shifts and changes but have few documented strategic models to draw from. Even when forces, trends, or other environmental drivers are identified, few explicit criteria seem to inform these educational leaders in how to develop effective strategy. (p. 5)

The challenges leaders face in planning vary widely. Some of these challenges, as identified in the literature, are addressed below. One example of these challenges is the struggle to overcome the negative stigma of the planning process in order to achieve support from within the organization. Young and Baker (2016) described the myth that planning in higher education is either a "check the box" activity or a commitment to exhaustively developed plans that unravel or are ignored at the implementation phase. The authors further stated planning is often fragmented, fails to gain momentum, and lacks leadership. According to Hinton (2012), while many college and university presidents and other senior-level administrators still feel the planning process is a necessity, many other individuals within higher education feel equally certain that the planning process is a waste of time or an exercise in futility, with the end result being a binder that sits on a shelf and is never implemented. Many times, the best developed plans fail to meet expectations because of participants' lack of experience, motivation, or credibility, or the organization's lack of readiness to engage in the planning process (Atkins, 2010).

A second noted challenge relates to the implementation of the plan once it is developed. According to Goodstein, Noland, and Pfeifer (1993) and Reeves (2008), many organizations participate in strategic planning exercises, though too often the strategic plan does not align with day-to-day practices and decisions, and thus does not achieve the desired results. Reeves (2008) reported more than 70% of business strategic plans are never implemented. According to Dye and Sibony (2007), only 23% of those surveyed indicated that major strategic decisions were made within the framework of the plan. These types of results may cause managers to forgo or eliminate the planning process altogether. Sull et al. (2015) noted that translating strategy into results is very challenging as the number of books and articles related to strategy development outnumber those regarding execution by a great number. Young and Baker (2016) added that a fragmented approach leads to disconnected actions, which lead to a lack of strategic focus, inefficient or uncoordinated resource allocation, and stasis. This results in a struggle to find common language, build momentum, and sustain movement.

Internal stakeholder or employee participation is a third challenge to the planning process for colleges and universities. For the purpose of this study, *stakeholders* are defined as employees of the institution (faculty, staff, and administration) who have a vested interest in the direction and goals of the institution. Gorman (2016) described how some planning processes do not seek input from faculty and staff, leading to the failure of both the process and the plan. In one case, although the plan was approved by the board of trustees, because the administration had not sincerely sought input from key stakeholders, the plan went dormant. Delprino (2013) added that faculty and staff perception and participation in the process determine the success or failure of any strategic change. While elements such as mission and vision are very important to plan development, how the people fit into the process matters most. In higher education, at times,

the focus is more on the plan and not the human side. This can lead to the failure of the entire process.

One additional challenge to the planning process is linking the strategic plan to the budget or appropriate resources. According to a survey of 50 senior administrators conducted by higher education consulting firm Academic Impressions, integrating planning and the budgeting process was viewed as the most significant challenge (72% of respondents) to strategic planning (Fusch 2010a, 2010b as cited in Auer, 2016, p. 4). According to Harvey (2017), two significant advances have been critical in helping higher education face the changing environment and new demands. The first is colleges and universities aligning enrollment, curricula, advising, and facilities within a focused strategy for success. This helped spawn strategic planning in higher education. The second new development has been to find effective ways to align resources with these new strategies. Harvey (2017) explained, “Even the best strategy fails if it is not implemented, and resources represent the place where implementation lives or dies” (p. 23).

To address the research problem and the associated challenges described above, this study focused on one high performing community college in order to study its strategic planning process. By researching an accomplished community college, the aim of this study was to discover best practices in developing and implementing a strategic plan in a successful manner that may help higher education leaders advance their institutions, regardless of the level of success previously experienced. For this study, I identified the institution as high performing as it was recently awarded the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The prize “is the nation’s signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America’s community colleges” (Aspen Institute for Community College Excellence [AICCE], n.d.). This

study examined how the selected institution addresses the challenges listed above in helping to answer the study's research question.

Studying how high performing institutions construct their strategic plans may assist other colleges to implement planning processes successfully. One of the challenges is identifying truly high performing institutions, as the literature related to organizational performance in colleges and universities is limited (Jenkins, 2011). Measuring performance in two-year institutions is even more challenging (Voluntary Framework of Accountability, n.d.), as previously established accountability measures in higher education are not sufficient to assess community colleges due to their unique mission, specifically due to the lack of inclusion of part-time students and noncredit career or technical education students who are key users of community colleges. According to Jenkins (2011), based on a review of research including higher education, K–12 schools, and organizations outside of education, there are several factors that are characteristic of high performing organizations. These practices include strong, inclusive leadership, a focus on the customer, functional alignment, process improvement, the use of measurement, employee involvement and professional development, and external linkages. Jenkins suggested implementing these processes in concert will result in major student outcome improvements.

### **Research Question**

To gain insight into successful planning processes, the following research question was developed for this study:

*How does a high performing community college operationalize the strategic plan to ensure that it is integrated throughout the institution and is ultimately successful?*

The results of this study may assist higher education leaders and, specifically, community college leaders with planning efforts by sharing best practices from an institution nationally recognized for excellence.

### **Researcher Perspective**

My career in higher education started in athletics and student affairs at both four-year institutions and one community college. I am a European-American male from the Midwest region of the United States. My professional experience has been mostly confined to institutions in the Midwestern region of the United States, and in 2007, I began my administrative career in higher education as the dean of enrollment management at community college in Nebraska. I had little familiarity with strategic planning until I was asked to co-chair the strategic planning process in 2008 at a previous institution. Being a relatively new administrator at the time, and having no prior experience with strategic planning, I was extremely nervous about taking on such a large leadership role for the campus. I accepted the task, however, knowing it would be a valuable experience that would further develop my administrative skills through leading a process that would encompass the entire campus community.

Over the course of nine months, as the team developed the plan, my eyes were opened to many real challenges faced when developing a strategic plan. This process drew strong resistance from colleagues and peers across the institution. As part of the planning, the team wanted to have a participatory process that involved many internal stakeholders. Consequently, faculty and staff were required to attend two focus group sessions. My initial thought was this would be well received as employees would be excited at the opportunity to provide their thoughts on the direction of the college. This was not the case, however. While some employees embraced the chance to participate and provide input, many of the comments heard were those such as “why

are we wasting our time with this?” and “we’ve done this before, and nothing ever changed.” This was very disheartening as the leader of this project. The strategic plan was completed on time and, in the end, the finished product included the views of the employees who participated. At the conclusion, I was proud of the final planning document and implementation plan but learned that planning comes with great challenges in higher education.

The combination of this experience and the literature highlighting negative perceptions regarding the strategic planning process predisposed my notion that strategic planning is not viewed positively by many in higher education. This basic assumption was derived from personal experiences, though I worked to keep these perceptions in the forefront while conducting this study so that bias did not cloud the data collected. Moustakas (1994) described this as *epoche* or “setting aside our prejudgments, biases, or preconceived ideas” (p. 85). It is necessary to be transparent prior to the research and disclose bias so that the data are viewed with new eyes and openness (Moustakas, 1994). During the research process, I remained acutely aware of the potential bias as a proponent of strategic planning. It was critical to keep an open mind in developing the interview questions, conducting interviews, and interpreting the data. Moustakas (1994) described this issue:

Although there is always an overlap between looking from one perspective and viewing something as a whole, it is possible to separate the object as a point of focus from my experience of it as a whole, to take one angle of it and look freshly once more, and then another angle, connecting each looking with my conscious experience. (p. 93)

For my research I aimed to capture the true experiences of those participating in this research while keeping a clear mind of preexisting biases. Before starting interviews with those who had experienced the phenomenon, I reviewed my own experiences to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions (Merriam, 2009). In doing so, and in searching

for rival explanations, asking the right questions, and attending carefully to the participants' responses, I believe this goal was achieved.

### **Research Approach**

The foundation of this research was studying the strategic planning process of a college identified as a high performing institution. A qualitative, single-site case study was developed implementing the case study principles outlined by Yin (2009) to address the research question. The critical case design described by Yin was selected due to the innovation shown by the institution in earning the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The research included creating a detailed protocol (Yin, 2009), which was important to increase the reliability of the research. The protocol included:

- An introduction and overview of the case study including the research question, the theoretical framework, and the researcher's role.
- Data collection procedures including detailed information on the selected site, the relevance of the interview participants, documents related to the strategic planning process collected by the institution, and other relevant field procedures (see Chapter Three).
- An outline of the case study report including how the strategic plan was operationalized and the history of how the current process was developed. The report is an overview of the data analysis created from the data collection tools (i.e., participant interviews, document analysis, direct observation, and physical artifacts).
- Case study questions were developed for the employee interviews to collect relevant data, including but not limited to: the perceptions held by the participants regarding the development and implementation of the strategic plan, employee participation in the



planning process, how resources were allocated to support the strategic plan initiatives, and how the plan was implemented.

To answer the research question, my study applied the three principles of data collection described by Yin (2009). These principles included:

- Using multiple sources of evidence, including participant interviews, document analysis, direct observation, and physical artifacts (see Chapter Three).
- Creating a case study database, an organized system of collecting notes and other relevant materials.
- Maintaining a chain of evidence, which enhanced the reliability of this research and included the case study report, case study database, citations of any evidentiary evidence, the case study protocol, and the case study questions.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the history of strategic planning and the impact that it can have on various types of organizations, including higher education institutions. Although strategic planning can be an important tool for organizations, higher education has historically trailed some other industries in their planning practices. The issues that institutions face may vary, but four particular challenges are addressed in this research: the perceptions held by employees regarding strategic planning, implementation of strategic planning, employee participation in the institution's planning process, and budget or resource allocation to support the plan. A high performing institution was identified for the purpose of this study to examine their strategic planning processes through a qualitative, single-site case study by following a critical case design and research protocol according to Yin (2009).

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This chapter presents a literature review that discusses the main topics of this study. The chapter begins with an overview of the schools of strategy developed by Mintzberg et al. (1999) from their extensive review of the strategic planning literature. The next section contains characteristics defining high performing institutions, followed by an overview of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, and the criteria for the Aspen Prize. The criteria are consistent with the attributes described in high performing institutions. Next, I present an in-depth review of four issues surrounding strategic planning found in the literature: stakeholder perceptions of strategic planning, participation in developing the plan, linking budgets and other resources to the plan, and implementation of the strategic plan. While this is not an exhaustive list of challenges found, these four issues or themes continued to emerge during analysis of the literature. These issues were vetted to address the research problem and purpose of the study. Each section of the literature review provides support for the relevance of the issue and identifies gaps in the research, highlighting key research on each topic, and concluding with a summary of the findings.

### **Strategy Safari**

Mintzberg et al. (1999) identified 10 schools of strategic thought developed from a historical perspective of the strategic planning literature. The authors noted that the literature related to strategic management is wide ranging and continues to grow. Within the strategies, each strategy has strengths and weaknesses, and has played an important role in the development of the strategic planning theory known today. The authors noted organizations often search for the newest trend to lead the development of their strategy, and went on to add that the purpose of

their work was not to define the best process for strategy, but rather to provide planners with an analysis of how planning has evolved over time. The 10 schools of thought are listed below with brief descriptions as per Mintzberg et al. (1999, p. 5).

### **Prescriptive Schools**

**Design school.** This is a process of conception and the most influential view of strategy formation. Developed in the 1960s, this framework provided the basis upon which other strategies were built and the foundation for management courses. This school attempts to find a match between internal capabilities and external possibilities.

**Planning school.** During the peak of the planning school method in the 1970s, the literature was flooded with articles celebrating strategic planning. Businesses became very involved with formal planning practices. The formality and quantitative emphasis on planning during this stage, however, neglected qualitative analysis and little attention was given to how planning actually works.

**Positioning school.** In response to the planning school, the positioning school evolved in the 1980s. This school incorporated many of the foundations from the previous two schools but added two new components. The first component emphasized the strategies themselves and not just the development of the strategies. The second component focused on the content of the strategies, including the prescriptive side of strategic management.

### **Strategy Formation Schools**

**Entrepreneurial school.** This school placed the strategy formation process solely on the individual leader. This included the individual's intuition, judgment, wisdom, experience, and insight. The key concept to the entrepreneurial school is the vision of the leader and his/her sense of direction.

**Cognitive school.** Arriving from the cognitive psychology field, this school focused on the mental processes. The cognitive school stressed that strategies develop from knowledge and direct experiences. Experiences shape what leaders know which, in turn, has a direct impact on future decision-making. This school provided the bridge between the prior schools, which are more objective, and the following schools, which are more subjective in nature.

**Learning school.** This school described how people learn over time and develop strategy from this learning. This can happen individually or as a collective group; either way, strategy develops as people learn about situations and the organization's ability to deal with those situations as they arise.

**Power school.** This school emphasized that power and politics are used to negotiate strategy, which is favorable to certain interests, particularly self-interests. The literature on the power school is very limited, and this school is on the opposite side of the continuum from the positioning school.

**Cultural school.** This represents the opposite process from the power school. This is a collective process that emphasizes the common interests of the group. Culture represents the organization and is what separates one organization from another. The culture of the organization is highlighted through this process.

**Environmental school.** This is a reactive process to the outside environment. While environmental factors are a part of every other school, in this instance it reduces strategy and puts leaders and organizations in the position to react to what comes their direction.

**Configuration school.** Simply put, this school combines the best parts from all of the others and brings them together for configuration and transformation.

## **High Performing Institutions**

### **Defining High-Performance**

According to Jenkins (2011), the research on high performance in higher education is very limited. Attempts to increase completion rates by using small-scale programs such as learning communities, supplemental instruction, and mentoring programs are not enough by themselves to increase completion substantially. Liu (2011) added that although the United States plays a role as a leader in the world, a number of issues in higher education such as low retention rates, low degree attainment rates, and blurry accountability mechanisms have plagued the nation. Accountability in higher education has received significant scrutiny from the government, accrediting agencies, and the public.

Jenkins (2011) identified seven practices in research conducted in higher education, K–12 schools, and organizations outside of education that have the greatest impact on performance when implemented together and properly aligned. These practices include:

- Leadership– leaders who strive to improve outcomes that align with the organization’s mission and goals.
- Focus on the customer– providing high-quality service to the customer.
- Functional alignment– aligning functions to meet goals established by the organization.
- Process improvement– improving core organizational processes, including instructional program coherence.
- Use of measurement– the use of performance measurement, including measurable goals, assessment, evaluation, and use of evidence.

- Employee involvement and professional development– involve employees in reform efforts, particularly those involving improving student outcomes. This effort involves preparing employees to play a role, which requires training.
- External linkages– although the research is not as extensive in the education sector, such as between colleges and K–12, research in the private sector emphasizes the importance of managing relationships between the supplier and the customer. (p. 1)

Jenkins (2011) further explained that community colleges specifically need improvement in the areas of functional alignment, use of data for improvement, external linkages, and failure to engage faculty and staff in improvement efforts. In order to be successful in large-scale efforts, particularly to improve student outcomes, community colleges should implement the best practices identified above.

A nationally recognized standard in evaluating organizational performance excellence is the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. During the 1980s, the Baldrige Award was created to help American businesses focus on quality and become more competitive in the global market. In 1999, this award was expanded to include healthcare and educational organizations that demonstrate performance excellence (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2017b). The Baldrige Award defines *performance excellence* as “an integrated approach to organizational performance management that result in the following outcomes”. This definition identified some consistencies with the practices identified by Jenkins (2011) above:

- Delivery of ever-improving value to customers and stakeholders, contributing to organizational sustainability;
- Improvement to overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities; and
- Organizational and personal learning. (NIST, 2017a)

## **Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence**

The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence was created in 2011 and is awarded to one select community college every two years. The Aspen Institute (AICCE, n.d.) defines the prize as “the nation’s signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America’s community colleges.” This statement provides the context for selecting the Aspen Prize as the measure for identifying the high performing institution in this study. Wyner (2012) stated that the 2017 Aspen finalists are implementing intentional practices to create improved outcomes, consistent with the traits of high performing institutions described above. These institutions are doing so through five main steps, as described below. While these steps are specific to institutions of higher education, they are consistent with the principles of performance excellence defined by Baldrige (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2017b) and Jenkins (2011). The Aspen Institute (2017b) listed these five steps, as implemented by the group of finalists:

1. Redefining student success on campus through job placement metrics and not just graduation rates, and aligning educational programs and classroom teaching to meet employment goals.
2. Partnering with four-year colleges and universities to improve four-year transfer and bachelor’s degree attainment.
3. Engaging employers in defining common goals for talent development by assessing state and regional workforce needs and designing cutting-edge programs and facilities.
4. Aligning advising systems which include students choosing a program of study in their first year with a prescribed sequence of courses.

5. Reorienting the college culture by consistently sharing student success data throughout the college, and establishing a distinctive system of faculty development, support, and accountability. (p. 2)

In 2011, the Aspen Institute invited a group of nationally recognized experts to develop common criteria for defining and assessing excellence within community colleges in terms of student success. One of the goals was to help community colleges improve outcomes, particularly graduation rates (Wyner, 2012). The Aspen Institute described the relevance of this award when highlighting the finalists of the first-ever Aspen Prize: “With this Prestigious Prize, the Aspen Institute and its partners aim to further the national understanding of how community colleges can increase student success. The winning community colleges profiled in this document have done just that. They have shown us that what colleges do matters deeply to student achievement” (AICCE, 2011, p. 4).

Wyner (2012) explained the Aspen Prize determines levels of excellence within community colleges by assessing performance across four domains:

- Completion/transfer outcomes– the proportion of students who complete an associate degree, earn a certificate, or transfer to a four-year college.
- Learning outcomes– effective efforts to improve student learning.
- Labor market outcomes– graduate employment and earning power.
- Equitable outcomes– success rates of students from low-income backgrounds; of Hispanic, African-American, or Native American students; and of others who have historically been underserved. (p. 15)

Valencia College was the first Aspen Prize winner in 2011, and since that time, the college has shown how achieving the Aspen Prize has continuous positive impacts for the



college. According to Shugart (2016), Valencia is a national leader in improving student learning outcomes due to its hard work for a number of years. Valencia started its efforts towards significant improvements because it was dissatisfied with the prior results achieved. The college realized it required a significant change in practices, systems, habits, relationships, partners, and culture. The Aspen Prize is not the only recognition the college has received for their work. Valencia also earned the designation of Vanguard Learning College by the League for Innovation in the Community College, was named a Leader College by Achieving the Dream, and received the first Leah Meyer Austin Award for Excellence in Student Success.

The first portion of this chapter described high performing institutions and the criteria for how the identified institution was selected for this study. The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence was the key component for identifying a standard achieved which set the college apart from other institutions. The following sections examine the research related to four ongoing issues related to strategic planning faced by many institutions throughout higher education. These issues include; stakeholder perceptions of strategic planning, participation in developing the plan, linking budgets and other resources to the plan, and implementation of the strategic plan.

### **Employee Perceptions of Strategic Planning**

Research has highlighted there is often a negative perception among faculty and staff regarding strategic planning in higher education. Weimer and Jonas (1995) stated that failed attempts at strategic planning create cynicism among stakeholders and cause a lack of support for further planning efforts. Furthermore, if not careful, strategic planning can be viewed as just another process on top of the many other processes already in place. The concept of strategic planning is not always well received in the higher education environment. In fact, despite its

many advantages, strategic planning has only been moderately successful in higher education (Rowley et al., 1997). Strategic planning is not uniformly applauded and skeptics question whether planning is a vital process, a core function, or just the latest fashion. Many of these comments are aimed at poor planning practices and those that lack creative planning (Dooris et al., 2002). Sevier (2003) described this skepticism:

There are probably few phrases that cause a greater group groan on most campuses than strategic planning. The fact is, most colleges and universities look at strategic planning as a path to pain, rather than a path to plenty. As a consequence, the universal response to the completion of a strategic plan is, whew, finally! Now I can get back to work. (p. 18)

Young and Baker (2016) discussed research from the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) and Baker Strategy Group who conducted a 2015 survey of approximately 2,300 higher education professionals from all different institution types. The findings of this survey, including how overall planning effectiveness, was viewed as fair by those who participated in the survey. The results, however, found that individuals who worked closely with the planning process held more favorable views of the importance and values of planning.

## **Culture**

Culture is one of the biggest challenges to overcoming negative perceptions and creating positive views about strategic planning. del Barrio-Garcia and Luque-Martinez (2009) identified that one major roadblock in higher education strategic management is the notion that the institution knows best what students want to learn and teachers want to teach, and the needs of businesses. Sanaghan and Napier (2000) similarly noted, regarding their experience working with groups to plan strategically in higher education, “about half of the institutions we have worked with have had a real reluctance to look at some uncomfortable stuff. Leading an institution through strategic planning that truly infuses engagement into the institution’s mission is a difficult task” (p. 35). Shugart (2013) explained that colleges and universities are historically

resistant to change. Culture-changing leadership must take a hard look at the roots of behaviors and attitudes. Simply adopting new strategies does not change the beliefs of the institution. Once courageous conversations have happened, the stage for change is set. Young and Baker (2016) noted that institutions have unique challenges with planning because of the distinct operating cultures within and throughout academic and administrative functions. Harvey (2017) added that managing culture change is required. Strategic planning challenges conventional wisdom and forces the campus community to contemplate disquieting potential futures. Furthermore, planning requires accepting risk.

### **Effects of Negative Perceptions**

Internal stakeholders' negative perceptions of planning can create challenges to the planning even before the process starts. In one case study, Willson (2006) highlighted the importance of organizational culture dynamics in relation to the planning process of an institution. In this case, the institution experienced tension within its organizational culture, which led to struggles throughout the planning process. The administration thought a collaborative planning process would build trust among stakeholders and create a feeling of shared governance and shared vision. The faculty, however, believed that planning should not even begin until trust-related issues were resolved. The tensions were so high that some stakeholders wanted the plan to fail in order to demonstrate the need for change within the administration, a desire created frustration with the leadership. Willson (2006) cautioned against beginning the process prematurely:

Effective planning cannot begin until stakeholders feel enough trust to engage in something greater than positional bargaining and gaming. Communicative planning is well suited to the faculty conception of organizational culture and provide a basis for building deliberative capacity to engage significant and controversial issues. (p. 14)

The trust-building step was not achieved in this case between the faculty senate and the administration. This case demonstrated how lack of trust can impede or derail the planning process.

To assist planners in offsetting these negative perceptions, del Barrio-Garcia and Luque-Martinez (2009) discovered the importance of combining their proposed methodology of gaining insight on perceptions of strengths and weaknesses from internal stakeholders with objective data, such as analyses of university indicators and university statistics and reports. They also supported the notion that colleges and universities need to change from a “product” orientation, which implies that the institution is most suited to determine what clients want, to a “client” orientation, which is driven by knowing who the clients are and listening to their needs and wants to make decisions.

### **Effective Planning**

While strategic planning does not generally have a positive reputation among faculty and staff in higher education, there are exceptions. In an effort to identify and attempt to alter negative perceptions surrounding strategic planning, the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted research on the perceptions of internal stakeholders towards the institution’s planning processes. Paris (2006) noted “For the first time, we have data on strategic planning practices that correlate with successful planning in higher education. Campus administrators, deans, directors and department chairs shared their planning practices and their views of the outcomes” (p. 1). The research followed a two-step process that consisted of a survey followed by in-depth interviews. The results indicated the majority of participants believed the plan set clear goals, had a sharpened focus, and prioritized needs. Negative reactions, such as complaints of wasted time or accusations that the process served only as an academic exercise, were seldom expressed

in this survey. A high percentage of participants rated their “local” planning process as beneficial as well. Those who responded as having successful planning experiences noted additional benefits, such as: improved organizational climate including morale, trust, and collaboration; deeper external connections, relationships, and views; improved resource allocation; improved process; and increased leadership capacity for individuals.

### **Faculty and Administrative Perspectives**

Welsh and Metcalf (2003) examined faculty and administrative support for institutional effectiveness activities, addressing two research questions: (a) Are there significant differences between faculty and administrators in their attitudes toward the importance of institutional effectiveness activities? And, (b) What factors help us understand faculty and administrative support for institutional activities? The results indicated a significant difference between the two groups, with administrators scoring higher regarding perceptions of the importance of effectiveness activities. The other control variables yielded similar findings. Administrators were more likely than faculty to view institutional effectiveness activities as internally motivated and more deeply implemented, define quality as student-outcomes based, and perceive greater levels of personal involvement. The level of faculty support for institutional effectiveness activities determined the likelihood of success, and without faculty support and participation, these activities were likely to be considered another failed management fad. With consistent faculty support, there was potential for these activities to become ingrained in the culture.

Welsh, Nunez, and Petrosko (2006) also examined similarities and differences in faculty and administrative perspectives on the development and implementation of strategic planning activities. Welsh et al. addressed the following research questions: (a) Do faculty and administrators differ significantly in their support of strategic planning activities? (b) Are there

any variables that help understand faculty and administrator support for strategic planning activities in higher education? And, (c) does the data suggest any institutional practices that might help cultivate faculty and administrator support for strategic planning activities in the context of postsecondary reform? The survey included five indices: level of involvement, depth of implementation, institutional planning model, institutional decision-making model, and support for state reform. A comparison between the two groups indicated a significant difference between the faculty and administrators for each variable. For each of the indices, the administrator group demonstrated more support for the planning activities. The data indicated that the depth of implementation, type of institutional decision-making, and support for state reform effort had the most important impact on support for strategic planning activities (Welsh et al., 2006).

Welsh et al. (2006) findings were very similar to Welsh and Metcalf (2003), which suggested two best practices for institutions to garner faculty and administrative support for strategic planning efforts. First, leaders should generate a culture of participation in the planning and decision-making processes to increase constituent support. Faculty and administrators prefer collegial models of institutional planning, however in most cases, the faculty did not feel this type of model was used at their institution. Second, planners should make all phases of the planning process as transparent as possible. Oftentimes, faculty may not even be aware that planning activities exist and what is driving those activities. The faculty felt included in the department-level planning phase, however their input did not have the same influence at the institutional level.

## **Summary**

While strategic planning does not always garner positive reactions among higher education professionals, attitudes seem to improve when stakeholders are brought into the planning process and the anticipated results. As a result, they are more willing to be participants in the construction and implementation processes of planning. In order to maximize efforts and input from stakeholders, more research is needed to determine what factors determine satisfaction among faculty and staff.

### **Stakeholder Participation in the Strategic Planning Process**

Researchers have identified the benefits and value of generating stakeholder participation and collaboration in successful strategic planning. Delprino (2013) described the importance of stakeholder participation in the planning process:

Faculty, staff, and student perception of, reaction to, and participation in the process will determine the success or failure of any planned strategic change. When it comes to change, either at individual or organizational level, the development of the strategy or plan may be the easiest part of the change process. Where institutions may fall short is in the management of the people side of the planning and change process. Part of this shortfall may be the inability or unwillingness to acknowledge that the people side of the strategic Planning process can be handled with greater efficiency and effectiveness. Unfortunately, in higher education there is sometimes a greater focus on the plan. Without similar appropriate consideration given to the human side of the planning process. Considering the strategic planning process from the perspective of the Individuals and groups that form the institution is vital for a positive outcome. Successful strategic planning requires gaining buy-in from others and addressing opposition to change. (pp. 195–196)

Similar to the findings on stakeholder perceptions of strategic planning efforts, stakeholder participation in the process has also been a concern identified in the literature over time. Shirley (1988) identified planning errors that occur in the absence of adequate campus-wide participation. Even when developing a planning committee with a grassroots process, issues regarding inclusion and exclusion remain. Planning committees often isolate themselves from the

rest of the college or fall short in keeping other faculty and staff up to date on the progress of the plan. Morris (2000) stated that without input, faculty alienation and resistance to change occurs. More steps need to be taken because participation is necessary and desirable, and ultimately the plan will not be accepted or implemented without these steps. Although the literature documents the necessity of increasing faculty participation in the process, often, this knowledge does not translate into action.

In order to ensure successful implementation of the plan, participation is needed throughout the entire process, with all constituents having a voice (Luxton, 2005). Banta, Pike, and Hansen (2009) supported this notion, stating that the first step to achieving positive outcomes is to involve stakeholders in the process to identify benchmarks for student learning and engagement in both academic programs and support services. The groups of stakeholders should include faculty, staff, students, and administrators from within the organization, as well as employers and other community members from outside the college.

Fathi and Wilson (2009) noted stakeholder participation is one of the primary differences between a business model of planning and a higher education model. The decentralized power structure of higher education means that faculty should be involved at a high level of the planning process from the start to strengthen commitment to achieving success. Hines (2011) added that not only is participation important, but that those involved must be respected by their colleagues for the results to be highly credible. Differing points of view within the planning group is also important. Good representation produces results that are balanced and representative of important future directions for the college.

Billups (2015) expressed that leaders often implement a top-down planning model while appearing to seek community participation. The success of the planning process depends on the



leader not only desiring community engagement but having the courage to accept that engagement. Auer (2016) added that ideal planning teams are broadly constituted, diverse, participatory, and good at clarifying decision-making criteria. With these attributes, the chances for optimizing the creation of a genuinely practicable plan.

## **Participation**

Weimer and Jonas (1995) stated that full participation and communication serve as a uniting force for planning processes. Planning can transform an organization by opening lines of communication for decisions and allowing for greater participation in developing the future of the institution. Sanaghan and Napier (2000) similarly identified building community as key to the change process. The authors found the connection individuals feel with others in the institution is necessary for their efforts to be leveraged and their commitment to be strong. Furthermore, stakeholders need to be allowed to share their ideas and perspectives if the institution is to undergo a meaningful change process. Van der Merwe, Chermack, Kulikowich, and Yang (2007) noted that widespread conversation and engagement are important in planning, though there is little research in this area.

Lumby (1999) investigated planning processes in higher education to examine the products of strategic management, the strategic plans themselves, and how those concerned created meaning within the process. The results of interviews with administrators showed the strategic planning process was considered difficult. The two biggest issues revolved around obtaining adequate information and the best process for involving internal stakeholders. In obtaining internal perceptions, most interviews involved upper management and did not include mid-level managers or faculty. However, the final plans often indicated they were not created in a top-down fashion. One of the administrators indicated it was difficult to involve constituents

who worked in different fashions and did not understand the cultures of different departments. There was also the belief that many employees did not want to contribute to the process. These findings were supported by Morris (2000), who conducted a study with faculty members to examine issues in improving the processes and results of participation in strategic planning. All participants agreed it was necessary to involve stakeholders in the process. The educational level and knowledge level of faculty, as well as the importance of the collection of ideas from a variety of sources made this participation important. There was, however, some reservation as to how successfully this participation of stakeholders could actually happen. For example, it was noted not all groups participate in the same way or at the same time. Faculty also held particular assumptions about their participation. Many of the participants agreed that faculty generally have a very narrow perspective and are not as well informed about institutional challenges. Faculty often lacked interest in the area of planning as well as the time commitment involved with participating. The respondents noted that without a culture of openness and trust, participation in and commitment to new goals was unlikely. The successful dissemination of information throughout the process was also important for continued engagement and successful change.

In each of these studies, the researchers found involving stakeholders in the planning process is an important element to success. Both Lumby (1999) and Morris (2000) found this can be challenging as often employees have a narrow perspective of what happens in other departments, thus making it difficult to give input into the process. Welsh et al. (2006) found that faculty do not feel a collegial model is used in their institution despite its importance. Morris (2000) and Welsh and Metcalf (2003) particularly emphasized the importance of faculty input and support for the success of the plan. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and Welsh et al. (2006) further

found that administrative groups had more confidence than faculty groups regarding the depth of the implementation of the plan.

Gorman (2016) described personal experiences working with one institution on its planning process on two separate occasions. The first time, it was apparent the administration was not interested in faculty and staff input, which resulted in poor communication and a lack of trust. The plan was approved and adopted by the school's governing board, but with little buy-in from the college's employees. The results were a failed plan that laid dormant. A few years later, Gorman was brought back to create a planning process in which true community engagement was supported by the trustees and administration. A planning committee was created consisting of various stakeholders including faculty, chairs, students, alumni, and staff. Various strategies were used to gain campus-wide participation. The results of the plan included improved institutional effectiveness and articulating an ongoing strategy for planning and shared decision-making.

### **Community College Research**

Lovik (2014) conducted a case study of a rural community college in North Carolina to describe how the institution reviewed its strategic planning process, made relevant changes, and communicated and implemented the new plan. One of the main issues the college found with its previous plan was that the plan itself was unknown to most college employees. Lovik noted lessons learned by the institution during the most recent planning process, which was developed in 2014. The first lesson was to enhance campus-wide participation. This was done by:

- Ensuring college-wide representation among the strategic plan work group;
- Asking key unit leaders to talk up the process with their employees;
- Scheduling open forums for faculty, staff, and students;

- Sending personalized email messages from the president and senior leadership;
- Posting updated drafts and measures of progress on the institution's intranet; and
- Updating the college community frequently regarding the review process.

Lovik's (2014) findings are similar to those of Lattimore et al. (2012), who studied three community colleges in North Carolina to examine planning processes at each college and how well each responded to accountability requirements. The qualitative case study found five themes with implications for practice, with the top theme being involving stakeholders in strategic planning and implementation. According to the researchers, this step is consistent with market and political perspectives as an effective planning strategy. Maple Community College used informal meetings with various groups (e.g., business partners, governmental agencies, and students) to gain input. The second college conducted sessions for strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis, which is an environmental scan technique completed by stakeholders. All three institutions made use of advisory committees to provide guidance and receive support for program development.

### **Summary**

The ultimate success of a strategic plan can be significantly impacted by the level of participation and involvement from internal stakeholder groups. Questions may arise over how much perspective employees have in terms of the overall institution; however faculty and staff provide a different viewpoint than upper-administrative personnel. These different perspectives are beneficial in developing appropriate strategies. More importantly, seeking input from faculty and staff creates buy-in and support, which is critical for the long-term success of the strategic plan.

## **Implementing the Strategic Plan**

Ward noted that “the most radical thing I did was to take a plan off the shelf and implement it” (as cited in Paris, 2004, p. 121). This message was delivered by the president of an institution, and it speaks loudly to the challenges and difficulties that many leaders face when attempting to implement a strategic plan. The concern regarding implementation has been an issue for quite some time. Dooris et al. (2002) noted a new emphasis on moving from formulation to implementation or from plan to practice—an issue that persists today. Warzynski (2004) stated that many strategic plans never reach full potential because they lack a foundation of common understanding and do not have the commitment needed to achieve the desired results.

The process of developing a strategic plan can be time consuming. Despite the commitment that goes into developing the plan, often the biggest challenge is carrying out the results of that hard work. Kogler Hill, Thomas, and Keller (2009) stated some have an initial positive view of the process as they see various stakeholders working together on a collaborative planning project. It is critical these individuals see results; if not, positive perceptions become negative. Atkins (2010) concurred,

Far too often, even the best-developed plans fall far short of meeting expectations or simply collect dust on office shelves. Leadership teams may lack the experience, motivation, or credibility needed to accomplish the task, or others in the organization are not prepared to be engaged in the planning process. (p. 24)

Sullivan and Richardson (2011) similarly found strategic planning invokes memories of excitement and disappointment. Excitement arises during the planning process when personal ideas and thoughts are integrated into the final plan. Disappointment results when the strategic plan is not implemented. Researchers have presented differing views in the literature on whether

strategic planning processes in higher education are successful, and the general consensus acknowledges the difficulty of implementing a sustainable and strategic process (Morris, 2000).

### **Why Implementation Fails**

Researchers have explored some reasons why strategic planning has not typically been successful in practice. Keller (1993) identified the following factors leading to failure: “soft campus leadership; faculty politics; academic hostility to activities such as marketing, financial controls, and management which often inhibit strategic action; and information about many items, from demographics of the region to faculty work load on campus” (p. 9). Barrows (2009) further identified failing to link strategic planning with strategy execution as a fatal flaw of many planning practices.

Lumby’s (1999) findings were consistent with Keller’s work, highlighting strategic plan development, while challenging, is much easier than the actual implementation of the plan. The participants interviewed found limited value in the plan because often the goals set were too easily achievable, and the constantly changing environment of higher education made the plan out of date as soon as it was completed. Another major challenge was difficulty changing employees’ attitudes and behaviors. At times, when certain participants of the planning process were implementing aspects of the plan, it was viewed as agenda-driven rather than in the best interest of the students. Kotter (1996) similarly found failure to anchor changes firmly in the corporate culture is an error many organizations make. Kotter underscored the importance of creating short-term wins as an important component of transformation.

In studying the difference in planning perceptions between faculty and administrators, Welsh et al. (2006) found faculty are often unaware planning activities exist. When faculty are aware of the activities, they often do not understand the driving force behind the initiative. The

researchers stressed the critical importance of ample communication about the planning efforts of the institution. The authors stated “deans and department heads often fail to communicate the context, process, and outcomes of planning with faculty and other employees throughout the organization” (p. 703). Barrows (2009) identified strategy review meetings as a further key to the success of planning efforts.

### **Successful Implementation**

Paris (2004) recognized that in order for strategic plans to be taken seriously by employees, they must be able to see the plan infused throughout the organization. Some of the infusion strategies Paris identified, as developed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, included: identifying point people to champion the priorities, creating key positions around some of the priorities, reporting according to the plan, allocating discretionary funds in line with the plan, considering plan priorities when facing budget reductions, spotlighting the plan at high-visibility campus events, providing academic leadership training and development to support the plan, and tying academic program reviews to the plan.

Weimer and Jonas (1995) explained that a planning process developed by comprehensive participation within the community college can be difficult to enact and control and cannot be treated like other processes within the institution. The plan must be part of the everyday environment of the college. It must become ingrained in decision-making, the budget process, goal setting, and departmental planning. The plan remains a piece of paper until it is implemented in the classroom. The most difficulties and the most successes arise once the plan is developed and implemented. Gorman (2016) offered consistent statements based on personal experiences in leading strategic planning efforts. Gorman suggested creating committees for faculty and staff to participate, as their engagement in implementation and assessment of the plan

help to link it to the vision of the institution. The level of engagement should be aligned to achieve institutional goals.

Young and Baker (2016) described five key components of a successful strategic plan: balancing creativity and discipline, connecting choices to underlying values, developing planners across the institution, celebrating the expert-generalist, and bridging pragmatism and ambition to foster sound implementation. The last component, bridging pragmatism and ambition to foster sound implementation requires not allowing planning to become simply the development of goals to achieve outcomes. Planners must combine ambition with practicality, and act not too cautiously, yet also not stray too far beyond reality in setting goals.

### **Communicating the Plan**

Leaders often clearly articulate the goals of the strategic plan, but may not clearly identify the indicators of success of established goals (Bresciani, 2010). Kogler Hill et al. (2009) described an implementation process for success. The first step is to share the plan with all stakeholders, including posting the plan on the institution's website, providing hard copies for all campus departments, and creating a brochure to highlight the main goals. The second step is to align all unit plans with the university's plan. The next step is to develop metrics so that the progress of the planning process can be measured. This includes developing key performance indicators (KPIs) highlighted in the annual report. The final step for implementation is to find champions for each of the initiatives to increase buy-in and accountability.

In the findings from a case study on a North Carolina community college, Lovik (2014) found results similar to Kogler Hill et al. (2009) on the implementation of strategic goals as critical to success. Although these plans may look impressive sitting on a shelf, the institution



cannot be transformed positively without using the plan developed. Lovik's (2014) steps to implementation include:

- Market the plan to campus to ensure that all employees know about it and put the plan in front of the campus community on a frequent basis;
- Set target dates for the evaluation of specific action plans and “calendarize” quarterly and annual progress reviews with senior leadership; and
- Adjust the plan as needed and keep everyone informed of changes.

Expanding Kogler Hill et al. (2009), Lovik (2014) added the step of taking incremental, deliberate steps; do not attempt to act on every single initiative/goal during the first year.

### **Summary**

Implementing the strategic plan within the organization may be the most important component of the process. With the time and effort invested in creating the plan, the impact will be nullified if nothing happens once the plan is completed. Yet, institutions struggle to incorporate the strategic plan into their everyday operations. This failure of implementation disappoints those involved in the process in light of the time they have spent developing the plan.

### **Linking Budgets and Resources to Support the Strategic Plan**

Budgeting processes were the primary purpose behind formal planning processes during the early years of strategic planning in the 1950s (Mintzberg, 1994). Strategic planning has since evolved and now plays a much bigger role than solely developing a budget, though this important aspect should not be forgotten. Successful strategic planning requires the alignment of resources with the institution's mission and strategic vision (Harvey, 2017).

Zimpher (2006) noted that institutions need to provide resources to support their planning goals or risk having their vision fail. Budgeting is an important piece of operations within an

organization and is closely related to determining strategic priorities and acquiring resources (Lepori, Usher, & Montauti, 2012). Strategic plans provide a basis from which the institution's goals can be translated into operational plans and carried out through budgeting decisions (Saunders, 2014). Varlotta (2010) identified the role of budgetary considerations throughout the planning process:

In highly functioning universities that follow best practices, the budget assumes and noticeably performs three vital roles: supporting the strategic plan, illustrating how money follows the mission, clarifying organizational work agreements between supervisors and their staff, and reflecting the trade-offs that have been made as part of the budget process. (p. 11)

Despite its importance, it has been challenging for organizations to achieve the goal of successfully allocating resources in alignment with the strategic plan. Schmidlein (1989) stated:

Within the field of public administration, the belief that budgets should be derived from well-conceived plans appears to be an unquestionable article of faith. Like the search for the Holy Grail, theorists and practitioners for many years have maintained a quest for the secret to a successful linkage. (p. 9)

Paris (2003) noted that it is not uncommon for institutions to have little or no relationship between their planning and budgeting processes. Some of the causes for these disjointed efforts include such issues as historical financial decision-making processes, the unavailability of accurate financial data to those involved in planning, and, in some cases, a lack of means for connecting the two processes. Sevier (2003) reported that plans are often developed without consideration of the budget. In these cases, the plans written are either too expensive for the allocated dollars, or money is sought after the plan is developed.

Harvey (2017) described two movements that have helped higher education remain relevant despite the growing challenges colleges and universities face in today's climate. The first movement is to align enrollment, curriculum, advising, facilities, and other activities as a coordinated strategy for success. The second movement is to devise more effective ways to align

resources to those strategies. The best strategy will fail if it is not implemented, and resources are the key to implementation success or failure.

### **Community Colleges**

Community colleges are facing the same challenges as other institutions as described above. Saunders (2014) described how institutional leaders discuss linking plans to budgets, though a number of challenges get in the way. In order to achieve this linkage successfully, the leader must rally stakeholders around the goals established in strategic plans. Procedures must be put in place to assess the link between resource allocation decisions and institutional goals.

Claggett (2004) reported Carroll College achieved success with a process linking budgeting to the strategic plan process. The college found that oftentimes the total area budget request was more than the revenue available for new initiatives. Claggett stated that “having area goals tied to strategic initiatives, which have been guided by institutional vision, approved by a governing board, and developed by consultation and consensus, is not enough. Resources must be allocated to adequately fund the tasks necessary to realize the goals of each initiative” (p. 117).

Israel and Kihl (2005) discussed how the budget process in the Collin County Community College District (CCCCD) was greatly revamped when leaders realized the budget and financial management processes needed to change substantially. The previous practice of incremental budgeting allowed for too much latitude and did not hold managers accountable for their budgeting decisions. The CCCCCD used a new three-year strategic planning process as the starting point for setting funding priorities and addressing difficult funding decisions. It emphasized the alignment of academic, student development, and technology plans with the college’s overall financial plan.

Some of the processes utilized by CCCCDC are similar to those implemented by the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), which has demonstrated a successful path for linking community college budgeting and planning (Krieger, 2011). Each of the colleges in the system prepares a biennial budget request based on the college's mission, needs of the service area, and high-priority goals and objectives identified in the state and college strategic plans, which are then aligned with the KCTCS strategic plan. The KCTCS Board of Regents then determines what will be measured as part of the strategic plan and those determinations are labeled as core indicators.

### **Planning and Departmental Performance**

Support exists for institutions to provide financial allocations for departments who develop new initiatives or who meet certain benchmarks in an assessment process. Sevier (2003) asserted although it is essential that actions be linked to rewards, resource allocation in higher education has traditionally treated all units equally, which has resulted in everyone being treated poorly. Successful strategic planning rewards those who perform to a higher degree and sends the message performance does matter. Shulock and Harrison (1998) similarly stated that decisions about allocations to departments have been based on the degree to which the goals of the strategic plan are realized. The implementation of outcomes assessments alongside budgeting keeps performance visible across the institution instead of being reduced to transformational data hidden away or collecting dust on a shelf (Hoyt, 2009).

Some institutions have found success in linking budget decisions to department performance. For example, Penn State University spent 20 years focusing on improving the university through strategic planning. By placing a focused effort on strategic planning and the budgeting process, the university reduced costs and developed more operating efficiencies.

Resources were then reallocated from unsuccessful programs and services to the most promising and effective programs (Dooris, 2003). The University of Wisconsin-Madison implemented this type of model with program budgeting. Program-level funds were requested in terms of goals and end-products instead of line-item budgeting for such areas as supplies, maintenance, and personnel. The inclusive process created up-front, strategic directions and goals (Paris, 2003).

The Feinberg School of Medicine (Haberaecker, 2004) at Northwestern University similarly developed a strategic plan for the school with devoted emphasis to data analysis and linkage of the plan to budgeting. One of the elements with a significant effect on the success of the strategic plan was the addition of mutually-agreed upon departmental performance indicators in the annual budget and planning process. These measures included assessments of how each department's performance compared to the rest of the school.

### **Summary**

Auer (2016) identified a survey conducted by Academic Impressions of more than 50 senior academic administrators, including presidents and chief financial officers at various institution types. According to this survey, the most significant challenge with strategic planning was integrating the planning with the budgeting process (72% of respondents). Auer indicated detailed budgets alone are not enough. The strategic plan must set actual priorities for investment and determine which objectives are most critical for success of the mission. It is apparent, however, there is still a need for more research on the best practices and approaches to linking budgeting with strategic planning. Recently, some states have found it necessary to reduce appropriations during the fiscal year, making it even more difficult to fund new initiatives, much less create a proactive plan that encourages faculty and staff to pursue those new initiatives.

## Chapter Summary

The literature reviewed in this paper revealed the following: (a) skepticism among faculty and staff regarding the need for strategic planning is common, (b) stakeholder participation in the planning process is a necessity for successful planning, (c) financial and personnel resources must be provided to support initiatives created by the plan, and (d) institutions often face challenges in implementing the strategic plan once it is created and need to address those challenges in order to achieve successful implementation. Institutions are striving to find solutions to these issues by developing more effective strategic planning models. The colleges and universities with the most reliable information regarding the key sectors within their operations and changes happening within society will best be able to compete for students, faculty, dollars, and goodwill compared to institutions with poorer information (Keller, 1993). More research is needed to support best practices in developing and implementing efficient and effective strategic planning efforts. This study examined these issues and how they have been addressed in-depth in the planning process at a high performing institution. The findings thus help to fill the current gaps in the literature.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The first two chapters identified the importance of strategic planning for institutions to remain viable in a competitive environment, as well as the challenges associated with planning initiatives. As outlined in Chapter One, the purpose of this single-site, qualitative case study was to examine the strategic planning methods of a high performing institution, including the development, implementation, and ultimate success of the strategic planning process. The selected institution was identified as high performing based its receipt of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The research question developed for the study was:

*How does a high performing community college operationalize the strategic plan to ensure that it is integrated throughout the institution and is ultimately successful?*

Due to the challenges facing institutions in successful strategic planning, a case study research method can highlight how this high performing institution manages its planning process through in-depth questioning. The case study methodology also allows for rich, in-depth analysis of this topic, making a contribution to the higher education planning literature.

Chapter Three provides a detailed overview of the methodology employed for the study and concludes with a discussion of the steps taken to maximize validity. As this chapter details, a research protocol as described by Yin (2009) was developed, which includes:

- An introduction and overview, including the research design (i.e., case study, purpose of the study, the research questions, site selection, and participants);
- The data collection procedures;

- The case study report (see Chapter Four; Note: In this report as well as the findings, all names were redacted to protect confidentiality, though the name of the institution is identified with the institution's permission); and
- The case study questions.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, single-site case study was selected to address the research question as this method provided the best opportunity to collect in-depth answers to the research question from the perspective of the institution's employees. Merriam (2009) described how qualitative research is different from quantitative research as the former attempts to uncover how participants experience a phenomenon, interpret their experiences, and construct their worldview as opposed to describing facts and characteristics about that phenomenon. In this study, the characteristics of qualitative research helped to understand and share participants' thoughts and perceptions on strategic planning which, based on the literature, are relevant to the success or failure of strategic planning.

To understand the thoughts and impressions of the participants, a qualitative approach was most appropriate, as supported by Merriam (2009):

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. (p. 14)

To answer the research question created for the study, an in-depth, rich description of the stakeholder's experiences and related planning documents and materials was necessary. Creswell (2007) noted utilizing a qualitative study allows for the opportunity to collect information beyond just numbers. Qualitative research allows participants to tell their stories and share their



experiences, which can only be achieved by sharing in-depth conversations with the individuals. As such, for this study I interviewed employees, including a cross-representational group of faculty, staff, and administrators. All participants had previously participated in the strategic planning process and provided perspectives regarding how the planning process was developed and implemented within the institution.

### **The Case Study**

Yin (2009) identified five important components of the case study research design: (a) the study's questions, (b) the study's propositions (if any), (c) the study's units of analysis, (d) the logic linking the data to the propositions, and (e) the criteria for interpreting the findings. According to Yin (2009), the key differential among various research methods is the type of research questions selected by the researcher. A case study methodology often fits "how" and "why" questions. Although topic alone is not enough to determine the method, research involving "organizations" and "processes" are good candidates for a case study. The research methodology for this study examined the process the institution created that led to a successful strategic plan development and implementation. Based on Yin's criteria, this process was fitting of case study research.

Based on the research found in the review of literature, the following propositions were created for this study: employee perceptions of strategic planning, employee participation in the strategic planning process, implementing the strategic plan, and linking budgets and resources to support the strategic plan. These propositions were identified in the literature review as impacting the success of the planning process. These propositions and how they link to the data, as described later in this section, guided the data collection process. Yin (2009) explained that case studies are conducted about decisions, programs, and organizational change. The strategic

planning process involves both decisions and organizational change, also supporting the case study methodology.

To support the choice of a case study and the unit of analysis further, I reviewed Merriam's (2009) work. Merriam explained the importance of examining the bounded system and how it fits into case study research. It is the unit of analysis that determines if a case study is appropriate; not the topic. This unit of analysis for the present study is the college's strategic planning process. This includes the timeline from the initial start of the process through the implementation phase. There must be a specific program or one particular group of individuals investigated to create a bounded system. If the issue under investigation cannot be bounded, there is no case study. To determine if this was appropriate, I contemplated how finite the data collection was or whether there was a limit to how many people were involved and could be included in the study. This research contained a bounded system as per Merriam. The bounded system was established by an in-depth look at the strategic planning process the college developed and implemented during the timeframe of applying for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence (2011-2017).

The primary approach used for linking data to the propositions was explanation building as defined by Yin (2009). In developing the study, I identified the four propositions as the main themes for the research to support the explanation building. To assist in this process, I analyzed the data by building an explanation about the case. In this study, the explanation building revolved around describing how and why the planning process used by the institution led to the operationalization of the strategic plan. This technique also helped to strengthen internal validity (Yin, 2009).

## Site Selection

Lake Area Technical Institute (LATI), located in Watertown, South Dakota, was selected as the high performing institution and the site for this research. LATI was founded in 1965 and was the first technical school created in South Dakota. The college has thirty degree programs and over 2,400 students enrolled. LATI was awarded the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2017 after earning the title of finalist-with-distinction in 2011, 2013, and 2015 (AICCE, 2017). No other institution earned the finalist with distinction level in three consecutive award cycles. The Aspen Institute (Aspen, 2017) stated this about those institutions which earn Aspen Prize recognition, “Excellent community colleges provide students with a high-quality education that motivates them to excel and equips them with the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in work and life.”

Aspen (2017) described how LATI developed an impressive system for technical education that is fully embedded in the campus culture and practices, perhaps more than anywhere else in the country. Staff and faculty work extremely closely with business and industry to ensure graduates are prepared for the workforce. With such a deep understanding of what employers need, the highly structured programs support students from initial enrollment through program completion and, ultimately, employment in their field.

LATI has also earned several other national awards to add to their list of distinctions. LATI earned Niche’s number one ranking in their list of Best Community Colleges in 2017 from a group of 804 colleges assessed. This award is based on academic, financial, and student life data compiled from the U.S. Department of Education and reviews from students and alumni (LATI, 2017). The institution also earned the 2018 gold-level military friendly designation by Victory Media. This designation is based on survey information as well as standards met

regarding student retention, graduation, job placement, loan repayment, persistence, and loan default rates (LATI, 2017). The 2017 designation marked the seventh consecutive year that LATI received this designation. In 2016, LATI earned a top 10 ranking on WalletHub's list of best community colleges. The award criteria are based on where students receive the best education for the lowest price (LATI, 2016).

### **Participant Selection**

Participants from three employee groups were interviewed: administration, faculty, and staff. Twenty-three employees total were interviewed and the participant demographics are detailed in the next section. Participants from each of the employee classifications were selected to gain insight into the planning process from various stakeholder groups within the institution. Purposeful sampling from each group centered on identifying individuals who had participated in the strategic planning process at least once while the college was applying for the Aspen Prize. This purposeful sampling allowed the participants to provide personal perspectives, knowledge, and understanding of the planning process, which were key to gathering relevant information on the research topic.

Prior to starting the research, the institution identified a gatekeeper, or facilitator, to select the appropriate participants who met the criteria identified in the purposeful sample. The gatekeeper had the knowledge to select individuals who were employed at the institution and participated in the strategic planning process, and who were willing to share their perspectives through the interview process. The gatekeeper was also an asset in helping the selected participants understand in advance the purpose of the research and that all interview data would remain confidential. I provided the participants in the study and the gatekeeper with a \$10 gift

card to a local business as a token of appreciation for the time they each dedicated to assisting with this research.

### **Participant Employee Category Descriptions**

There were 23 LATI employees who met the appropriate criteria of having participated in the institution's strategic planning process at least once since 2011 when the college began applying for the Aspen Prize and volunteered to participate in the interviews. Each employee falls into one of three classifications as defined by the institution: faculty, staff, or administration.

**Faculty.** This group consisted of seven faculty members who had participated in the LATI strategic planning process at least one time since 2011. The faculty group included employees who were either full-time classroom instructors or classroom instructors who had some administrative responsibilities in their respective academic programs. A cross-representational group of faculty was selected to include each of the academic divisions. The seven faculty – three women and four men – had a combined 111 years of experience working at LATI and an average of 15.8 years of experience with a median of 13 years of service at the institution. For confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, faculty members are labeled as Faculty followed by an assigned number (i.e., Faculty1 to Faculty7).

**Staff.** This group consisted of seven staff members on campus, three women and four men. Each of these participants had been included in the strategic planning process at least one time since 2011. The staff classification was defined as employees who play a support role in their department. The seven staff members had a combined 43 years of experience with the institution and an average of 6.1 years. The median was four years of service for this group. For

confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, staff members are labeled as Staff followed by an assigned number (i.e., Staff1 to Staff7).

**Administration.** This group included nine administrators on campus who had participated in the strategic planning process at least once during the predetermined timeframe. This classification included employees who have a leadership role in the college or their respective department, not including an academic department. Four female and five male administrators volunteered to participate. The administrative group had a combined 138 years of service at LATI. The average service for the group was 15.3 at LATI and a median of 12 years. For confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, administration members were labeled as Admin followed by an assigned number (i.e., Admin1 to Admin9).

### **Data Collection**

To address the research question, I utilized multiple sources of evidence in data collection as per Yin (2009), including participant interviews, document analysis, direct observation, and physical artifacts. Using multiple sources of evidence is a strength of case study research as it allows for triangulation and increases construct validity (Yin, 2009).

### **Participant Interviews**

According to Yin (2009), “one of the most important sources of case study information is the interview” (p. 106). Participant interviews were the primary data collection source for this study and served two important purposes. The first was to gain an in-depth perspective from the participants regarding how the strategic planning process was developed and implemented, as well as their personal insights into the LATI process. The second purpose was to use the information gained through the interviews as part of the triangulation process in comparison to the other data collected.

Each volunteer participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately one hour in length. Interviews were conducted in a conference room which was reserved solely for the interviews on the days that I was on campus interviewing. I worked with the gatekeeper to ensure additional time was built-in between interviews to allow individuals to leave the conference room prior to the next participant arriving. The goal was to conduct the interviews in a conversational nature to gather the participants' perceptions on the strategic planning process. Standard questions were developed beforehand to guide the conversation and maintain consistency (see the Appendix). Fifteen questions were created prior to the interviews, with a few probing questions identified in advance as follow up to assist if the interviewee was not providing in-depth responses. The first four questions asked participants to describe their role at the institution and the strategic planning process and how other employees are involved in the process. The next two questions examined assumptions about strategic planning prior to, and after involvement in the LATI process. The next section of questions directly related to the development and implementation of the process, including time commitment, communication, resource allocation, and assessment. The final section of questions were open-ended and allowed the participant the opportunity to share strengths and challenges faced by the institution in the planning process, including how the planning process related to the Aspen Prize process.

In preparation of the interviews, the interview questions were piloted with colleagues from other colleges who had participated in their institution's planning processes. This step helped me gain confidence and become more comfortable as an interviewer in this type of setting. As part of that pilot interview process, interviewees were asked to provide feedback regarding clarity of the questions.

The entire list of interview questions was not needed for each participant, as some volunteers shared information and their perspectives more easily and freely. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, further dialogue and questions were interjected as participant responses dictated. Less structured interviews allow participants to explain their perspectives in unique ways (Merriam, 1998). To aid in accuracy and thoroughness of the transcription and data analysis, an audio recorder was used to collect the responses from the participants.

Several steps were taken prior to beginning the interview. I began by introducing myself and explained the purpose of the study so there was a clear understanding of my role and what the research aimed to accomplish. Next, confidentiality was assured by stating that a pseudonym would be used for any comments attributed to individuals in the results. Participants were told the interview would be recorded for accuracy in the data analysis process, but that the recordings would remain confidential and be destroyed upon completion of the research. Lastly, the participants were asked to sign the informed consent form.

To aid in validity and accuracy of the results, member checking was incorporated in the research process. The interviews were transcribed by a third party professional transcriptionist. Once the transcription and analysis of the interview data was completed, the participants were sent their individual interview transcript. The transcript included initial thematic analysis coding and comments to be reviewed for accuracy. Individuals were able to express feedback on the coding and associated comments to ensure the analysis was consistent with the intent of the responses.

### **Document Analysis**

Key documents related to the LATI strategic planning process were analyzed. The first documents were the final strategic plan created by the institution each year from 2012–2013 and



2015–2017. The 2014 document was absent due to the transition of presidents that occurred that year. The second set of documents analyzed were the quarterly dashboards produced in conjunction with the annual strategic plan. The dashboards serve as the main assessment tool for the plan developed. The dashboard is a one page assessment matrix. The six key indicators that LATI assesses each year are listed in the far left column of the document. These indicators include: enrollment, fiscal health, plant capacity and condition, human resources, industry-regional relationships, and assessment. Each key indicator has the following criteria attached to them by column: goals, data for current value, data from previous value, narrative for current trend, narrative for future trend, and planned actions/notes. I reviewed five dashboard total, including one for each year (2012-2013 and 2015-2017). The dashboards are described in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Yin (2009) explained the most important role documents play is to support the evidence obtained from other sources. This is consistent with Gibson and Brown (2009), who stated the purpose of document analysis is to identify the consistency between the relevant documents and the perceptions of the participants gained through the interview process. The use of documents complements the other research methods, such as interviews, because comparisons can be made between how people explain the phenomenon and how it is explained in the documentation. This insight allowed for exploration on how the issues in question had been recorded, represented, and discussed within the institution.

### **Direct Observation**

Direct observation was an important data collection tool. This consisted of visiting the campus during the annual planning meeting and conducting a campus walk-through in which I viewed physical artifacts related to the strategic plan and the Aspen Prize. The research focused

on strategic planning activities that occurred while LATI was applying for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. The most relevant opportunity that presented itself, however, was LATI's strategic planning meeting to develop the next campus strategic plan shortly after winning the Aspen Prize. This planning session occurred during the research period. Although the interviews asked participants to respond to strategic plan development in previous years, the general format of the planning meeting was consistent with how the prior meetings had been conducted. Because this meeting format was consistent with past practices, it provided the opportunity to compare observations with the participant interview data and document analysis to enhance triangulation and validity of the research. The planning session lasted approximately 3.5 hours and was facilitated by an outside consultant who led various exercises during the session. The activities included reaffirming the mission and vision of the college, brainstorming sessions to help identify short-term and long-term goals, and lastly strategic visioning. The planning session included approximately fifty participants, which included LATI employees (faculty, staff, and administrators), regional business and industry partners, K-12 school district leaders, and local politicians. The strategic planning session is described in further detail in Chapter Four.

Yin (2009) noted, "Physical artifacts have less potential relevance in the most typical kind of case study" (p. 113). Despite this assertion, I included a campus walk-through as an element of data collection to explore artifacts related to the impact of the strategic plan and the Aspen Award. The purpose was to assess how prominently these artifacts are displayed, along with where and how the awards are presented throughout the institution.

## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research, including each phase of the data collection process, in order to develop a thorough analysis. The four principles described by Yin (2009) as necessary for ensuring a high-quality analysis were utilized. The first principle states the researcher must attend to all evidence. This includes the development of rival hypotheses and exhaustively covering all research questions. The second principle is to address, if possible, all major rival interpretations needed to ensure the validity of the results. If not addressed, the researcher must determine whether rival interpretations should be investigated in future studies. The third principle is to address the most important aspects of the case study and lose focus on lesser issues. The fourth principle is to utilize personal and prior expert knowledge to demonstrate awareness of the current issues and thinking about the topic.

The following sections describe the process of data analysis. The propositions or main themes were developed based on the literature review. The propositions and the logic linking the data to the propositions, as described by Yin (2009), were important in the data analysis process. The primary approach used for linking data to the propositions was explanation building, as defined by Yin (2009). These steps were imperative in answering the research question developed for this study and assisting strategic planners and researchers with effective implementation planning practices.

### **Coding Process**

Thematic analysis was developed to identify the commonality, difference, and relationship patterns found in the participant interviews. While primarily used for the interviews, the coding process was critical to the entire data analysis. The results of the thematic analysis set the foundation for triangulating the data collected in each source of evidence. The coding process

for this study followed guidelines recommended by Gibson and Brown (2009, p. 134) based on common reasons for developing codes. The guidelines included but was not limited to affixing codes to: something that occurs more than once, something said with intensity or strong emphasis, parties in a conversation that readily agree on something or something that goes uncommented, people disagree, and mistakes occur.

The thematic analysis started with developing predetermined *a priori* codes for general categories (Gibson & Brown, 2009). During the review of literature, four factors continued to emerge as key factors that contributed to the success of strategic planning. These four factors became the *a priori* codes, or propositions as described by Yin (2009). The themes that emerged during the data analysis were linked back to the propositions in accordance with Yin's (2009) approach to case study research. The predetermined *a priori* codes included: employee perceptions of the planning process, employee participation in the planning process, implementation of the strategic plan, and budgeting and resource allocation to support the plan. The themes that emerged during the ongoing data analysis became the empirical codes as described by Yin (2009). The codes were created when the same response was heard from multiple participants which indicated a pattern. In a few instances a code was developed when a participant said something with extreme emotion or confidence. Codes were also developed when one interviewee or a small group of participants expressed a comment that was very much contradictory to a response that was commonly held by the larger group. Each empirical code was linked back to one of the propositions, or a *priori* codes. The empirical codes provided supporting details, as well as information on the development of rival interpretations, which is a key element of high quality data analysis (Yin, 2009). From the data analysis, the following empirical codes emerged and were connected to the identified *a priori* codes. Employee

perceptions of strategic planning; prior to involvement in the LATI process, perceptions after participation in the LATI process, and the LATI culture. Employee participation in the planning process: involving employees and external stakeholders, influence from industry partners, and idea sharing and input from stakeholders is valued. Implementing the strategic plan: general implementation, utilizing an annual process, utilizing committees and teams to implement, communication of the strategic plan, improving communication during implementation, assessment of the strategic plan, and connecting the Aspen Prize to strategic planning. For the final *a priori* code, linking budget and resources to support the strategic plan: the strategic plan and budgeting process and alternative funding support for initiatives.

The thematic analysis was then compared to the selected documents to look for consistency or disconfirming information. When disconfirming information was found, I examined how often the disconfirming information was expressed or how strongly the statement was made by a participant. These were labeled rival explanations in the data analysis.

### **Participant Interviews**

The first step in the data analysis process was to analyze the interview data received from the participants. The interviews were transcribed and thoroughly analyzed to search for patterns that occurred, including keywords, phrases, or themes. Per Gibson and Brown (2009), thematic analysis has three aims: examining commonalities of the data, examining differences, and examining relationships. As mentioned previously, member checking was utilized so the participants had the opportunity to see the initial data analysis to confirm the accuracy of their comments.

## **Document Analysis**

The next step in the data analysis was examining the documents for relevant information related to the strategic planning process. This included the final strategic planning documents from 2012–2013 and 2015–2017 and the associated dashboards created from those plans. The information contained in the documents was compared with the thematic analysis of the interviews, as well as with the other data collected from the direct observation and physical artifacts as part of the triangulation process to answer the research question.

## **Direct Observation**

As an observer in LATI's annual strategic plan development meeting, I was able to witness the planning process firsthand. This provided insight into how the planning meeting was organized, how each activity occurred, interactions between stakeholders and, ultimately, the level of participation and involvement of those included in the process.

## **Triangulation**

Because multiple data collection techniques were used, triangulation was an important component in validating the data and writing up the results. Merriam (2009) described triangulation as cross-checking the data collected at different times and places or from different people. As mentioned above, participant interviews were the primary data collection tool. The thematic analysis from the participant interviews was compared to the document analysis to look for consistencies and differences with interview themes, as well as to corroborate information from other sources. Yin (2009) explained this is the most important use of documents in a case study.

Direct observation of the strategic planning meeting was also used as a verifying tool in the data analysis process. This data collection tool is valuable for providing additional

information about the topic studied (Yin, 2009). As mentioned previously, I examined the meeting organization and key elements of the activities used and participant interactions, specifically from the LATI employees.

The search for physical artifacts was valuable in the triangulation process by providing insight into how the strategic plan is highlighted by the institution. Although these artifacts may be less relevant than other sources of evidence (Yin, 2009), they illustrate the culture of the institution and, more specifically, the overall perception of planning at LATI.

### **Validation**

Providing research results for this study that can be trusted was critical to the mission of this research. The goal was to provide results that other practitioners can utilize knowing they stem from a thorough analysis of the data and research conducted ethically. Lincoln and Guba (1985) broke the concept of trustworthiness down by stating that the researcher needs to persuade the reader the findings are worth paying attention to and worth taking into account. According to Creswell (2007), validation of a qualitative study is an attempt to assess the accuracy of the researcher's findings. Furthermore, it is a strength of qualitative research because of the time spent in the field, the detailed description, and the closeness the researcher shares with the participants. Merriam (2009) emphasized there must be trust the study was conducted with integrity and ethics. Furthermore, regardless of policies or guidelines, the ethics of a study come down to the values of those conducting the research. Thomas (2011) described the validation process as an attempt to provide accuracy in the findings as described by the researcher and participants. Thomas added that validation is a real strength of qualitative research because of the extensive time spent in the field, the thick description, and the relationship between the individuals leading the study and the participants.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the researcher consider four questions:

1. Truth value: How can one establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings and the context in which the inquiry was carried out?
2. Applicability: How can one determine that the findings of the research have applicability to other contexts?
3. Consistency: How can one determine if the findings of the research would be repeated if the study was replicated with the same subjects and same context?
4. Neutrality: How can one establish the degree to which the findings of the research were determined by the subjects and the conditions of the inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the researcher? (p. 290)

By incorporating the in-depth perspective of each of the participants in this study, as well as utilizing the data analysis techniques described in the previous section, the results of this study provide insight into successful strategic planning practices for practitioners and future research on this topic. In order to ensure the validity of the research, my study implemented multiple strategies described by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (1998, 2009) as its foundation, with support from Thomas (2007) and Yin (2009).

### **Prolonged Engagement in the Field**

Creswell (2007) described the time spent in the field as important for the researcher to make decisions about what is important and of interest to the focus of the study. Merriam (2009) explained that although there is no right answer to how long an individual needs to remain in the field, it is important that the findings become saturated and no new information is found while collecting data.



While conducting the research, I spent extensive time collecting data to ensure all relevant data were analyzed. I made multiple trips to the LATI campus to conduct interviews. By making multiple trips to campus, I was able to interview until saturation was reached. Furthermore, I was able to spend quality time with each participant and spending time after each interview day making notes from each interview and reflecting on the responses and how those answers compared to previous sessions.

A specific trip to the campus was made solely for the campus walk-through and observation. This allowed me to take as much time as I needed to look for evidence of strategic planning and the Aspen Prize. I also made a separate trip to campus for the half-day strategic planning session. This allowed me to focus solely on the planning session and provided time after the meeting to review my notes and make edits as needed while the information was fresh. Extensive time was spent reviewing the strategic plan documents and quarterly dashboards to identify the main themes of the documents as well as consistencies and inconsistencies with the interview data.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation methods and the relevance of this technique in ensuring validation and a quality study were described above. The triangulation of data as illustrated in Chapter Four brings together important pieces of data found in each of the data collection methods to support the findings. Data from the participant interviews, document analysis, and direct observations were synthesized in the data analysis. Creswell (2007) discussed this process as corroborating evidence to shed light on a particular theme or perspective.

## **Member Checks**

Member checking was utilized as per Creswell (2007). Creswell's technique is not to provide the participants with the interview transcripts or raw data, but rather to share the preliminary analysis of themes to the participants to gather their viewpoints. This helps with the participant's perception of the written analysis along with finding out if anything is missing. Merriam (1998) described a similar strategy with member checks which included taking the interview data after coding back to the participants for feedback on initial analysis. In this study, this feedback was used as validation of my interpretations. Yin (2009) also emphasized the importance of member checks as a part of the validation process because through this process, the participants may not agree with the researcher's interpretations, and there may be a problem if the facts of the case are challenged. In that case, the data analysis must continue to investigate until disputes are resolved.

To accomplish this goal, an initial review of the data analysis was provided to the interview participants. Each individual was provided with the transcript of the interview, including initial thematic analysis and related comments. Participants were asked to review the transcript and comments for accuracy and provide feedback. Most of the responses indicated that the transcript and initial coding were accurate and no changes were needed. A couple participants made clarifications of their comments to make sure I was clear on their context based on the theme or comments that I had associated with the particular comment. One participant asked if a particular comment would be used in the final paper, and if so, would the comment be confidential. I assured the participant that all comments would be confidential and associated only with a pseudonym. The participant appreciated my response and was satisfied with this response.

### **Peer Review/Examination**

Peer review/examination was utilized by working closely with the dissertation co-advisor. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I relied on the expertise and knowledge of my advisor to keep the process of the study focused, as well as to assist with the interpretation of the data. To accomplish this, regularly scheduled weekly meetings occurred to discuss the data collection and analysis. The co-advisor reviewed the draft document prior to the meeting and provided feedback throughout the entire process.

### **Researcher's Position**

To enhance the study, I identified preexisting assumptions and opinions regarding successful strategic planning processes prior to beginning this study. My previous work experience included involvement in various strategic planning processes and had had both positive and negative experiences with those processes. It was not possible to set aside such predispositions, however it was critical to pay close attention to this bias and be aware of it throughout the entirety of the study so as not to impact the interpretation of the data. To ensure the most valid results, I was open to finding rival explanations and contrary findings. Yin (2009) explained that this openness to rival explanations is a test against possible bias and can be accomplished by sharing preliminary findings, even while in the data collection stage, with colleagues. Creswell (2007) stated it is important for the researcher to clarify past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that may shaped the interpretation of the study.

### **Audit Trail**

A detailed audit trail was documented to demonstrate the methods and procedures used in this study. Merriam (2009) described the importance of the audit trail in allowing readers to have

a complete view of how the research was conducted. This can be very useful, particularly if another researcher conducts a similar study.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter Four presents the findings of the data collected through the participant interviews, document analysis, direct observation of the LATI strategic planning session, and observations of the campus walk-through. This chapter begins with an overview of the entire LATI strategic planning process to introduce the reader to how the plan is created and implemented. Next, a summary of the participant demographics is listed. This information was also provided in Chapter Three, but it is also relevant to include prior to the thematic analysis. The next section includes both a deductive and an inductive thematic analysis of the participant interviews was conducted to identify commonalities, differences, and relationship patterns within the responses. Each theme is followed by linking the data to the propositions that were developed from the literature review prior to starting the research. This is a significant aspect of my research methodology as described by Yin (2009). The document analysis is then described, which provides an in-depth examination of the strategic planning materials created by the institution. This analysis presents confirming and disconfirming relationships to the participant interviews and direct observations. Next, an overview of the direct observation of the most recent (Fall 2018) LATI strategic planning meeting is provided, including an analysis of the planning meeting to describe how the process works. Finally, observations of the campus and physical artifacts related to the strategic plan and Aspen Prize.

### **LATI Strategic Planning Process**

This chapter discusses many details of the strategic planning process in detail. To explain the context, a brief overview follows of the steps LATI takes in developing the plan. The LATI administration maintains long-range plans, such as 3–5-year goals, to prepare for the future

direction of the institution. With that said, the majority of interview participants indicated that LATI emphasizes a continuous strategic planning process which occurs on an annual basis to remain nimble and quickly adjust as the needs of the community, industry partners, and students evolve. The annual process provides the foundation for future endeavors as necessary initiatives are developed to support longer-range goals. Each year, the college administration reviews the process for effectiveness. While small changes have been made to the process over time, I heard from several participants during the interviews and learned through the document review, that the main concepts for the planning process have remained mostly consistent since 2012.

One of the major steps in the process is that each year, the college holds a half-day or full-day planning session with employees from various departments throughout the college and key external partners. The purpose of the meeting is for the participants to engage in dialogue on key issues and challenges. The topics addressed in the session are predetermined based on key previously developed indicators. This brainstorming session helps to guide the administration in creating initiatives designed to meet those key indicators. These initiatives create the framework for the final strategic plan.

The strategic planning session includes both employees and external stakeholders. A blend of faculty from different academic programs, staff from various departments, and the college administration make up the internal group of participants. The external stakeholder group has increased in size since 2012 to be more representative of outside groups who have a vested interest in the college. Various partners comprise this group, including K–12 district employees, local and regional business and industry partners who work closely with the college and hire LATI graduates, and local politicians.

During the planning session, participants break into smaller groups consisting of cross-representation of employees and external stakeholders. This cross-representation ensures different perspectives are shared within each group conversation throughout the day. The facilitator of the planning session introduces different questions or challenges throughout the session. Each table then brainstorms potential answers or solutions within their group. Once the brainstorming is completed, each table reports discussion highlights to the entire group. These highlights are recorded for later discussion by the administration as they develop the final plan.

After the strategic planning day is completed, the LATI administration gathers to discuss the ideas shared and to begin the process of devising the initiatives for the final version of the strategic plan. During these meetings, the leadership team prioritizes the initiatives and makes an initial assessment to determine what resources are needed to complete initiatives and if there are sufficient resources available. Once the administrative team decides which initiatives will make the final plan, an individual or department is assigned to take the lead on that project. The components of the final strategic plan document are described in further detail later in this chapter.

While the framework of strategic planning has remained consistent since 2012, some minor adjustments to the process have been made during this time. For example, prior to the 2018 planning session, an electronic survey was administered to every employee and various external stakeholders to gain perspectives on certain key issues. The responses were compiled prior to the strategic planning session to help guide the key topics for the strategic planning meeting. Another example of adjustments made since 2012 is that of the facilitator in the process. In some years, LATI facilitated the strategic planning day with an internal employee,

while other years an external consultant was hired to serve in that capacity to provide an outside perspective.

### **Participant Interview Thematic Analysis**

The section discusses the primary data collection method for this study which was participant interviews. This section starts with an overview of the demographics of those who were interviewed. A detailed description of the participants is covered in Chapter Three, but here I provide a review of that information. Next I explain the process of coding used for the thematic analysis, which brought together both deductive and inductive processes of coding. This is followed with a discussion of the four main themes and the associated sub-themes.

### **Participant Employee Category Descriptions**

There were 23 LATI employees who met the appropriate criteria and volunteered to participate in the interviews. Each employee falls into one of three classifications as defined by the institution: faculty, staff, or administration. The faculty group consisted of seven participants with an average of 15.8 years of experience at LATI. For confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, faculty members are labeled as Faculty followed by an assigned number (i.e., Faculty1 to Faculty7). The staff group consisted of seven interviewees who had an average of 6.1 years of experience at LATI. For confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, staff members are labeled as Staff followed by an assigned number (i.e., Staff1 to Staff7). The administration group included nine participants who had an average of 15.3 years of experience at LATI. For confidentiality purposes, when attributing comments to a specific individual, administration members were labeled as Admin followed by an assigned number (i.e., Admin1 to Admin9). Each of the 23



participants have participated in the strategic planning process at least once since 2011. A more detailed description of the participant groups is included in Chapter Three.

### **Thematic Analysis Process**

Each interview was semi-structured with a list of guiding questions (see the Appendix). The primary interview questions related to participants experience with the LATI strategic planning process, including describing the process through their personal lens and how individuals are included in the process from design to implementation. Participants were also asked to describe the steps in implementation, including who is involved, how the plan is assessed, what resources are allocated, and communication steps within the planning process. There were questions designed to explore participants perceptions of the Aspen Prize and how, if any connection, was made between the Aspen Prize and the strategic plan. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the interview questions were partially guided throughout the interview by the responses provided by the participants. As described in Chapter Three, four *a priori* codes or themes were developed as part of the research design prior to the interviews. Throughout the data analysis, empirical codes or subthemes were inductively constructed from each of the *a priori* codes, or main themes, from the data collected. The four themes are outlined below with their corresponding subthemes:

- Employee Perceptions of Strategic Planning:
  - Mixed Perceptions of Strategic Planning Prior to Participating in the LATI Process
  - Positive Perceptions Developed after Participation in the LATI Process
  - The Impact of Positive Culture on LATI's Successes
- Employee Participation in the Planning Process:

- Creating Engagement in the Process by Involving Employees and External Stakeholders
- Being Responsive to Industry Partners needs is Critical
- The Value of Stakeholder Input in the Process
- Implementing the Strategic Plan:
  - Ensuring Implementation of the Strategic Plan
  - Conducting the Strategic Planning Process Annually
  - Utilizing Committees and Teams to Implement the Strategic Plan
  - Communication of the Strategic Plan to Stakeholders
  - Improving Communication of the Plan During Implementation
  - The Importance of Assessing the Strategic Plan Initiatives
  - Connecting the Aspen Prize Feedback to the Strategic Plan
- Linking Budget and Resources to Support the Strategic Plan:
  - Initial Budget and Resource Allocation to the Strategic Plan
  - Identifying Alternative Funding and Resource Support for Initiatives

### **Theme 1: Employee Perceptions of Strategic Planning**

As described in Chapter Three, employee perceptions of strategic planning was one of the four propositions developed for this study. Those interviewed discussed their perceptions of strategic planning both prior to and following their involvement in the LATI process.

#### **Mixed perceptions of strategic planning prior to participating in the LATI process.**

The responses varied when describing perceptions of strategic planning prior to taking part in the process at LATI. Some of the perceptions related to individual's previous experiences or involvement with planning processes. The most common theme expressed was that participants

had a more negative view of strategic planning prior to their experience at LATI. This was heard more often with faculty and staff participants, many who had no prior experience with strategic planning prior to LATI. These negative comments included being hesitant to participate in planning exercises because of the importance of the topic and concern that one lacked knowledge to contribute. Faculty7 indicated feeling “scared” going into the process and being surprised at being chosen to participate in such a “big thing.” Other perceptions were more negative, including the view that planning was a waste of time and employees had more important things to do with their time at work. Admin10 described commonly held perceptions of planning this way: “sometimes it's a painful process, because people don't necessarily like to do strategic planning. There are those that do, but there's a lot of them that don't.” Staff7 added this perspective:

Probably strategic planning gets a bad rap, because you know how that goes, you're all busy. And then you're like, "What? I have to go to strategic planning meeting? I can't do that on top of the 300 things I need to do today.

Admin1 supported this belief and thoroughly expressed these impressions held about the planning process:

Well, strategic planning can be a dirty word. Let's just face it. I mean, people think, “Oh, we're going to go through this and nothing is going to ever happen. Or, like I said, it gets put on a shelf. Here's what we did. Here's the nice document that recorded what we did. Here's what the plan is and we'll pull it out in 5 to 8 years and we'll look and see how we did. And sometimes it's a painful process because people don't necessarily like to do strategic planning. There are those that do, but there's a lot that don't.

A few participants expressed no opinion or a neutral opinion on the subject. These opinions were often due to a lack of knowledge regarding what strategic planning precisely meant or what the process entailed. The term “nebulous” was used by one participant. Staff1 indicated that planning was something he never thought he would be asked to participate in due

to not being in a very high profile position on campus. Staff2 “guaranteed” not knowing what strategic planning meant, other than the “boss is calling a meeting” so everyone should plan on attending.

Some comments regarding the concept of strategic planning were more positive, including that strategic planning was a good thing for the organization to undergo. The positive comments indicated strategic planning was for the betterment of the institution or was important for reaching milestones such as building student enrollment. Faculty1 described a positive image of strategic planning, mentioning the importance of sharing ideas and coming up with common themes.

**Positive perceptions developed after participation in the LATI process.** As previously mentioned, each participant in the study had been involved in at least one cycle of the strategic planning process at LATI. The consistent theme that surfaced during the interviews was a favorable impression of how LATI conducts strategic planning and appreciation for the opportunity to be involved. Regardless of their opinions or attitudes about planning prior to involvement, most participants across all three employee categories reported positive feelings about the topic after going through the process.

Specifically, these comments expressed by many of the participants throughout the interviews included perceptions of having gained new knowledge, having felt they contributed to positive change for the college, and having been heard by the administration through their involvement in the process. The topic of being heard by the administration was the most prevalent comment from all three employee groups. Staff2 described it in these words, “The communication, or at least to being able to listen to the people and have some kind of influence on what your strategic plan is, I think is the key to making it successful. Certain phrases such as

“unique experience” were used by participants. For example, Faculty3 described the process as valuable and on the pride felt from influencing the direction of the school because ideas expressed during the meeting help set the direction of the campus.

The LATI strategic planning process was identified by several individuals as having led to positive change throughout the campus. This positive change has had an impact on students, employees, academic programs, business and industry engagement, and campus facilities. Staff1 mentioned how through involvement in the process, it became clear how much the planning efforts impact every individual’s work on campus. Admin6 shared:

I think it’s been a positive. Before, we were basically just an institution taking care of the needs of students. But I think now it has evolved and grown to what gives us an idea, gives us a roadmap, and what we need to do. It’s always changing, but it’s always a positive to see what’s going on. And it keeps everybody else involved too.

Most of the participants also expressed praise for the administration’s commitment to listening to the ideas and valuing the opinions of those individuals in the room during the strategic planning session. The valuing of ideas was expressed as one of the key reasons for their positive feelings towards the process. Staff3 discussed how the initial perception was that the administration was just trying to be nice by extending an invite to the session. This individual discovered, as the process went on, that “No, they’re actually listening to you.” Faculty3 added, “I believe our administration values our input and I’m always appreciative of being on it [the strategic planning committee].” This topic of valuing input is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

A small number of participants from the faculty and staff groups indicated a negative feeling towards the process related to the time commitment needed to participate as opposed to the impact of the process itself on the college. Those participants discussed how busy they are in their day-to-day work and the struggle to give something up in order to be involved. Faculty3

mentioned when you give up a full day on campus, you think, “Oh my gosh, this is really putting me behind.” These perceptions, however, did not overshadow the idea that going through the process was important to those participants. Faculty3 then added, “But no, I believe our administration values our input and I’m always appreciative of being on it.”

**The impact of positive culture on LATI’s successes.** Throughout the interviews, the topic of the institution’s culture was discussed at length by many participants. Many interviewees, including members of the faculty, staff, and administration groups, talked with passion about how strong the culture is throughout the college and how important that culture is to the employees. Participants explained how this positive culture has had a significant impact on the success the institution has experienced over the years. Furthermore, the culture was credited for making LATI such a great place to work and a reason why employees enjoy coming to work and want to be involved on campus. Staff1 shared this about the college’s culture:

You know that's one reason (culture) this place is awesome to work for. It's not, they're up here (administration) and we're down here, or whatever. I feel like it's very much a family where we all realize how important this person is versus this person and what they do.

Staff2 described the LATI culture this way:

Well, we have a direction. I think everybody has one here. Regardless of the strategic planning, we have a culture. The culture here is amazing. The strategic plan always has part of the culture in it; to maintain it and improve it.

Faculty1 described the close-knit culture felt on campus:

We kind of have our own little families here. I go home to my kids and that’s my home family. But my work family is people from all over campus that know about our class lives and things that are going on with our home families and such.

This culture is not easily maintained, however, and almost every interviewee discussed how difficult it has been to continue fostering the family-like feel as the college has grown. With significant enrollment growth over the past 13 years, the college has needed to expand faculty

and support staff, as well as to increase facilities to meet the needs of the students. This growth has brought about challenges which have been felt by the employees. Faculty3 described this challenge:

I think what has happened is we've grown and when you grow, that makes it harder to keep some things that I think keeps unity, keeps communication solid. Keeps everybody involved. We used to be one main building and 80 faculty and now we're about four buildings and 220 faculty—you lose something.

The challenge to maintaining this strong culture has not gone unnoticed by the institution's leadership. The topic has been included as a point of emphasis each year in the strategic planning document. The administration acknowledged this challenge throughout the interviews and responded by proactively attempting to address concerns within the campus in various ways in the attempt to avoid losing something that has become so special to the college. Some examples noted included focused communication and activities during the tech team meetings.

**Linking data to the proposition.** The interviews found mixed opinions regarding employee perceptions of strategic planning prior to becoming involved with the process at LATI. While there were some positive and neutral comments heard, many of those interviewed expressed a negative perception of strategic planning before becoming involved in the process themselves. This finding is consistent with the literature (Rowley et al., 1997; Sevier, 2003). There was not one specific reason for the negative perceptions, rather the comments ranged from viewing strategic planning not being a worthwhile investment of time to not understanding how they could be an impactful part of the process because of their job responsibilities or experiences. These perceptions were altered to positive views by almost every participant following involvement with the LATI process. These perceptions are consistent with the literature (Young & Baker, 2016). I believe that the positive perceptions expressed by those interviewed had a

direct correlation to the willingness to be participate in the strategic planning process and contribute with positivity. Participants shared they enjoyed the process and felt they had contributed to the successes experienced by the college. These positive perspectives were a result of gaining new knowledge, contributing towards the future direction of the college, and the openness felt when expressing ideas and opinions.

The perception of a strong, positive culture within the college was expressed frequently during the interviews. Participant views centered on LATI creating a family-like feel on campus, which contributes to the college being a great place to work. This finding of this strong culture indicated to me that the strategic planning process benefitted because employees felt heard throughout the process and felt their input was ultimately considered by the administration for incorporation into the plan. With that said, it has become challenging for the college to maintain that culture with significant growth in students, employees, and additional facilities, which have physically separated staff. The LATI administration is proactively attempting to maintain the culture that has existed. This finding is consistent with what Harvey (2017) identified in the literature as a need to manage culture. Participants also felt extreme pride in winning the 2017 Aspen Prize.

## **Theme 2: Employee Participation in the Strategic Planning Process**

Employee participation in the strategic planning process was the second proposition developed for this research. During the interviews, participants described how employees were involved in the LATI process and how that participation impacted the overall process.

**Creating engagement in the process by involving employees and external stakeholders.** Employee and external stakeholder input was highlighted throughout the interviews as key to the success of the LATI strategic planning process—“Its faculty, staff, and



industry people divided equally. It's everybody working together" (Staff7). Respondents reacted very positively to the focus placed on involvement in the process from a wide array of key stakeholders. The involvement of community members and partners such as advisory board members, school board members, and industry partners was critical in guiding the future of the college. These external partners bring a perspective to the planning process regarding what the community needs from the institution and their graduates. Admin1 mentioned, "We always involve key players, the people that can help us the most. Industry people, school board members, and others." The impact of business and industry partners and how they shape the strategic plan is discussed later in the chapter.

Additionally, interviewees emphasized involvement from a variety of employees from various classifications (staff, faculty, and administration) as extremely important in the process and the ultimate success of the plan. Words such as "cross-representational" and "cross-functional" were used to describe this inclusiveness. Admin9 described the widespread involvement of employees, stating, "I think the biggest thing that I can see is that they try to involve all the stakeholders as much as they can so that you get a good cross-representation." This notion was supported by Admin3, who stated, "I think everybody here is engaged in it, whether they feel they are or not. I think all staff hopefully should feel that they're part of the process." The number of employees involved each year seems to vary, but those interviewed felt it was an adequate number and provided sufficient representation for each of the employee classifications.

Even more important than just having employees present at the meetings, respondents made reference to the impact that employees have during the meetings. Many of those interviewed, including representation from all three employee groups, conveyed that every

participant was allowed significant input during the meetings, which created “buy-in” and “engagement” from employees in the process. Furthermore, interviewees expressed that college leadership was open to ideas and valued the input of their employees in shaping the plan.

Faculty7 expressed the notion this way:

I know I feel like I can have an impact. That I do have a voice, and it doesn't feel like there's so many channels and it has to go through all these committees and legislation, and whatever else. And so yeah, I like that we can decide like, Oh, we think this is a good idea. And the faculty actually have an impact on it (the strategic plan).

Staff2 said this about having various stakeholders involved in the process:

I guess, I'll go back to just saying that not the more voices you have, but a variety of voices that you have, and actually listening to them, I think is the thing that's going to make it more successful.

Admin2, on the selection of employees from the various classifications for the strategic planning process, stated:

He [President Cartney] does a very good job of randomly selecting employees. Obviously all the administrators are put into the team, and then he invites certain key partners. He invites faculty and staff and everyone gets their voices heard one way or another. And there's a good selection of participants. Usually there is one out of every program, a couple out of every division.

These positive responses were consistent throughout the process. There was one rival explanation to this theme, however. Staff4 felt that for the most part, the selection of those involved in the process was driven by the titles of the individuals. Furthermore, this individual expressed that the process has begun to be opened up to more mid-level employees, most of the meetings are held behind closed doors, and there should be more input from others than the top administration on campus. The perspective expressed by this individual was not consistent with the other interviews.

**Being responsive to industry partner needs is critical.** It was evident through the interviews that LATI is serious about involving business and industry partners in the strategic

planning development process. Representatives from all three employee groups consistently expressed an understanding and appreciation of the value that inclusion of these partners brought to the process. Staff7, on the relevance of including those industry partners, stated, “I think, again, just because we’re so industry focused, I do think that their opinions are exactly the way we want to look at it.” Faculty and staff shared that a key to the success of the LATI planning process was not only the participation of business and industry partners in the conversation, but truly implementing change to meet the demands of these important stakeholders. Most participants emphasized the need to adapt curriculum and academic programs to prepare LATI graduates for the employment needs of their partners. Several participants’ comments indicated that if LATI students were not employed or ready for the workforce after graduation, then the institution was not doing its job or meeting its mission. Faculty5 stated:

It’s an educational–industry partnership. I mean, we’re in this together. So that’s a huge part of what we are. We can say that with confidence. I think it all goes back to, what’s our focus here? Our focus is to partner with industry and supply them a workforce. That’s our focus.

Faculty were very much supportive of the need to listen and make adjustments to their programs based on feedback from these partners. Continuing to keep up with the demand of employees in a particular field as well as to adjust to new trends were noted. Faculty6 described the importance of involving business and industry partners in the planning process:

There’s definite value there simply because they are the consumers of our products. And anytime you can get feedback from them about what’s changing, what they see in the students that they’ve been getting as employees. Anytime that you can get that from them, it’s going to be valuable information.

**The value of stakeholder input in the process.** As mentioned previously, participants spoke favorably when describing the process and the role employees have in the annual strategic planning process. Of all topics discussed, no other was met with the same enthusiasm than this topic. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the value of helping to shape the

direction of the college, and knowing they were allowed to be candid and share their opinion on any topic that arises—“They listen to us. And if we want to try to do something, they definitely listen to our ideas” (Faculty5). Admin5 also described the sharing of ideas:

I think it’s a lot of open dialogue. It’s brainstorming, it’s connecting with people that you typically don’t have a seat at the table with. And everybody brings their expertise or their knowledge, their experiences. By the end of the day, we all feel really accomplished.

Each table in the room consists of a cross-representational group of employees and external stakeholders to ensure a well-rounded perspective on each topic. The topics for discussion are predetermined by the administration prior to the event, and once the topic is introduced to the full group, everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.

The general format has been for each group to come up with different options or perspectives on how to address the issue at hand. The strategic planning sessions were described as being very active and participatory as opposed to sitting and listening. The terms “brainstorming” and “sharing ideas” were heard frequently during the interviews. Those involved in the process felt comfortable sharing any thoughts or ideas that came to mind, and no ideas were “bad” ideas. The overall consensus of participants was that all ideas are valued, even if an individual does not work in a particular area or have background knowledge on the topic. Admin7 discussed how he had never felt worried about speaking up or giving an opinion on any specific topic. Admin9 described his thoughts about the process:

But in those meetings, one of the really good things about this place and the way we do things, it doesn’t matter what topic we’re on. If it has nothing to do with me, if we’re talking about the student side or the instructional side of what we do here on campus, our opinions are always good, and they’re always sought.

The next step is for the small groups to share their ideas with the full group of planning participants. This step happens in different ways, but was described as another brainstorming event where each group shares the best ideas generated through their conversations. This

generally happens by groups verbally sharing ideas or writing those ideas on post-its or large sheets of paper hanging on the walls. Participants mentioned that oftentimes those initial thoughts spark other ideas from the full group that end up making it into the final strategic plan.

Admin3 stated:

I think it's a very thorough process. Mike [President Cartney] always says there is no idea we can't throw at the wall. If it's something we deem later isn't something that we can do, then it will get crossed off the list. But everything gets looked at. We definitely look at the financial implications, staff involvement, and just, is this actually possible that we can do.

**Linking data to the proposition.** Those interviewed consistently expressed positive feelings towards the planning process because of the administration's willingness to involve employees in the process. This finding was consistent with the literature (Delprino, 2013) and I believe to be a significant factor in the success of the LATI process. It was noted throughout the interviews that a cross-representational selection of employees including faculty, staff, and administration are included. This inclusion allows for a variety of perspectives to be shared and included in the final planning document and is consistent with Lovik (2014). This inclusion provides for a strategic plan that best meets the needs of the entire college and not just certain areas or departments.

In building upon the cross-representational participation in the process, the majority of interviewees expressed that even more importantly, their ideas are listened to and valued by the administration. This concept was identified as critical to the process by Hines (2011). Employees keep very busy work schedules and want to know that their participation in the process is valued and worthy of their time commitment. Furthermore, when the administration values the input, I believe a sense of involvement and buy-in to the process are created, which carries through to the implementation phases.

While this proposition focused on employee participation in the process, the interviews established the importance of including external partners in the process to ensure success. These partners include business and industry partners, K–12 district leaders, and local officials. The perspectives of the external stakeholders are valued by the institution and critical to the development of the strategic plan. The institution is open to making changes suggested by the external partners to meet the needs of the industry and the rest of the community. Preparing graduates for success in the workforce is always top of mind for the entire college.

### **Theme 3: Implementing the Strategic Plan**

The challenge of implementing the strategic plan was developed as the third proposition for this research. During the interviews, participants described the steps taken by the college to ensure the initiatives created within the strategic plan are carried out successfully.

**Ensuring implementation of the strategic plan.** Participants discussed how implementation occurs at LATI and how implementation is a factor in the success of strategic planning in the institution. It was apparent from their responses that, in their view, the college follows through with implementing the plan after development. In fact, not only are initiatives implemented, one challenge brought up by some participants was how difficult it is to decide which initiatives to eliminate given the availability of sufficient personnel and financial resources. Faculty2 described the challenge of narrowing down initiatives: “Once we have a list of things to do, new ideas are developed from that. When we start thinking about it, we have to think about it for the next year.” These comments centered on the importance of looking forward to the future and adapting as needed. The plan is not developed to be “put on the shelf,” but to be kept in the forefront of the college. Admin2, on the implementation of the plan, stated, “it just doesn’t end when planning ends, that’s when the work begins.” During the interviews, several

factors were continually mentioned that help to keep the plan moving forward. These included using an annual process, identifying individuals or teams responsible for each initiative, communicating the strategic plan, and continually assessing the process of the plan, as described below.

**Conducting the strategic planning process annually.** When discussing how the implementation of the strategic plan works at LATI, participants emphasized that the institution goes through the process on an annual basis. This theme was heard in each of the three employee groups, but was most evident in the administration group. LATI has developed long-range goals, such as three to five year goals, though the institution is guided by the yearly process of goal and initiative development. Admin9 stressed the annual process is designed to create the “building blocks” for the three to five year plans so that they all work in concert with each other. The strategic planning committee, which is comprised of a cross-representational mix of administrators, staff, and faculty, creates an annual strategic plan each year. The committee meets with business and industry, K–12 school district, and other partners from the region in a half-day session to create the framework for the annual plan.

Many of those interviewed in each of the three employee categories stressed that the annual process is a component of the overall success of the strategic plan for several reasons. A significant emphasis was placed on the notion that meeting industry needs, as discussed previously, is a critical part of the LATI mission. In today’s competitive environment, industry needs are constantly changing and many of the respondents felt the need to have a constant pulse on these needs and adapt quickly. The annual process provides the opportunity for the institution to hear directly from industry partners about immediate needs and how to address those needs.

This communication between the college and its partners provides for a stronger connection, which benefits the community and the region.

Another strength of the annual process discussed by many participants included keeping strategic planning in the forefront of everyone's minds and focusing on continually improving the institution. This is imperative to ensure completion of projects and to avoid dropping or forgetting priorities. Admin8 described the advantage of the annual process:

A continuous process rather than the old 5 years at a time and throw it up on a shelf. That's something we had done in the military, was this continuous planning process. We have a one-year plan for what we're doing. Because it's a bitable chunk, because our world is very dynamic. We have to keep up with industry.

Despite the positive comments made regarding the benefits of the annual process for the college, challenges were also noted. The main challenge discussed was that the process is time consuming. These concerns stemmed from the day-to-day workload of the organization and its employees. Those who shared such thoughts conveyed that the process is not a bad process, rather it is challenging because of large workloads in which they struggle to find time to complete everything. Admin9 stated:

Well the strengths I believe is it keeps it fresh in people's minds. Probably some of the downfall is people are like, "here we go again." But your goal is to always get better, make sure you're staying on track, and make sure everybody's voice is being heard. Those things are consistent from year to year.

**Utilizing committees and teams to implement the strategic plan.** It was apparent throughout the interviews that a key component of the successful strategic plan implementation for LATI is the use of committees to implement each initiative, with an individual assigned to be the lead of that committee. This part of the process begins with the administration appointing the lead or point person, timelines for starting and completing the project, resources needed, and measures of success (the latter of which is discussed later under the assessment theme).



The lead or point person is typically an employee whose job responsibility is directly related to or impacted by the initiative. The leader is then allowed to put together a committee to assist with the work needed to make the initiative become a reality. Depending on the initiative, the group could be an already-formed campus committee or department with responsibility over that particular item. Other times, the lead individual can create a committee made up of a cross-represented group from across campus who brings different insights to the project. Staff6 described this committee formation:

We just have a lot of different people involved. Like a cosmetology instructor and a database manager. People that you would not usually have together. And we all bring something different to the table.

Once the committee is created, the group maintains autonomy in doing the work to make the initiative a reality. Many of those interviewed had served on these committees, and expressed satisfaction with their role and freedom to do their work. Faculty5 mentioned, “Everybody basically had a task to do. So they really weren’t depending on anybody, or any one person, to do a big major task.” While each committee functions a little differently, participants noted it is common for projects to start with brainstorming sessions to generate a wide range of ideas from individuals with different perspectives. It was further noted individuals have the ability to be creative and provide input into the process.

While having this autonomy, a couple participants noted that they felt comfortable because they continued to receive support from the administration as needed. Admin1 noted because LATI employees wear so many hats, each department’s work is integrated. This helps to provide additional support committees may need with their work. Faculty4 described this process:

The chair is usually trying to get the ideas down, and work it in a way that it is a possibility moving forward to try and gain that initiative or achieve it. It’s usually brainstorming again with a cross section of people. Usually, they will come up with a lot

of creative ideas. The chair had to submit it and make sure the committee agreed with what was being submitted. It was up to the committee to figure it out and get the work done on their own.

The committee structure for implementing initiatives appeared to be very popular among the participants across all three employee classifications. There was, however, one isolated dissenting or rival comment. Staff4 mentioned the composition of the teams and committees is often made up of the same selected people. Staff4 went on to state there is often a lack of action when it comes to the initiatives and results are not noticed.

**Communication of the strategic plan to stakeholders.** The topic of communication elicited a significant response from the participants. Many of the comments regarded communication from the president and administration as positive, particularly information shared with the campus once the plan was developed and implemented. There was one area of communication participants felt needed improvement, which was the need for more continual updates on the plan once implementation had begun.

Specifically, participants appreciated how communication of the strategic plan happens through multiple methods. The methods of communication included tech team meetings, email updates from the president and vice president, academic department meetings, and the dashboards contained in the college portal. While many employees attend the tech team meetings, interviewees noted that when they were unable to attend, they liked to read brief email updates they missed. It was noted that some employees like to take more time reading through the dashboards and drilling further down into the details. Others mentioned not having the time or interest in digging into the dashboards and preferred the brief overview given during the tech team meetings or email updates. Faculty6 described such communication, stating, “I think they do communicate it out, whether it’s in a dashboard to let everybody know, or they disseminate it out to people in the tech team meetings or emails or whatever.”

The most popular method of communication appeared to be the tech team meeting. In almost every interview conducted, the tech team meeting was mentioned immediately when the topic of communication was discussed. The leadership team utilizes these sessions, which are a monthly gathering open to the campus community, to share college-wide relevant information to all employees in one setting. The meeting is held at the end of the day when classes are finished, which allows for most employees to attend. The main purpose is to update the campus community on the major happenings and projects on campus. Faculty and staff may ask questions and provide input on the various issues discussed. Many comments reflected employees felt comfortable sharing opinions with the administration team during these meetings. Staff7 described the communication at the tech team meetings:

I think for the most part the big picture items are communicated. There's not one staff member who wouldn't know that it's going to take \$3.1 million for us to build a new healthcare facility and how that's going to look in timeframes. It's talked about at every single tech team meeting.

Admin9 also mentioned the relevance of the tech team meeting and how the strategic plan is communicated:

We also have what we call tech team meetings. If there's, you know, some of the smaller details, not everybody on campus probably needs to know what's going on. I mean they will get that through an email, but if there's something really important, within the strategic plan that everybody needs to stay up on.

Many participants noted the email communication from the president and other members of the administration as a way to learn more details about the strategic plan. They described valuing the emails because information can be shared in a more timely fashion and they ensure more ongoing communication as opposed to relying on the monthly tech team meeting as the sole method. The email updates provide more in-depth information and often refer readers to the dashboards as well as further details if employees want to learn about the strategic plan progress.

Some participants noted this was not necessarily something they wanted to spend a lot of time on, but it was available for those interested. Admin6 stated:

It comes out in an email so that all staff and everybody can actually sit down and focus on it and read it, and basically just absorb it to see what's happening. I think most of the people will agree on how the matrix is laid out and where we are with everything.

Another popular method of communication happens through department leaders sharing strategic planning information with their constituents. While there was not one formal method for ensuring this happens or tracking these conversations, it is common and part of the institutional culture for department leaders throughout the campus to take this on as a responsibility. Participants mentioned this is valuable because often the entire strategic plan does not affect their day-to-day work, but being able to discuss relevant topics with colleagues in their department meetings is beneficial. Admin1 described the process:

The department heads usually talk to their people. Some departments are made up of one or two faculty and some have as many as 12 or 14. In that way, I think there's good communication there and nothing is a surprise.

Lake Area Tech also uses dashboards, which are contained in the college's portal, as a communication method of the strategic plan. The relationship of the dashboards as an assessment tool is discussed later in this chapter, though here it is useful to note several participants described the importance of the dashboards in helping them stay informed on strategic planning efforts. As noted earlier, not all employees use the dashboards for this reason, but it is beneficial for those who want more detailed information particularly about their department. Faculty2 mentioned making the dashboards available online came out of a suggestion a few years ago to help employees stay informed. At that time, the plan was only made available through paper copies. The online version of the dashboards helped to update progress of the plan. Admin5 described the relevance of the online dashboards:

Everything is available to our staff through the portal. We have an assessment tab and you can download the previous strategic plans. You can download program dashboards. You can download the institutional dashboard, all the state reports we do, and it is accessible to all faculty, staff, and whoever needs it.

**Improving communication of the plan during implementation.** While there were many positive responses to the communication of the strategic plan, particularly as the plan is unveiled to the campus community, a number of participants described a rival perspective. A couple of administrators and faculty expressed this concern, but this perspective was specifically heard by many staff members. The concern focused on the need to improve communication as the initiatives progressed, including when a change of direction happens or upon the completion of an initiative. These comments about communication improvements were more prevalent among the staff group compared to administration and faculty.

The members of the staff group who shared this concern felt they were not always informed about progress on individual initiatives or when adjustments were being made to the strategic plan mid-cycle. Staff1 mentioned, “Just the overall progress of the strategic plan. How things are happening. I think maybe it could be just a little bit better.” Some respondents felt waiting until a project was completed or until the next tech team meeting is not be soon enough for individuals or departments that may be impacted by the results. Some participants viewed this gap in communication as partly due to the growth of the college and the increased number of employees, as it is difficult to stay connected as the campus grows and employees do not see each other as frequently. Other comments included that the tech team meetings gave high level details, though there is not currently a method to learn about challenges to initiatives as they are occurring. Staff2 stated:

I would say it's adequate if we have another [meeting] to keep the communication going and to be informative to where we're at with each one of our initiatives and goals. I guess just meeting to say, “Okay, this is where they're at kind of thing.” Just to get in the room and visit about it rather than, “okay, this is the report coming out.”

**The importance of assessing the strategic plan initiatives.** An important component in the ultimate success of the LATI strategic plan is the continuous monitoring and reviewing of the initiatives and the progress being made on each task. Participants identified several steps used in the assessment process. These steps included identifying the point person responsible for the task and developing measurements of success, resources or budgets, and expected completion dates. The primary method for tying these pieces together and the overall major tool for assessing progress and success is the quarterly dashboard.

The strategic planning dashboard was previously mentioned as one of the methods for communicating to the campus community. Throughout the interviews, the dashboard was also identified as the primary component of the assessment process. Participants elaborated on how the dashboard indicates the lead staff on each initiative, the anticipated completion date, and progress made on the initiative to date. Staff7 said, “at least the person in charge of coming back with that plan was always identified. And then that success is monitored along the way. It [the dashboard] is pretty extensive.” The dashboard is then reviewed frequently during weekly cabinet meetings with the administration team. These discussions help to keep the plan at the forefront of everyone’s minds. Admin8 stated:

So the dashboard is really your assessment of how you’re doing. It’s color coded, are you doing—whether you’re performing above your goals, at your goals, below your goals or is there some kind of things to watch out.

The leader or chairperson assists with development and implementation, as described earlier. The lead person, however, is responsible for tracking the progress and reporting back to the cabinet with updates. Admin3 gave the example of how the recruitment of minority students fell to the director of student services, with a list of staff who could be called upon to assist as the subcommittee.

Reporting back to the cabinet was highlighted as one method to stay on track with work. Admin1 mentioned the cabinet meets weekly and there are occasions when the group assesses the progress of initiatives. Additionally, the president occasionally sends out reminders asking staff about the progress made on strategic plan items so everyone is updated. Admin2 discussed the work on articulation agreements with other institutions and how it was assigned to the registrar's office and academics office to coordinate. They used a team to help with the outreach, reporting back to someone within each of those offices.

Setting timelines and anticipated completion dates is a part of every initiative and a key component of assessment. Although completion dates are a part of the plan, there is flexibility given to the subcommittee when needed to adjust for heavy workloads or certain busy times of the year, such as the start of the semester. These completion dates are tracked in the quarterly dashboard and reviewed occasionally by the administrative team during their weekly meetings to make sure progress is on track. Admin9 noted though there are dates attached to help keep track and hold people's "feet to the fire," sometimes the mark is missed. As long as progress is being made and the work is being covered, the college's leadership team is open to adjustments when requested by the project lead.

**Connecting the Aspen Prize feedback to strategic planning.** Participants discussed the excitement and positive vibes felt when LATI earned the Aspen Prize in 2017, as well as "Finalist with Distinction" in the previous three Aspen Prize cycles. Employees noted that a great deal of effort and additional work went into collecting data and applying for the award each year. Several respondents mentioned the extensive efforts that went into preparing the application each year. Staff6 mentioned, "I think we had to dedicate a lot more time to the Aspen award." A common theme throughout the interviews was how worthwhile all of the work was

when the college reached their goal of winning the top award. Having finished as “Finalist with Distinction” in the prior Aspen Prize cycles, the participants described the great feeling of pride in finally reaching the top. Faculty7 described the impact of winning the Aspen Prize:

I really think it’s brought a big sense of pride to the school. I think that makes us all want to stay on top of our game even more. I also think it’s brought a lot of notoriety here. I mean Obama came, and not only that, but other schools have come. We’ve had nursing programs come too and want to talk to us about what we do because obviously we’re doing something right.

The success of being named the top two-year college in the nation brought unprecedented attention to the college and the work done on campus. Participants recognized the notoriety and exposure that came with the college’s achievements. Staff2 mentioned, “We say we are the best. We tell our faculty and students that all the time.” The spotlight on LATI brought higher education professionals throughout the country and even beyond the United States to look into the success of the campus.

Most participants through all three employee categories agreed that going through the Aspen Prize application process was a valuable learning experience for the institution. Those interviewed perceived that feedback received from the Aspen reviewers was beneficial and helped LATI strengthen some areas where improvement was needed. There were key elements of feedback from the Aspen Prize process that trickled down into the strategic plan. Admin9, on the feedback received from the Aspen Prize reviewers and how it impacted decision-making processes for the institution, stated, “Well, the thing about Aspen is, they brought questions to the table that maybe we hadn’t thought of. And we were able to—it helped us focus on some areas. It made us think outside the box.”

While the Aspen Prize process was identified as positive, neither the Aspen application process nor the feedback became a significant influencer on the strategic planning process or to determine the overall direction of the college. While the participants expressed the positive



feelings and impact that Aspen Prize recognition has brought to the campus, there were very strong sentiments from many participants that the goal was never to tailor the day-to-day work of the campus in order to win the award. The institution took feedback from the Aspen reviewers and made adjustments when the data suggested to improve processes. Admin2 described the Aspen impact: “It was never the intent to win Aspen. It was just the intent to make sure Lake Area Tech’s doing the best we can, and then everything else just kind of followed with it.”

One example of how the Aspen Prize feedback assisted in the strategic planning process was the need to enhance diversity efforts on campus. There was an overwhelming response from interviewees that the Aspen Prize reviewers pointed to the lack of diversity and services to assist diverse students, and the college responded to meet this need. LATI realized from the first Aspen Prize assessment there was a gap in student diversity both in terms of number of students and the success rates of those students in the eyes of the Aspen reviewers. LATI responded to that input and made a focused effort to improve results in this area.

Through the strategic planning process, different initiatives were identified to address diversity on campus. As with other strategic planning initiatives, a committee was created to look into solutions for this challenge. One big step was for LATI to hire a full-time diversity liaison to help recruit underrepresented student populations and more low-income students to the college. The work did not stop at the recruitment of these students, however, as the campus worked on improving retention of these students by identifying resources needed to help them be successful in their courses. While the Aspen feedback was helpful to the college in discovering areas for improvement, participants never felt the process was about winning the award as the end goal. The importance of applying for the Aspen and going through the process was more about learning from external observers what is working well and also what can be done better.

**Linking data to the proposition.** The majority of those interviewed described implementation as extremely important and thought out during the planning process. Several steps were consistently described through the interviews that ensure LATI is successful in implementing their strategic plan. Conducting an annual process was a major step described as it keeps strategic planning at the forefront throughout the campus. This constant attention prevents projects from falling behind or being forgotten as other day-to-day priorities consume employees. This annual process also allows the campus to stay in touch with the changes happening with business and industry partners in the region and allows for quick adaptation to new challenges and the needs of external partners. I believe this is a concept unique to LATI and a key factor in the overall success of the strategic planning process.

A second important component addressed that leads to successful implementation is defining a point person and creating teams to help carry out each of the initiatives. This is consistent with the literature (Paris, 2004; Gorman, 2016). Identifying a lead person creates ownership and designates who is responsible for making sure progress is tracked and reported back to the campus. While this individual receives assistance from a team or committee, this person takes the lead and works closely with the administration when further assistance is needed for such things as new resources.

The participants discussed the importance of communication during the process at great length. There were positive comments about certain portions of communication from the administration. These comments included the communication prior to and immediately following the development of the strategic plan. Communication at this point in the process happens through regularly held campus meetings, such as the tech team meeting, as well as emails, department meetings, and dashboards. Each of these methods has advantages. Some methods,

such as tech team meetings and dashboards, have the ability to communicate more detailed information. Other methods, such as email communication, are timelier, but do not always have extensive details included. Overall, the availability of multiple communication methods meets the needs of stakeholders who have different preferences for receiving information. Lovik (2014) identified the importance of using multiple methods of communication to the campus community. Participants discussed the need for additional communications throughout the year after the plan is introduced to the campus. Some employees were not aware of progress being made on individual initiatives or when the direction of a project was changed or removed from the plan.

From the interview data, I believe assessment of the plan is a primary component for implementation of the strategic plan. This included identifying the individual responsible for leading the project and reporting progress and challenges back to the college leadership team. The assessment involves regularly reporting on initiatives to the president's cabinet and updating the dashboards on a quarterly basis, which is consistent with Lovik (2014). This reporting ensures those responsible continue to make progress towards completion and projects do not fall behind or get lost.

While the participants expressed the positive feelings and impact that Aspen Prize recognition has brought to the campus, there were very strong sentiments from many participants that the goal was never to tailor the day-to-day work of the campus in order to win the award. The institution took feedback from the Aspen reviewers and made adjustments when the data suggested to improve processes which supplemented the strategic plan. Many of those interviewed provided the perspective that LATI was already doing many of the great things they were recognized for by the Aspen Award when they initially applied in 2011, including having

impressive student retention and job placement numbers and strong ties with business and industry. It was said numerous times that the institution did not change the foundation of their work to win the award.

#### **Theme 4: Linking Budgets and Resources to Support the Strategic Plan**

Linking the strategic plan to the budgeting process was developed as the fourth proposition for the research. Participants described their perspectives on how budget and resources are identified and allocated for strategic planning initiatives to ensure their successful implementation.

**Initial budget and resource allocation to the strategic plan.** Throughout the interview process, no one formal method for resource allocation was identified, however several separate processes were noted that occur at different times throughout the year. Some participants had in-depth knowledge about these processes because of their job responsibilities or positions in the institution, while others only understood the budget process vaguely and knew of some aspects, but not necessarily all options available when seeking resources. For example, Admin7 noted:

I don't know that there has been any specific thing that I can think of that I could tie to a budget line item anywhere, or that we've ever set up an initiative that I can think of that says, "Okay, here is what you've got to spend and go make this happen."

Overall, it was evident there are built-in processes that address resource needs, and participants felt they could successfully implement initiatives that were part of their responsibility. Interviewees discussed their experiences with these processes and how they impact their work with the strategic plan. The various processes for resource attainment to implement strategic plan initiatives are described in the following paragraphs and next section.

The first step identified in resource allocation occurs when the leadership team meets to create the final strategic plan. In this phase, the leadership team sets priorities based on what priorities were identified in the strategic planning session and how those priorities align with the

KPIs already established. As these priorities are developed, the administration team works closely with the institution's budget committee to determine what resources are currently available and can be immediately allocated to support the plan. As part of this process, the LATI leadership explores other possible alternatives to fund projects beyond the institution's operating budget. Admin9 described this portion of the process:

At the budget committee meeting, they will look at the plan and they will try to marry up and say, "Hey, we got this in the budget." If not, is this something that needs to be done this year? We may not have the money to do it, so if we don't, can it wait? If not, where do we find the resources for it? Do we need to go outside and ask some of our partners and those types of things?

The second process for resource allocation occurs during the annual budgeting process, which begins a few months after the strategic plan is rolled out. This prioritization includes requests for additional funds to address projects directly related to the department that were created through the strategic planning process, and how those priorities fit with the other needs of the department. When strategic planning initiatives fall to those departments, the departments first look to see if their normal operating budget can absorb the costs associated with the strategic plan initiative. It was noted that many strategic planning projects are low cost and implementing these projects with no additional funds is possible. For example, a small group of staff and administrators worked on developing new campus policies to address communicable diseases when there was an outbreak scare. While the outbreak did not impact the campus, the level of concern was high enough to rise to needing attention through the strategic plan. The initiative resulted in a significant amount of staff time researching the problem and then follow up communication to the campus, but no additional funding was required.

There are times when the annual budget process results in additional allocations to departments to meet these needs. Other times, the budget process does not result in providing the necessary funds to assist with these projects and the individual department budget managers are

asked to be creative in finding alternative resources to ensure implementation. When this happens, employees work together to try and solve the issue. For example a particular interdepartmental project that was identified from the strategic plan with no allocated dollars to begin. Several departments needed an expensive piece of technology for cross-department research and development. The department chairs felt strongly that if the identified project worked, it would improve learning outcomes for students in each department, however there was no money earmarked at the institutional level for the project. The faculty felt strongly they needed to find a way to fund at least a pilot to determine if the success of the project. Faculty<sup>2</sup> described that project this way:

So it wasn't in the fiscal year we were working on it. For this example, we were all trying to get it to work. Our department bought a little bit, this department helped buy a little bit, everybody just pitched in a little so we could prove it. And we proved it, it's working so everything is good. . . . If you can prove to the administration, with numbers, that it's to benefit the students, benefit programs, to help the school and industry, they're behind you 100%. And they might not have the money right at first, but they'll start helping us look. I think they are great about that.

**Identifying alternative funding and resource support for initiatives.** Although the strategic planning and budgeting processes may not always align, participants expressed confidence in their ability to seek support from the president and vice president of the college when needed to ensure they can accomplish their work. Two factors were identified that made participants feel at ease about budget constraints. First, the administration reviews the budget at two points during the fiscal year to make necessary adjustments as priorities shift. By allowing the budget to be amended twice annually, requests can be made and considered for unexpected items occurring during the year. At the same time, projects identified earlier in the year may no longer be viable, which frees up resources to be shifted elsewhere. The administration has the flexibility to shift resources to align with institutional priorities.

Participants also shared the notion that mid-year requests can be made for additional resources if data supports the request. The administration is willing to discuss budget challenges facing departments and assists in finding solutions. Interviewees mentioned the college leadership team are “number people” and willing to consider ideas supported by data. Faculty4 put it this way:

They [LATI administration] are very actively involved. Knowing Mike [President Cartney], if I were to say, “I got this idea,” I would have to send it to him, it would have to be broken down, itemized by time and money. . . . To prove my point, you have to get him the data.

Staff7 also mentioned the support from administration in accomplishing initiatives:

For the most part, even though I know my name was behind that, I would always know that I could go to Mike [President Cartney] or Diane [Vice President Stiles] and say, “here’s the dilemma with meeting this goal and I need this.” Or, “here’s going to be the obstacle to us meeting this.”

In some cases, an initiative may be too costly to implement at the time of planning, which then requires the college leadership to reprioritize. One example discussed in several interviews was building spaces, particularly classrooms and labs for programs that have significantly grown in enrollment. Admin2 described some of the challenging conversations that occur during the planning process:

Yeah, that’s probably the biggest hurdle is just the resources, especially when it comes to the great dollar. There might be some great ideas, but there’s not a million dollars laying around for us to implement it either, so we do what we can with the funds that we have. Sometimes we’re able to call up those key-impact partners for certain things to get some of that assistance. It kind of determines what’s all given and what we can honestly do.

While reviewing documents related to the strategic plan, it appeared that budget and resources needed for implementation are part of the development process of the college leadership team when finalizing and implementing the plan. The strategic plan documents reference the allocation of resources to the initiatives, as also noted in the associated dashboards. This is further discussed later in relation to the document analysis.

**Linking data to the proposition.** Linking budgets to the strategic plan was identified in Chapter Two as an important component of strategic plan development (Lepori et al., 2012; Varlotta, 2010). Throughout the interviews for this study, many participants were not aware of a formal, direct link between the strategic planning process and budget allocation. In some cases, individuals in an upper-level administrative role were more aware of these processes. This did not seem to be a concern, however, as many participants indicated there are other methods to obtain the resources needed to complete the assigned projects. I believe this finding of having a multi-faceted and ongoing resource allocation throughout the entire year is unique to LATI and a key finding of the research. It was noted by those involved directly with the strategic planning process that the administration works with the budget committee to prioritize initiatives and find available resources for high priority items in the plan. When resources are not readily available for certain projects, there are alternative methods to ensure implementation. These alternative methods include prioritizing department budgets and requesting funds during the annual budget process, which occurs after the completion of the strategic plan. In other situations, departments collaborate and share resources during implementation.

The college analyzes the entire budget at two different points throughout the fiscal year. Requests can be made to prioritize specific items mid-year. When available, funds can be reallocated to assist those items that are a high priority for the institution. A few of those interviewed expressed the importance of providing in-depth data to support these requests. While individuals mentioned certain ideas could not be included in the final strategic plan because of limited resources, no one indicated lacking the necessary resources to successfully complete an initiative assigned to them in the plan.



## **Summary**

The participants had a positive perspective regarding their experiences with the strategic planning process at LATI. The interviews revealed several factors the college utilizes that they believe lead to the success of strategic planning. Comments were supportive of the administration's willingness to include employee representation from throughout the campus as well as external stakeholders. Even more important than just asking for input, participants generally agreed that the administration listens to and implements the ideas shared by all stakeholders. When the strategic plan is finalized, steps are laid out to ensure the initiatives are actioned. Once implementation begins, the administration measures the progress and results, finding ways to provide resources when needed to those responsible for making the plan a reality. Staff2 provided context to the overall process utilized:

I really think that we do a very nice job. We look out for our students. We look out for the institution and we're successful at it. I don't know how I would say, "I think we should change this," or "I think we should do this differently." I think, they [the administration] do a nice job with it. The process is working.

## **Document Analysis**

The second phase of the data analysis was conducting a document analysis of relevant materials related to the LATI strategic planning process. The document analysis helped to provide more insight into the strategic planning process, confirmed information learned in the interviews, and determined if the information compiled in the documents is consistent with what the participants experienced during the planning process.

The first portion of the document analysis focuses on LATI's annual final strategic plan document. Five years of these planning documents (2012–2013 and 2015–2017) were reviewed, the time period of which coincided with the institution's Aspen Prize applications. The contents in each document, including the portions that have remained consistent or changed each year, are

described below. After reviewing the strategic plan documents, the next analysis included the quarterly dashboards used by college personnel to track progress and assess the strategic plan. An overview of the content of the dashboard and its impact on the overall success of the strategic plan process follows. Throughout the document analysis, references to interview data are provided related to information found in the documents. Following that analysis, a synthesis of the interview data and documents based on the propositions developed for the research is provided. This synthesis further confirms and disconfirms information discovered and triangulates the data.

### **LATI Strategic Plan Document**

The LATI administration produces the finalized strategic plan document each year prior to implementation. The institution's strategic plan documents for 5 years were analyzed (2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2017). A planning document for 2014 was not available due to the transition of college presidents that occurred that year. The first four strategic plans included (2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016) were each developed during the timeframe in which LATI was recognized as a "Finalist with Distinction" for the Aspen Prize. The 2017 strategic plan was completed during the year in which LATI was awarded the Aspen Prize.

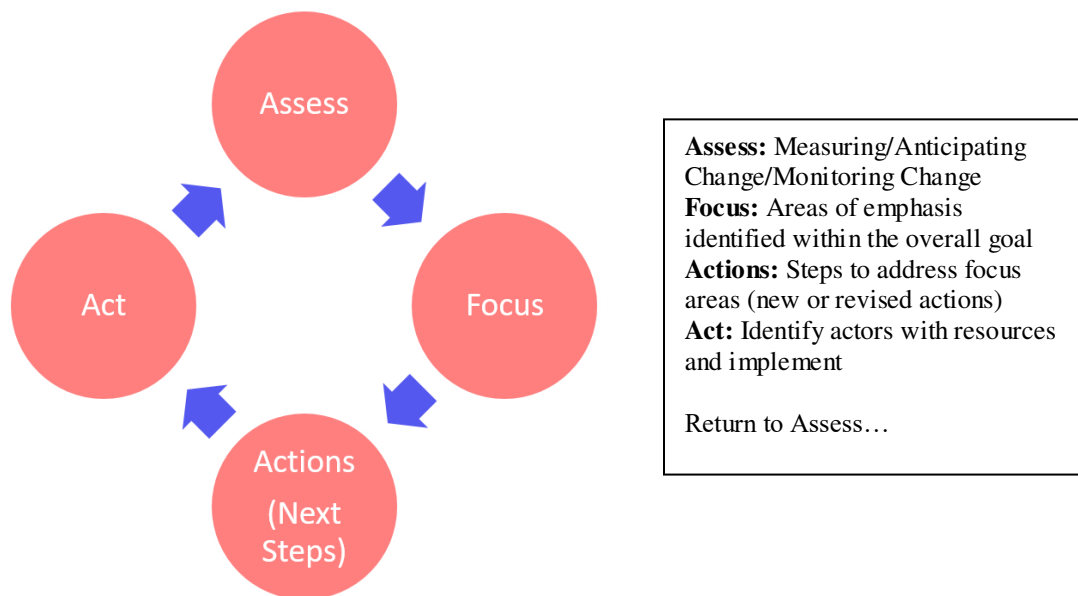
The documents were mostly consistent year to year, though some modest changes were made. The design and content have remained consistent, which was valuable when comparing the documents. The length and level of detail has increased, particularly beginning with the 2015 document. Below, the title for each of the sections in the strategic plan document are listed with brief descriptions of the relevant information from each section, along with supporting information from the interviews and direct observations where relevant.

**Quick recap: Paradigm shift.** Each year the strategic planning document opens with a “Quick Recap: Paradigm Shift” section to set the foundation regarding key thoughts and overarching principles of the strategic planning process. This section identifies several key points for readers to review before proceeding further into the document. The content has stayed consistent every year with only minor changes made to the wording. The concept of utilizing a continuous or annual process is described on this page and highlighted to provide emphasis. The opening section also contains the following key factors identified by the institution as important in the development of the plan each year:

- Centered around LATI’s Mission and Vision
- Based on LATI Critical Performance Indicators
- Proactive Aspect
- Assigning resources to priorities
- Enables flexibility/adaptability
- Promotes feedback and communications
- More responsive to “an ever-changing world”

**Long term target and direction.** The “Long Term Target and Direction” is a shorter section that contains LATI’s mission and vision statements. A highlighted statement is included reminding readers “Who we are” and guiding the rest of the strategic planning process. While the mission and vision statements were not mentioned often during the interviews, they were emphasized during the strategic planning session. During the half-day session, an entire activity was dedicated to identifying how closely LATI’s current work LATI aligns with the mission and vision of the institution. This was called the “Bullseye” exercise, and the results found LATI was very much on track in these areas, as further discussed below.

**The strategic planning cycle.** Each year, the document contains an overview of the four steps developed by the institution: Assess, Focus, Actions, and Act. These four steps operate cyclically and lay the foundation for how planning occurs on campus. This cycle has remained unchanged since 2012 and includes a graphic to illustrate the cycle, which is a core component of how the entire plan operates from start to finish (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* LATI strategic planning process cycle. This diagram of the LATI strategic planning cycle is included as part of the final strategic plan document. It provides a visual representation to participants on the process of implementing initiatives in the plan.

**Assess.** The Assessment section of the document is important in the implementation phase of the plan. This section gives the reader a global view of the entire plan from the past year, as well as how different projects will be evaluated for success moving forward. Each year, the Assessment section begins with the most recent quarterly dashboard from the prior year to provide an overview of the progress made in the previous year. The dashboard is provided on the initial page, however the assessment goes into greater detail. The subsequent pages include more

in-depth details that highlight the Focus, Act, and Action components of the individual initiatives.

Another item that has remained consistent since 2012 is the critical performance indicators identified each year. These indicators are the overarching themes that individual initiatives fall within for categorization. The critical performance indicators include enrollment, fiscal health, plant capacity and condition, human resources, industry-regional relationships, and accreditation. While these indicators have remained consistent since 2012, they are occasionally reevaluated to ensure continued relevance. Admin8 described this process, explaining, “probably every two years we talk about do we still have the right key performance indicators and do those [need to be modified].”

**Focus.** This portion of the document contains areas considered a high priority during the current planning phase that may not be included in the critical performance indicators. These focus areas help drive individual initiatives and may change from one year to the next. For example, in the 2012 strategic plan, the focus areas included maintaining quality/mission, funding, staffing, and culture. In the 2016 document, the focus areas were sustainability and affordability, culture, quality (instructors, equipment, and facilities), and information influenced decision-making.

While many of the focus areas change each year, culture has remained a focus area over several years of the strategic planning process. In the 2016 planning document, culture is included in the Current Cross-cutting Focus Areas section. This section is described by the question “What are the big things on our mind?” Within this section, culture is one of the four main topics. The following three statements are used to describe the LATI culture: The Core of LATI, Why we do stuff-the intangibles: The Stories, and Our Beliefs. In the 2017 planning

document culture is once again highlighted. In this version, culture is part of the section “What’s our institutional focus?” Some of the same statements were used in the 2017 document as the previous year, but this year also included the following statement: How we do stuff. Including culture as one of the four main points of the institutional focus area is very consistent with the responses heard during the interviews.

This is consistent with references to the importance of culture mentioned by interviewees during the data collection process. Participants mentioned that the culture at LATI is very strong and an important part of the institution’s success. The culture was described as “family-oriented” and “close knit” by several employees. Despite the positive culture on campus, it was also mentioned frequently that as the institution has grown, it has become more challenging to maintain that culture. Having more employees on the campus as well as additional physical space has it made it harder to keep open communication lines, and this is very much on the minds of the employees. Employees are concerned with how the culture will remain strong and the intentional efforts that can be made to keep LATI from losing its positive culture. Admin5 described this challenge:

One of the things that came out of that was that we need to focus on our culture, and maintaining our culture because we continue to grow. We’ve had 15 years of growth. College has changed dramatically when you’re looking at that level of growth.

**Actions.** The Actions column includes tasks that are currently happening or will be starting in the future to meet the intended outcomes of the plan. The actions correlate with the participant interviews as another important component of the implementation process. The actions have measurable outcomes, as Staff7 summarized:

When those strategic plans are put into place, they have guidelines and timelines. And they’re labeled A, B, C, or whatever for timeliness and importance. This is a high priority and this is going to be a lower priority. And then it’s attached to someone’s name.

One of the biggest changes that has occurred in the LATI strategic plan document during the past few years is in the Action section. In the 2012 and 2013 documents, the Assessment portion of the document included a list of the actions for each initiative. The details of these actions were very brief and only contained two infographic boxes, one for major ongoing actions and one for new actions. While those brief pieces of information are still included in the document, starting in 2015 LATI has further enhanced this portion by supplementing each critical performance indicator with its own action plan for the related initiatives. For each goal listed in the action plan, the following columns are included in the matrix to assist with implementation and assessment. These columns align with the interview data and the content of the strategic planning document:

- How will you measure if the goal was met?
- Person Responsible
- Other Team Members
- Start Date
- Completion Date
- Additional Resources Required
- Current Status

**Act.** The Act section of the strategic plan document is an indicator of the individual or group of individuals responsible for each project, as well as some of the logistics needed to be successful. Starting with the 2015 strategic plan document, the LATI administration further developed this area by including the steps planned for each initiative, including: assign to a team lead, further define/clarify tasks and key resources, give resources and constraints, monitor

progress, adjust as we learn more, demonstrate completion, and assess if the desired impact was achieved.

### **Strategic Plan Dashboard Analysis**

The LATI strategic planning dashboards were reviewed in the second document analysis. The dashboard is the key tool for monitoring progress and assessing the success of the institution's strategic plan. LATI has kept the framework of the dashboard consistent since 2012. As mentioned previously, the six key indicators have remained the same during this timeframe, as have the six columns for assessment. These key indicators help to set the foundation for the entire strategic plan as each initiative falls into one of these categories. Each key indicator has the following criteria attached to them by column: goals, data for current value, data from previous value, narrative for current trend, narrative for future trend, and planned actions/notes. The columns for current value, previous value, current trend, and future trend are color-coded to track extent to which these categories exceed, meet, or fall below the goal. (See Figure 2)

Throughout the interview process, participants frequently referred to the dashboards and how they play a critical role in the strategic planning process from beginning to completion. The dashboards are imperative in the assessment process as they support the college's efforts for continual progress towards successful completion. Furthermore, participants identified the dashboards as one of the major communication methods of the strategic plan to the campus community throughout the year. The value and purpose of the dashboard and color coding were supported by Admin8, who stated:

So the dashboard is really your assessment of how you're doing. It's color-coded to tell you how you're doing. Whether your performing above your goals, at your goals, below your goals, or if there is some kind of things to watch out for.



Other respondents responded similarly regarding the effectiveness of the dashboards. Admin9 said, “Then we keep up the spreadsheet to check-in with cabinet members and make sure we are making progress on the goals, those types of things.” Faculty2 stated:

I know there’s dashboards to see where we’re at. We might have our own objectives and initiatives within the department but then as a school, they have their own too. And they’re rated there as we go through so we’re just continuously assessed.

October 2015 Quarterly Dashboard 10/14/15						
Indicator	Goal	Current Value	Previous Value	Current Trend	Future Trend	Planned Actions/Notes
Enrollment	2% increase from previous year (Unduplicated Headcount/FTE)	Fail Enrollment 1846 (+7% increase over FA14) FTE FY14-15 1754 +6% Freshman/ +3% online	AY14-15: (2037/1756) (+7% over 13-14) AY13-14 (1893/1660) (+3.8% over 12-13) AY12-13(1823/1568) (+6.1% over 11-12)	AY14-15 5 Year Trend: +26% since 09-10 10 Year Trend: +41% since 04-05	Scholarships! \$50M Build Dakota \$200k NASA	Enrollment continues to increase FY14 FTE = 1756 estimated FY15 FTE = 1800 projected Fall 2015 – New Ag Swine Option, Law Enforcement 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year
Fiscal Health	Funding to meet budget requirements with 15% reserve	2015-16 budget increases 2% on PSA (.5% overall) Tuition increase \$5 per credit plus fee increases	TAACCT Round 4 funded - \$2.5M for Adv Mfg. \$500K NASA Grant \$259K in GOED equipment funds	More investment in scholarships and state investment in equipment expected	Alternative funding for instructor salaries – High Demand Programs	3.5% average raise for 2015-16 Pursuing federal apprenticeship grant \$1.5 M Equipment List submitted to state
Plant Capacity & Condition	Adequate, safe facilities	Master Campus Plan underway Phase IV Construction complete M&R Plan updated HED Land Lease in place	Arrow Court Parking Relocation of HED work area	Parking improved, office space needed, at capacity and classroom utilization being examined	Delayed bonding. Short classrooms, lab and office space Renovation and to accommodate growth areas	Master Campus Plan: Fall 2015 Risk Mitigation Plan tied to State M&R Funding Renovation Plans under development
Human Resources	annual turnover rate of less than 10% and at least two qualified application per position	2015-16 positions 3+ Applicants for most New grant positions	FY15 19/194 (9.8%) FY14 19/191 (10%) FY13 19/183 (10.4%) FY12 17/165 (10%) FY11 19/160 (11.9%)	43% of employees have been here less than 4 years; 59% less than 7 years	Instructors – 26% over 53 years old	2015-2016 new positions: (4) Grant Instructors, Psychology Instructor (SDSU), Ag, Instructor
Industry – Regional Relationships	100% placement, +80% in field, CEC enrollment increase at least 2%, and foundation grow donor level by 2% per year	New Foundation Dir. Build Dakota awarded- 73, including 7 Stretch the Million Corp Training 202/2117 (companies/trainees)	Foundation Scholarships \$325K, Build Dakota Scholarship Awards & “Stretch the Million” partnerships, CDBG Grant for short-term welding training	Develop annual campaign Expand industry partnerships	Capital campaign in conjunction with campus plan	Corp Ed: Expand industry and Tribal partnerships Foundation: Festival of Trees Build Dakota Processes
Accreditation	Full Accreditations	DT visit FA15-Full accreditation! Dental still pending MA beginning paperwork	Auto received the formal accreditation notice	Programs achieving accreditation standards	HLC Visit 16-17 Paramedic 16-17 MA- 2017	Continue work on HLC visit fall 2016; committee work in process; mission rev. completed

(Colors: Blue-exceeds goal; Green-meets goal; Yellow-slightly below goal; Red-significantly below goal or Trends: Blue-improving trend, Green-stable trend, Yellow-cautionary trend, Red-trend requires immediate attention/action)

Figure 2. LATI strategic planning quarterly dashboard. LATI produces a dashboard when the strategic plan is developed each year. The dashboard is updated quarterly to monitor the progress of each initiative and aid in communication to the campus stakeholders. This dashboard was reprinted with permission from Lake Area Technical Institute.

## **Document Analysis and Interview Theme Synthesis**

This section synthesizes the themes discovered through the interviews and information contained in the final strategic plan documents and dashboards. This step triangulates the data as described in Chapter Three, identifying consistencies and inconsistencies. To provide clarity, comparison is organized by the propositions or main themes created for the study. The first proposition, stakeholder perceptions of strategic planning, could not be included, as it was not present in the documents.

**Employee participation in the strategic planning process.** The thematic analysis from the interviews identified positive responses regarding the breadth of employees as well as external participants involved in the LATI strategic planning process. This emphasis on including employees in the process is supported in the strategic planning documents. Each year, the document recognizes the individuals involved in the process. This group is identified as the revision team. One noticeable difference found when reviewing the strategic plans was how the revision team has grown over the years, which supports the notion of a participatory process found in the interview data. While reviewing the 2012 document, 26 participants were identified in the process. By 2017, the revision team had grown to 51 participants. This growth came from a combination of employee and external stakeholders. Faculty6 described the campus representation:

Really, to me, that's what it amounts to, it's a way to include the rest of the staff and faculty and maybe get their unadulterated versions of what they think is needed. Sometimes, I think when [the administration] is up here, it's hard to make the realization of what's really happening in other parts of the campus.

Another area in which the planning document has expanded in recent years has been the inclusion of action plans. These action plans are an extension of the quarterly dashboard. The dashboard contains more global information related to each initiative, whereas the action plan

documents allow for a deeper dive into how each initiative will be completed. As part of the Action Plan, those involved in the efforts of each initiative are identified. While each initiative includes a varying number of members, the document demonstrates that a wide range of individuals and departments are included, which is consistent with the interview data. It was apparent in reviewing the action plans that a significant portion of the campus participates in some type of implementation. This concept is further described in the following section on committees and teams.

**Implementing the strategic plan.** The planning documents contain various components describing how the plan will be implemented, which is consistent with the interview data. The concept of utilizing a continuous or annual process is addressed in the Quick Recap: Paradigm Shift section each year and highlighted to provide emphasis. The interview data centered on the feeling that the annual process is a factor in the success of the strategic plan. Admin1 stated:

Unlike a lot of places, I would say that ours is kind of a continuous process. It seems like every year we're doing a strategic plan update, taking a look at what our goals were both short and long-term, and where we're at with them, and what new things need to come on the plate.

Assessment of the strategic plan is highlighted in the planning document each year. The final quarterly dashboard from the previous year is included in the document for readers to see what has been accomplished. This aligns with the interview data, which highlighted regular updating to the dashboard and sharing with the president's cabinet. The dashboard is shared quarterly throughout the strategic plan lifecycle. Regarding the cabinet meetings, Admin1 stated:

We meet every Tuesday morning and there will be times when we'll just check on our progress about how we're coming and update everybody. This helps ensure that the plan is being carried out.

Admin3, regarding the assessment of the plan and communication, stated:

He [President Cartney] does a very good job at kind of keeping it in the forefront where people need to just take a look at it and review it. When we have our monthly tech team

meetings, he'll sometimes talk a little bit about the strategic planning and spaces and other issues.

The concept of utilizing teams or committees is an important component of implementing the individual initiatives from the strategic plan, as seen in the interview data and dashboards, the latter of which identify the point person responsible for implementation.

The 2016 and 2017 documents went another step further and included additional spreadsheets or action plans, as described previously. Participants stated consistently that having extensive participation from employees is a key part of implementing the plan, and provides accountability to ensure initiatives are completed. Staff7 described how after each item is developed in the strategic plan, "then it's attached to a person's name." Staff2 added that once the point person has been identified, "there are like subcommittees that lie underneath that [individual]." Admin7 expressed support for this strategy for implementation: "It could be more than one person as well. We would say, okay, these are the people I want on my team to accomplish this specific goal. I think that is a great thing."

The Aspen Prize was identified in each of the strategic plans reviewed, though recognition was minimal and not a major highlight. LATI has received Aspen recognition every year since 2011, and beginning with the 2012 strategic plan the institution identified its Aspen ranking from the prior year on the upper corner of the planning document. The award was only highlighted in more detail in the two most recent documents (2016 and 2017). In those years, Aspen recognition comprised only a small portion of the document, with the Aspen logo and LATI's final place showcased on one page. The Aspen logo was accompanied by a statement created by the college: "It's not about being the best. It's about doing our best." This phrase is consistent with comments made during the interviews about the Aspen Prize being a great accomplishment, though the college was not solely motivated by earning recognition. As

Faculty4 stated, “we haven’t changed anything. We’ve always done what we’ve done even before Aspen was around. We’re not doing stuff differently just because they’re here. This is what we do every day.”

**Linking budget and resources to support the strategic plan.** Throughout the interviews, some participants expressed the lack of a formal process to allocate resources for initiatives in the strategic plan. Despite these impressions, the interviews described several alternative methods for how resources could be secured for implementation. Some participants viewed that they could work within their established department operating budgets or request additional funds as they were implementing portions of the strategic plan, but did not convey a direct link between the strategic plan and budgeting. For example, Admin6 described an example of preparing for a new facility and finding resources to support the needs of the new building project. Facilities have been an important component of the LATI strategic plan as one of the KPIs:

Where we come in is that when I see a building or a budget coming up, a building or a project coming together on the front end, I will have to basically reserve some of my budget to make the building come together.

In reviewing the 2012 and 2013 strategic plan documents, it was not easy to identify how resources were allocated to support the initiatives. There was no direct mention in the documents of how resources would be allocated. While reviewing the quarterly dashboards, resources were mentioned briefly, particularly in the following columns: Current Trend, Future Trend, and Planned Actions/Notes. This primarily related to situations where alternative funds would need to be identified to complete an initiative, though the statements were vague.

The 2015 strategic plan document, however, began to address resources more specifically. Although there was no detailed description of how resources are allocated, resources were mentioned with more emphasis throughout the document. The Quick Recap: Paradigm

Shift section identified “assigning resources to priorities” as a bullet point. Furthermore, the Act section, which is a large descriptor for implementation of the plan, also listed, “Give resources and constraints” as a component. The quarterly dashboards also began providing more detail about how resources would be provided, specifically in the following three columns: Current Trend, Future Trend, and Planned Actions/Notes. Examples include: more investment in scholarships, finding additional grant dollars, bonding for facility improvements, and a capital campaign to implement the new campus plan.

The 2016 and 2017 strategic plans went one step further in highlighting resources, as they also included an action plan assessment matrix for each of the individual initiatives. These matrices are in addition to the quarterly dashboards. Each action plan matrix contains a column identified as “Additional Resources Needed.” Not every initiative lists resources, and in some cases the column identifies “Department Budget” as the source for funds, as noted during the interviews. There were, however, other sources identified that would come from the institutional budget, including making a budget adjustment mid-year. Admin5 supported this process in noting, “but we also amend the budget in November, and then in May. So, if there was a major initiative that would come up on our strategic plan, we can amend the budget in November.”

## **Summary**

The information discovered between the interviews and the document analysis displayed a significant amount of consistency. Overall, the participants detailed the planning cycle similarly to how it is outlined in the document. Furthermore, the assessment dashboard was discussed in great detail during the interviews and noted for its ability to keep the campus on track with each initiative. Reviewing the dashboard in the document confirmed the detail that was shared by the participants. Lastly, while the participants described several methods for

obtaining needed resources, they could not identify a formal process. This seemed to be consistent with the document analysis as there was no one process laid out and defined.

### **Direct Observations**

To assist in the triangulation and validation processes, multiple sources of data are needed (Yin, 2009). Direct observations were included to enhance the data collected through the interviews and document analysis. Two different observations occurred: (a) conducting a thorough campus walk-through looking for artifacts that provided evidence or signs of the strategic plan and the Aspen Prize, and (b) attendance at the strategic planning meeting conducted by the institution. The two direct observations are described in this section.

#### **Campus Walk-Through**

During the campus walk through, I was observing for artifacts and other evidence of the strategic plan and Aspen Prize on campus that support the importance placed on each by the institution, as described in the sections below, respectively.

**The strategic plan.** While the strategic plan document itself was not found during the walk-through of campus, certain components of the strategic plan were on display. In the atrium of the main building on campus, key items related to the strategic plan were found, including architect renderings of the proposed new and renovated facilities which are an ongoing component of the strategic planning document. The atrium also included a Community Brainstorming/Idea board which offers everyone the opportunity to share ideas to be implemented which improve the college. As mentioned previously, plant capacity and condition is identified as one of the six critical performance indicators in the strategic plan. Staff3 recognized the importance of plant capacity and condition: “Strategic planning, I believe, has never been more important than when you’re doing physical building or adding of programs and

things like that.” Faculty7 further commented on the relationship between strategic planning and facility enhancements:

I think growing our health programs probably came out of strategic planning. And then there was the need for space and we’re on the older end of campus. I think was part of that strategic planning, things like how do we update, and how do we accommodate the needs for space.

The importance of placing an emphasis on new and upgraded facilities was mentioned throughout the interviews. Participants continuously addressed the challenge facing the institution regarding adequate space and updated facilities and how important this topic is within the planning process. Staff7 stated, “The strategic planning has focused a lot upon our growth here, and the need to do a capital campaign and provide more lab space, more physical space for the growing number of students coming to Lake Area Tech.”

One of the ways this focus on strategic planning was noticed in the campus walk-through was in the main building atrium where there is a pictorial display of future new facilities for campus. This display sits in a very prominent location for students, employees, and visitors to see as they enter campus. There are seven renderings in total, each displayed on an easel. The first picture is a rendering of the campus master plan. This includes the current layout of campus with the planned expansions. New buildings are highlighted in red which helps the observer see where the expansion will occur. The rendering also identifies areas of the current campus that have been slated for remodel. The other six renderings contain the architectural design photo of each of the proposed new facilities that will help LATI meet the needs of increased student growth. The new and remodeled facilities will also provide updated facilities and equipment for students and faculty to train with and prepare graduates for the workforce.

With the significant need for new and remodeled space to be addressed through the planning process, employees expressed how they were part of this work and had input in the



process. Admin8 mentioned, “So that [committee participation] drives our strategic planning. We had a couple committees last year on how do we get the maximum use of our current facilities.”

Faculty7 also discussed the participative nature of facility planning:

There are architects on campus, so we’re kind of in the planning how it’s going to look and what needs to be remodeled. And we have had direct input in that too. We all, each department got to meet with architects, and say what our wants and wishes were.



*Figure 3. LATI Master Plan on display in main building atrium.*



*Figure 4.* LATI future facility renderings in main building atrium.

The second piece of evidence related to the strategic plan is contained in one of the hallways of the main building, near a main conference rooms located in this area. There is a glass wall on the exterior of the conference room that faces into the hallway. That wall has three separate glass panes that are essentially suggestion boards for planning purposes. Each glass pane contains a heading that serves as a category for suggestions and ideas. The three categories are: “Things we’re Doing,” “Things we’re Thinking About,” and “Other Good Ideas.” Marker pens are available for employees and students to compose their thoughts under any of the topics and the boards are monitored by a staff member to make sure college leadership is aware of any new ideas. During the interviews, some participants mentioned these boards when talking about the administration being open to feedback and ideas from campus stakeholders. Admin8 described the purpose of the boards:

Well anybody can write on it, that’s one of the things. Someone kind of keeps an eyeball on it. I read it every once in a while to make sure that [nothing new is on the board]. And then I think we all read it every once in a while just to see what’s going on.

This concept of having a forum for people to share ideas is consistent with other references made throughout the interviews related to a culture of openness throughout the institution. Faculty and staff regularly mentioned the ease with which they could talk about ideas, as well as challenges and issues faced. When discussing the administration’s willingness to listen, Faculty5 said, “That’s administration communicating, keeping an open door to everybody. There’s an open channel to get the information.” Admin5 also described this openness: “Everyone here has an open door policy, and so if somebody has questions, they are not afraid to ask. They’ll come right in and ask.” During the campus walk-through, several students stopped and read the board.

Although none of the students added comments at that time, they took the time to stop and read the board, paying close attention to what was already listed.

Table 1

*LATI Community Brainstorming/Idea Board*

Things we're Doing	Things we're Thinking About	Other Ideas
Quality online initiative	Innovative Scheduling	Competency-based programs
Culture	Creative financing	New programs to meet workforce demands
Closing the loop on assessment	Improve dual credit	Cost savings for students
Connecting of students	Maximizing use of current facilities	Rowing team
Low income and minority student achievement	Expand "Learn where you earn"	

**The Aspen Prize.** Interview participants described the sense of pride they felt from being a part of something as big as winning the Aspen Prize. All three employee classifications detailed the hard work and effort that went into earning this recognition. From the first application submission in 2011, the college worked harder each cycle to improve until they reached the pinnacle—"I really think it [The Aspen Award] has brought like a big sense of pride to the school, and I think that that makes us all want to step up our game even more, and continue to stay on top" (Faculty7). This sense of pride is evident to anyone coming to campus upon arrival. Upon driving or walking up the main street that runs through the middle of campus, the street is lined with posts that hoist banners representing LATI as the 2017 Aspen Award winner. These banners immediately draw attention as they lead to the front entrance of the main building. There is an immediate sense that something significant has occurred on this campus.

The Aspen Prize is also highlighted in various facilities. Inside the front doors of the main building are large rugs embroidered with the 2017 Aspen Prize Winner symbol. The open

atrium area of the main building faces a large staircase straight ahead, which leads to the second-level balcony displaying many of LATI's recent accomplishments, including: Aspen recognition in 2011, 2013, 2015, and as the 2017 overall winner; Great Colleges to Work For 2009–2015; and the military friendly designation 2011–2017. The balcony also holds an additional large banner recognizing the institution as the 2017 Aspen Prize winner.

The main office on campus, which is the home of the college's administrative and student services offices contains multiple artifacts that recognize LATI's successes. Immediately inside the office contains a roll up banner which identified the 2017 Aspen Prize award. Next to the reception desk was a table that held each of the Aspen Award trophies earned by the college since 2011. The 2017 Aspen Award document which provides the highlights of each of the Aspen finalists is located on this table. The program from the 2017 Aspen program is also located on this table. The relevance of the awards and what they represent to the campus was pronounced by Admin8 in these words, "the Aspen was all about putting and shining a pretty bright shine on everything we're doing here."



*Figure 5.* Entryway to the LATI main building.



*Figure 6.* Grand staircase in the LATI main building.



*Figure 7.* 2017 Aspen Prize.





*Figure 8.* Aspen Prize displays located throughout campus.

The second floor of the main building contains an impressive corridor with high-end finishes and track lighting highlighting recent awards won by the college as well as donors of the college. The hallway connects the main building to one of the academic wings of the campus. One wall of the connecting hallway is decorated with glass plaques from each of the Aspen Prize awards won by the institution. The Aspen plaques are lit up against the dark walls with track lighting from the ceiling. There were three smaller plaques, etched with the Aspen logo from 2011, 2013, and 2015 when the college earned “Finalist with Distinction.” Next to those three plaques are the larger etched plaque as the 2017 overall Aspen Prize winner.



Figure 9. LATI showcase hallway I.



Figure 10. LATI showcase hallway II.

### **LATI Strategic Planning Session**

As part of my research, I was able to observe the half-day strategic planning session to witness how the institution developed the foundation for their upcoming strategic plan. The planning session lasted approximately 3.5 hours and was facilitated by an outside consultant who

led various exercises during the session. The observation allowed me to see firsthand the consistencies and inconsistencies between the participant interviews and how the planning session was conducted.

**Participants.** As people were filing into the room prior to the start of the session, I noticed a number of LATI employees I previously met on campus during the interview phase of the research, as well as a variety of individuals introducing themselves from various outside organizations from the local community. Round tables were set up around the room with six seats at each table. There was no assigned seating, however the LATI employees divided up and sat two to three per table to allow themselves to converse with members from the outside organizations. The planning session began with a welcome from LATI President Mike Cartney. The participants then went around the room introducing themselves to the rest of the group. As the introductions were going on, I observed an approximately even distribution of employees and external stakeholders in the room. The external group consisted of such groups as business leaders, healthcare professionals, local politicians, and K–12 administrators. The employees consisted of representatives of faculty, staff, and administration from the college, with each group equally represented.

Once the welcome and introductions were finished, the outside consultant led the group through several activities. The first part of the session included a couple of activities that involved identifying LATI's current reality. This included an environmental scan and an activity to identify several initiatives, and actions needed for each of these initiatives that should be started, continued, or stopped within the college. Discussions were held among the groups at each table to share thoughts and ideas. A leader from each table was asked to share their feedback with the entire group.



The next activity was designed to affirm LATI's mission, values, and vision using a "Bullseye test." This activity paired participants together to discuss how the institution was doing in meeting each of these statements. Each pair was then allowed to assess how successfully the mission, values, and vision statements were being met by the work being done within the institution. This was an interactive exercise where groups were allowed to discuss their thoughts, and then identify for the larger group how close LATI is towards their target.

Participants then engaged in discussion regarding the establishment of short-term and long-term goals for each of the six "strategic buckets." These six buckets are the six critical performance indicators discussed throughout the data analysis: Enrollment, Fiscal Health, Plant Capacity and Condition, Human Resources, Industry-Regional Relationships, and Assessment. This involved discussion around if the current goals and measures were still relevant and what the two most important goals for the institution are at this time. During this part of the session, the facilitator introduced the results from the survey described earlier in this chapter, which was administered to stakeholders in advance. The last exercise of the planning session was about identifying top strategic priorities and assessing the possible return on effort. The facilitator began the session, but once again there was a great deal of discussion held at each table about what the top priorities should be for the institution. Each table was asked to share the results of their discussions with the entire group, as well as possible barriers that might be encountered during implementation.

**Linking data to the propositions.** The strategic planning session included a diverse group of employees, including an even mix of faculty, staff, and administration from across the campus. Employees were split up throughout the room, which resulted in each table having various perspectives from the different employee classifications. This cross-representational mix

is consistent with the interview data and identified as a strength of the LATI process. Admin5 described the diverse make-up of employees in the meeting:

We make sure that we have people that have been at Lake Area Tech for a number of years, and we have people that are newer. We have people from each division, so we look at our list of faculty and staff, and try to make sure that all the groups are recognized. We have people from admissions. We have people from academics. We want to make sure that we have a good cross reference of people and their experiences.

The strategic planning meeting included numerous activities where all participants were asked and encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions. Included in these activities were brainstorming sessions at each table. Open dialogue and free-flowing conversations occurred throughout the room. Although I could not hear the dialogue at every table, it appeared that people had no reservations in talking within their groups. Staff4 supported this notion of open dialogue: “You could say that we were able to give a lot of information. We’re able to give a lot of input for the most part, because he’d break us into groups and we talk about [the topics].” During the meeting, there were also opportunities for the smaller groups to go back to the full group to share the ideas generated. As described by many of the interviewees, the entire session was interactive and included a great deal of dialogue by everyone in attendance. The main ideas or themes that came out of the groups were captured to be used later by the administrative team in their sessions to create the final initiatives for the strategic plan.

**Chapter summary.** The data provide evidence that LATI has developed a strategic planning process that has impacted the institution’s overall success. This perspective was expressed by all three employee groups during the interviews. Information found in the strategic planning documents and quarterly dashboards were consistent with the interview data. These documents demonstrate that LATI implements a number of components in their strategic planning processes that are described as important planning practices in the literature review. As I observed the strategic planning session, the activities of that meeting reinforced all of the

factors that had been revealed through the interviews and document review. The most notable practice was the method in which the meeting facilitator, and the design of the meeting, encourage everyone in the room to share their opinions and ideas related to developing the future strategy for the college. The participants were engaged in the meeting and the college leadership was listening and recording various ideas and themes shared by all of the participants. The observations of the campus walk-through highlighted how the college has worked to achieve a few components of the strategic plan – particularly the development of new facilities and inviting campus/community voices through a brainstorming board – and the pride earned through the Aspen Prize featured on campus.

While the analysis found consistency between each of the data collection methods, a couple of suggestions could be made for improvement based on the results. The first suggestion relates to continuous communication to the campus community throughout the implementation phase of the strategic plan. Participants, particularly those in the staff category shared they did not always feel informed, particularly when projects were completed, altered, or dropped from the plan. A second potential for strengthening is awareness of the resource allocation process. Many participants felt they could obtain resources when needed to complete their respective initiatives, however the process was not formalized and some participants perceived the current process differently.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this single-site, qualitative case study was to examine the strategic planning methods of a high performing institution, including the development, implementation, and ultimate success of the strategic planning process. LATI, located in Watertown, SD was identified as high performing based on earning the 2017 Aspen Prize. This chapter provides a discussion of the research findings as they relate to the literature. The discussion begins with an overview of how the Aspen Prize impacted the institution and its relationship to the strategic planning process. The chapter then transitions to the discussion of the four propositions created for this study. Also included in this chapter are recommendations for future practice which includes the key findings of this study, followed by recommendations for future research. The research findings were organized in a manner to answer the research question developed for this study: How does a high performing institution operationalize the strategic plan to ensure that it is integrated throughout the institution and is ultimately successful?

Developing propositions is one of the components of case study research design (Yin, 2009). To help answer the research question, four propositions were developed prior to the study based on elements of successful strategic planning found in the literature. The first proposition developed was employee perceptions of strategic planning (del Barrio-Garcia & Luque-Martinez, 2009; Shugart, 2013; Young & Baker, 2016). The second proposition was employee participation in the strategic planning process (Auer, 2016; Billups, 2015; Delprino, 2013; Lovik, 2014). The third proposition created was implementing the strategic plan (Atkins, 2010; Gorman, 2016; Sullivan & Richardson, 2011; Young & Baker, 2016). The final proposition was linking budget and resources to support the strategic plan (Auer, 2016; Harvey, 2017; Krieger, 2011;

Varlotta, 2010). These propositions were identified in the literature as instrumental in strategic planning success and became the four main themes of the thematic analysis from the participant interviews and document analysis.

### **The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence**

The Aspen Prize was created in 2011 and is awarded to one select community college every 2 years. The Aspen Institute (AICCE, n.d.) describes the prize as “the nation’s signature recognition of high achievement and performance among America’s community colleges.” This statement was the major factor in selecting LATI as a high performing institution and the site for this research. In 2011, the Aspen Institute invited a group of nationally recognized experts to develop common criteria for defining and assessing excellence within community colleges in terms of student success. One of the goals was to help community colleges improve their outcomes, particularly graduation rates (Wyner, 2012).

LATI earned the “Finalist with Distinction” honor during the first three Aspen Prize cycles (2011, 2013, and 2015). The college earned the highest honor of winning the Aspen Prize in 2017. The common theme throughout all of the interviews was this recognition was considered a significant accomplishment and great sense of pride for the campus. The employees were passionate about the great work being done across the campus in all areas that led to this achievement. The Aspen Prize has brought notoriety to the institution, which has resulted in other colleges nationwide seeking input on how LATI operates so successfully.

Institutions are not evaluated on their strategic planning process as part of the Aspen Prize criteria. Employees were asked what, if any, connection the results of the Aspen Prize evaluation had on the LATI strategic planning direction. The common theme indicated the college took the feedback into consideration when creating the final initiatives for the strategic

plan, but the feedback was not a significant factor. One specific initiative was expressed that came as a result of the input from the Aspen Prize reviewers. The reviewers noted LATI had a gap in recruitment and support services for minority and underrepresented student populations. LATI addressed this shortcoming through the strategic planning process by hiring a staff person to oversee the recruitment of minority populations and assist in the creation of additional student services.

There was a strong sentiment among the participants that the success attained through the Aspen Prize process was due to the great work already happening on campus. As much of an accomplishment as it was to earn the award, it was a result of processes and culture already in place on campus. Staff2 shared these sentiments, which were consistent with the interviews:

I don't know if there was a direct relationship on purpose. I think it just was because of what we do here with the strategic planning and what Aspen looks for [in their criteria]. Had Aspen not been there, we still would've had our strategic plan, those goals that we wanted to achieve, and through the same process.

### **Theme 1: Employee Perceptions of Strategic Planning**

Those interviewed in this study expressed mostly neutral or negative perceptions of strategic planning prior to their participation in the LATI process. When first asked to participate in the LATI planning process, many individuals were hesitant to accept the invitation due to the negative stigma of strategic planning. Some of these perspectives came from a lack of knowledge or understanding of what strategic planning is or how the process works. Other individuals felt that strategic planning related to upper administration and would have no impact on them, and thus was not worth their time. These negative perceptions are consistent with the literature. Weimer and Jonas (1995) described employee perceptions of strategic planning as

being another process on top of too many other processes already in place. Dooris et al. (2002) found some skeptics view strategic planning as just the latest fashion in higher education.

Negative perceptions can have deep-rooted ill effects on the institution's strategic planning process. Wilson (2006) found that a lack of trust by faculty and tensions between faculty and administration can cause a planning process to fail before it even begins.

Furthermore, some faculty may want the plan to fail despite the administration's desire to create a collaborative process because of prior issues created by leadership. Yet, other research findings have noted positive perceptions by stakeholders can have beneficial results in strategic planning. Paris (2006), for example, identified when participants have a good feeling about the process, it results in positive planning with improved morale, trust, and collaboration.

This research found unique results once the employees participated in the LATI process. The majority of participants had a positive feeling about the LATI strategic planning. The process was largely described as positive, valuable, and a source of pride from being a part of the planning group. Many comments indicated that being part of the process meant being a part of developing the direction for the college moving forward and having an impact on the day-to-day work of the institution. These results indicate that campus leaders can create planning processes that are valued and appreciated by employees which encourage participation.

The culture of an institution can have such noteworthy impact on the perceptions that employees have regarding strategic planning. As mentioned earlier in this research, these perceptions can impact the success of planning practices in the institution. The literature suggests that the culture within the institution can also have a significant impact on the success of strategic planning. Perceptions that sometimes are common in higher education, such as institutions know best what students and other stakeholders need, create major challenges in

planning (del Barrio-Garcia & Luque-Martinez, 2009). Billups (2015) described the importance of culture in planning, noting, “there is probably no single more influential factor in the success or failure of a strategic planning effort than the accurate reflection of the campus culture in its design” (p. 44). As mentioned in the literature review, Mintzberg et al. (1999) describes The Cultural School as one of 10 schools of strategy. The authors define the premises of the Cultural School in this manner:

1. Strategy formation is a process of social interaction, based on the beliefs and understandings shared by the members of an organization.
2. An individual acquires these beliefs through a process of articulation, or socialization.
3. The members of an organization can, therefore, only partially describe the beliefs that underpin their culture, while the origins and explanations may remain obscure.
4. As a result, strategy takes the form of perspective above all, more than positions, rooted in collective intentions.
5. Culture and especially ideology do not encourage strategic change so much as the perpetuation of existing strategy; at best, they tend to promote shifts in position within the organization’s overall strategic perspective (p. 267).

Throughout the interviews in this research, participants continually discussed the strong culture at LATI and how much that culture positively impacted the success of the institution. I believe this solid culture that has been created and engrained at LATI supports the work of Mintzberg et al. (1999) and is a key influence in the support demonstrated by those interviewed for strategic planning on the campus. The culture was described as friendly and family-like, which many participants described as a source of enjoyment in working at the college. This family-like culture appears to support employees to trust that they can share their thoughts and



ideas with administration without fear of reprisal. Furthermore, many participants voiced that they are a part of the process and ultimately the college's success. Mintzberg et al. (1999) went on to add that "Culture knits a collection of individuals into an integrated entity called organization" (p.264).

LATI's significant enrollment growth has brought many benefits to the institution. While employees underscored the value of a strong, positive culture within the institution, many of these comments were followed by the notion that this culture is becoming much harder to maintain as the campus grows with employees and facilities to meet the demands of increased enrollment. This growth has created challenges in employees getting to know each other as well and maintaining close relationships. The administration has recognized this challenge and is attempting to address it through the planning process. Culture has been identified as a focus area in each of the strategic plan final documents since 2012. In the last two planning documents, these focus areas are described as "the big things on our mind." Furthermore, in the documents, culture is described as, "the core of LATI, the intangibles: the stories, and our beliefs." The importance of these efforts are supported by Harvey (2017) who identified the relevance of proactively managing culture on a campus.

The institution's focus on creating a positive culture in the workplace for employees can have a significant impact on success. While culture can be affected by many different factors, campus leaders should strive to create an atmosphere where employees feel valued in their day-to-day work. This type of culture benefits planning efforts by promoting open dialogue based on trust that has been developed. When this happens, strategic planners receive honest perspectives from the employees who are directly impacted by the decision-making process.

## **Theme 2: Employee Participation in the Strategic Planning Process**

The results of this research found that including employees in the planning process encourages input and leads to a successful plan that employees support. Participants shared an overwhelming positive response to how employees and external stakeholders are included in the development and implementation of the LATI planning process. Along with the stakeholder participation encouraged by the college administration, the majority of interviewees specifically noted that input from the stakeholders was heard, valued, and included in the final strategic plan. A variety of participants expressed that the inclusion of employees by the administration has been an important factor in the success of strategic planning for the campus. The importance of employee inclusiveness in the process is supported in the literature. Gorman (2016) described how openness to having faculty and staff be a part of administrative decision-making is critical in planning. The LATI process includes adequate representation from each of the employee classifications (faculty, staff, and administration) in the strategic planning meeting. During the interviews, cross-representational or cross-functional employee groups were frequently identified as being included in the process. Staff 2 described the diverse employee representation:

It involves everybody or at least, a member of every area, from President Cartney on down. It involves not just faculty but other staff, including support staff. But, I appreciate the fact that they allow other people and other departments, and other facets of Lake Area to be involved in it, because I think that's what, like I said, makes a success.

The benefits for promoting open dialogue are supported by del Barrio-Garcia and Luque-Martinez (2009), who emphasized the need for institutions to move from a “product” orientation towards a “client” orientation, which happens by knowing and listening to the needs and wants of faculty and staff. Lovik (2014) described this broad participation in strategic planning as key to institutions meeting the challenges currently being faced.

The LATI strategic planning session consists of various activities occurring which involve small and large group discussions. Participants described these as being designed for “brainstorming” or the “open sharing of ideas.” The positive feelings were a direct result of the administration’s willingness to listen to and consider all ideas shared. In general, participants felt strongly valued by the administration during the process, leading employees to feel comfortable speaking openly even if their ideas did not end up in the final planning document. Several comments were made that “no idea is a bad idea.” This openness plays an important role in developing the best ideas from the entire group. Faculty2 shared:

We break out into teams we talk a lot, it’s not a lot of just sitting and listening, it’s a lot of conversation. As a table or a group, there’s questions at the table, we sit down, talk and converse and make a list. And then we share with everybody, and then ideas grow from that. And I think that’s a great way for that to happen—just open talks.

The findings of this research indicate that engaging external stakeholders in the process, is a key factor in the success of strategic planning efforts. This engagement, particularly with business and industry partners, was identified by some participants as maybe the biggest influence in the success of the strategic planning process. The strategic planning session is comprised of approximately half of the participants from external partners. From comments made during the interviews, as well as through direct observation of the strategic planning meeting, it was evident that these individuals share their thoughts and ideas as openly as the college’s employees. The faculty, staff, and administration groups all commented about the importance of the feedback received from these stakeholders and how influential it is in the development of initiatives in the final strategic plan document. Admin8 described the relevance of external partners in the LATI process: “We take our cues from industry, we set our goals and we define success based upon what industry says. And we have to remain nimble to meet their needs as industry evolves.” This external engagement is supported by Banta et al. (2009), who

emphasized the need for employers and other community members to be included as stakeholders in the process. Wyner (2012) expressed that the best community colleges monitor how well their graduates succeed in their employment through the partnerships created locally and regionally. Lovik (2014) also described the role that industry demand for skilled employees plays in successful planning for community colleges.

### **Theme 3: Implementing the Strategic Plan**

The findings identified numerous key steps LATI employs to ensure the successful implementation of the strategic plan. From the findings I believe it is the compilation of these steps that create strategic planning implementation success. These steps included conducting the process on an annual basis, utilizing committees or teams to implement individual initiatives, communication of the strategic plan, and continual assessment and monitoring of goals. The annual process was a key finding of this research as it was not previously identified in the literature and will be discussed further in the Recommendations for Further Practice section.

A key component to implementation is assigning a lead person to each of the initiatives and then subsequently creating a team or committee to assist in the implementation process was also identified as a valuable component. This committee structure, which includes representation from the department most closely related to the project as well as members from cross-functional areas who have different viewpoints, was favorable. This is consistent with Gorman (2016), who noted the creation of planning subcommittees that include cross-representation of various campus stakeholders assists with implementation and tracking progress.

Once the strategic plan is launched, however, the point person and their committees are given autonomy to create solutions and develop strategies to address the challenge. Almost everyone who participated in the research had been a part of at least one subcommittee. Much

like the strategic planning session itself, several participants indicated that individuals serving on these teams are encouraged to be active participants and share ideas as it is beneficial to the process. Creating extensive participation from campus stakeholders through all aspects of the strategic plan process is consistent with Auer (2016), who emphasized inclusiveness should be a main consideration for both the dissemination and implementation of the plan.

The level of communication from the administration to the rest of the campus community has a direct impact on how much support the strategic plan garners from employees. In this study, communication regarding the strategic plan received a lot of discussion during the interviews. Participants were satisfied with the level of communication that occurs during the development phase, as well as the initial implementation phase of the strategic plan. Several methods of communication are used by the administration on campus. The tech team meeting was mentioned by every participant and in most cases was highly regarded for its positive impact in communicating the strategic plan, as well as other major topics impacting the campus community. This meeting is held for one hour monthly during a time when no classes are scheduled so all employees have the opportunity to attend. Most interviewees felt the discussions held at the tech team meetings were relevant and a positive factor in facilitating communication across the entire campus.

From the findings, I believe multiple methods of communication are an important factor in the success of planning. Participants shared other successful methods of communication, including email. Email updates are beneficial when individuals are not able to attend the tech team meetings and want to stay informed. They also allow employees to spend more time studying the information if they so choose. Another popular method included department

supervisors sharing updates from the strategic plan with their respective areas during department meetings.

Quarterly dashboards created from the strategic plan were also noted as a key communication piece. While the dashboards are the primary assessment piece of the plan, several interviewees noted that some individuals' desire more detailed information and the dashboards serve that purpose. Reviewing the dashboards allows employees to spend as much time as they like "drilling down" into the data. This layered approach to communication in sharing the strategic plan is consistent with Kogler Hill et al. (2009), who suggested multimethod communication is one of the key steps in successful strategic planning. Lovik (2014) supported this notion as well, stating that the plan should be shared campus-wide frequently.

One area of improvement related to communication was noted during the interviews. Comments suggested that employees would like more updates once the strategic plan is rolled out and implementation begins. This notion was identified by the staff group more than the faculty or administration groups. Specifically, those comments centered on providing more information to the campus community when an initiative changes direction, is completed, or drops altogether.

The previously mentioned quarterly dashboards also serve as the primary assessment tool for the LATI strategic plan. The dashboard contains the KPIs, lead person assigned to the project, anticipated completion timeframe, resources needed, and progress made to date. Gorman (2016) found that regular assessment of the projects developed in the plan is important to reach outcomes. Furthermore, this assessment must include benchmarks that provide evidence of progress and success. Many of those interviewed for this study mentioned the role and importance of the dashboard in the LATI process. The continual monitoring and updating of the

dashboard ensures the initiatives are on track and that nothing is forgotten or left unattended. It also provides the opportunity for in-depth information for those who are interested in being better informed about the plan.

#### **Theme 4: Linking Budgets and Resources to Support the Strategic Plan**

The LATI administration considers resource allocation throughout the entire strategic planning development and implementation process, which was a key finding in the data analysis portion of my research. Sull et al. (2015) stated the strategic planning and budgeting processes are the backbone of execution for organizations. Linking strategic planning with the annual budgeting process is an important component of the success of the planning process (Harvey, 2017; Varlotta, 2010). These two processes are closely tied, as strategic planning essentially was created as a budgeting process (Mintzberg, 1994). The format employed by LATI, however appears unique to higher education. While a single, formal budget allocation process for the strategic plan is not identified by those interviewed, it is evident during the research that allocating resources is a priority of the college's administration. Because there is always a limited budget, the allocation process is multifaceted and takes shape throughout the entire year as priorities evolve.

The strategic plan document makes reference to allocating resources, which supports this key component. The quarterly dashboard includes columns for current trends, future trends, and planned actions. In reviewing the dashboards, there were several examples in each of those columns that addressed the topic of resources needed or allocated to meet the goal. In reviewing the planning documents from the two most recent years (2016 and 2017), it was apparent the LATI administration has placed an even greater emphasis on addressing resources as part of the strategic plan.

Certain projects created in the plan are allocated funds during the initial strategic planning development based on prioritization. This occurs through joint discussions between the college leadership team and the budget committee. For those initiatives not funded at the outset, other options includes the annual budgeting process, as well as several other steps to allocate necessary resources. This process is described in greater detail in the following section.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

The data from this research provide a framework for how strategic planning impacts a high performing institution. This research identified two key findings which are relevant to the successful strategic planning processes at LATI and can benefit higher education institutions with planning processes moving forward. The two key findings from this research include: conducting the strategic planning process annually and ongoing resource allocation for initiatives in the strategic plan. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach that works for every college, the findings from this study may translate to other institutions and be replicated to develop a successful planning process. Young and Baker (2016) described strategic planning for higher education in today's environment:

All colleges and universities plan. But it's how they plan-how often, how well, whom they involve (and how), and how integrated that planning is-that makes the difference. There is a myth that higher education planning is either a perfunctory "check-the-box" activity that fosters a culture of suffocating order or a commitment to exhaustively developed "best-laid-plans" that unravel, or are ignored, at the critical juncture of implementation. (p. 38)

Strategic planning will be an important tool for colleges and universities to meet future challenges facing higher education institutions. The results of this research may provide insight to help higher education leaders develop a planning process that is effective in meeting these challenges. The results of this study indicate several factors should be considered by institutions



developing their strategic planning processes. Faculty6 described the impact of strategic planning at LATI:

I mean, honestly, with the success we've had, I guess, in my mind, it's pretty hard to say that the process as it is, is not working. When you look at what's happening here over the last 13, 14 years, it has been nothing but growth.

Ensuring that the strategic plan is implemented after development is critical. LATI conducts the strategic planning process on an annual basis, which was noted as beneficial by most of those interviewed for this study. This was a significant finding as this concept of an annual planning process was not identified in the literature. The literature identified the rapidly changing environment of higher education as a challenge to strategic planning as plans can become outdated quickly (Gorman, 2016; Lumby, 1999). Furthermore, institutions need to find ways to scan their environments constantly and make changes swiftly (Hines, 2011). While the literature described the importance of measuring or assessing goals quarterly and annually (Lovik, 2014), conducting the entire planning process on an annual basis was not identified. LATI's commitment to this annual process is innovative and a concept that could be viewed as a best practice in strategic planning for higher education institutions. While LATI goes through the planning process each year, they do not ignore 3–5-year planning strategies which keep the long-term direction of the institution in mind. The long-range goals are a focus for college leadership, however the annual process is essential in supporting the future vision of the institution.

An annual planning process allows for the college to be flexible and react quickly to the needs of business and industry as they evolve. Furthermore, the annual process keeps the strategic plan at the forefront of the campus and helps initiatives to move forward despite other daily demands on campus. It was noted by some participants that the positives of conducting the process annually outweigh the negatives, though administrators should keep in mind that this approach is time consuming for campus constituents. It is important to note that this annual

process involves creating a new strategic plan yearly and not simply reviewing and editing the current plan in place.

Higher education leaders need to prioritize the initiatives developed within the strategic plan. To do so, a resource allocation process must support these efforts. A key finding in this study which could be considered a best practice for institution's to adopt is a continual resource allocation process that is carried out throughout the entire fiscal year.

This ongoing budget allocation process was not identified in the literature and may be considered an innovative process. This continuous allocation process allows the institution to evaluate priorities and budget needs throughout the year. Many of those interviewed could not identify one formal budgeting process to address strategic planning priorities, however several steps designed to assist in the allocation process were mentioned. The college, and specifically the implementation committees for each initiative, continue to evaluate projects and search for resources throughout the year and not just at the point of strategic plan development.

The following processes occur for initiatives not immediately funded. The first step includes the annual budget process, which occurs in the spring after the strategic plan has been launched. During this process, budget managers assess their departmental priorities and present a proposed budget to meet those needs. Additional dollars can be requested to include necessary resources to implement items from the strategic plan that have been assigned to that particular department. Sometimes these requests are funded, while other times they may be partially funded or unfunded through the annual budget process. When sufficient resources are not allocated, budget managers attempt to shuffle their appropriated funds to fulfill the identified priorities. Some of the participants in this study elaborated on this process by saying that sometimes this

results in several departments partnering and sharing resources when applicable to implement initiatives successfully.

Another step in this process includes the college amending the institution's budget twice each year. This involves college leadership reevaluating revenue and expenses to those points in the year. If revenues have exceeded expectations, those funds can be allocated to support certain priorities. As new priorities emerge or are altered, funds can be reallocated from another area that is no longer a priority or from a department that has underspent their budget because of shifting priorities. One further step in the allocation process is the college leadership maintains discretionary funds that can be allocated for new priorities that emerge during the fiscal year. Several participants expressed confidence in requesting additional resources from the college administration during the year when no other options are available. One theme that continuously arose from the participants was that in order to request funds successfully, individuals needed to present a detailed plan supported with extensive data describing the resources needed and how the initiative would successfully impact students or some other area of the college. This data-driven decision-making as part of the allocation process is supported by Harvey (2017), who mentioned "this is accomplished through presumptive allocations based on measurable phenomena that drive revenues and expenditures, like teaching loads and consumption of campus services" (p. 23).

This multi-step process is valuable for the following purposes; projected revenues for the institution change throughout the year as enrollment projects are exceeded or not met, allocations from state and local government increase or decrease, and fund raising efforts are impacted. Due to the challenge of projecting revenues, the annual strategic planning process assists in appropriate resource allocation. Furthermore, a continuous resource allocation process through

the fiscal year may assist in meeting these changing dynamics. Regardless of how this process occurs, the critical piece is to have a process that ensures resources are available to support the implementation and success of the strategic plan.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Sull et al. (2015) noted that Porter's work in the field of strategic planning from the 1980s provided a widely known definition of strategy. Despite this common definition, much less is known about how to move from strategy to achieving results. This research utilized a single-site, qualitative case study to gain insight into employee perspectives on how the strategic planning process is operationalized in a high performing institution. The data collected provide insight into the perspectives of the individuals towards what works well and what could be improved about the process, as well as supporting information through institutional documents and direct observation of the annual strategic planning session and artifacts displayed through the campus. Several areas of future research could be developed to build upon the findings in this study. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, 23 employees of the institution were interviewed. A qualitative approach was used to gain a deeper perspective from the participants by hearing their thoughts and exploring deeper with follow-up questions. Further research could include a quantitative study utilizing a survey tool to gather perceptions from a larger sample.

LATI was selected as a high performing institution based on winning the 2017 Aspen Prize. The Aspen Institute will be revealing the fifth Aspen Award winning institution in 2019. This study could be replicated to examine any of the other four winning institutions. Furthermore, a comparative study between institutions could be developed to identify similarities and differences in strategic planning processes among multiple high performing institutions.

Other criteria could be used to identify how *high performing* is defined. For example, the American Association of Community Colleges selects institutions for their Excellence awards in several categories each year, which may provide the appropriate criteria for a study. The Baldrige Award for Excellence which is administered by the NIST would be another opportunity as strategic planning is a component of the evaluation process for the award.

The Aspen Prize is limited to two-year community and technical colleges. Future research could be expanded to include four-year institutions, including public and private colleges. The Baldrige Award for Excellence would provide possible criteria for selecting a high performing four-year institution. Harvey (2017) noted that all categories of institutions are struggling with the challenges associated with rising costs, lower revenues, public scrutiny of college education, and rising expectations of stakeholders. These types of statements support further research to develop best practices in strategic planning across all sectors.

While this research focused on employee perspectives, the data found that including external partners, particularly business and industry partners, is an important factor in the success of strategic planning. Potential studies could be developed to include the perspectives of key external stakeholders. External stakeholders are the recipient of the institution's graduates. These stakeholders depend on quality graduates who have the necessary skills to be productive employees in the workforce, which supports the need for this type of study.

The data from the interviews in this study indicated many positive aspects of the LATI planning process. Participants expressed satisfaction with their ability to contribute to the process and valued their experiences. One concern identified throughout the interviews was the challenge facing the institution with retaining the strong, positive culture that has existed on campus as the college continues to experience significant growth in enrollment, facilities, and employees. This

culture was credited by those interviewed as being an important factor in the success of the LATI planning process, as well as other achievements such as the Aspen Prize. There is concern, however, as to how well the culture can be preserved given the changes endured by the institution to absorb growth. As noted earlier, the literature supports the notion that culture can have an impact on the success of an institution's planning process (Harvey, 2017; Shugart, 2013). Further research could be conducted to examine which factors impact employee perceptions of positive culture and/or have the greatest influence in maintaining that culture as an institution experiences major growth and other potential demographic shifts.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Protocol**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview and assisting me with my research regarding strategic planning. The purpose of this study is to examine the strategic planning methods of a high performing institution, including the development, implementation and continual assessment of the strategic planning processes. All of your responses will remain anonymous and will only be used for the purpose of this study. Any of your responses provided in the study will be referred to by a pseudonym. You are under no obligation to participate and you can withdraw at any time without any consequences. To help me provide an accurate account of your responses, I will be recording our conversation. This audiotape will remain confidential and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Participant Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your position here at Lake Area Tech.
2. Tell me about the strategic planning process here at Lake Area Tech.
3. Describe your participation in the strategic planning process.
  - Probe: How did you get involved in the process?
4. How does the rest of the institution participate in the process?
  - Probe: Is the process for participation the same for all employee groups, such as faculty, staff, and administration?
5. Can you describe what your assumptions about strategic planning were before the process started?
6. How were those assumptions about strategic planning impacted by your participation in the process?

7. Describe your thoughts on the length of time it took for the institution to create the strategic plan from start to implementation.
8. How much time did you invest in the planning process?
  - Probe: Did you feel this was an adequate amount of time?
9. How did the college communicate the strategic planning process prior to starting?
10. How has the college provided ongoing communication since the plan was completed?
11. How are the goals of the strategic plan measured?
  - Probe: Are there specific individuals responsible for reviewing the progress of the goals?
12. How are resources distributed by the institution to meet the goals established in the plan?
13. Can you tell me about any steps during the course of developing the strategic plan that could have been done to improve the process?
14. Describe how the strategic plan process prepared Lake Area Tech for the Aspen Prize process.
15. Are there any other comments or thoughts about the strategic planning process that you would like to add to this interview?

Closing: Thank you again for taking time out of your day to meet with me and participate in the interview. I will be transcribing the interview and will send my analysis to you to provide feedback on the accuracy of my interpretations of your comments. You can also contact me in the meantime with additional information you would like to add.