SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE: A FOCUS ON THE FIVE GOALS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of the strategic planning process at South Texas College (STC) which was centered on the five strategic goals. Over 80 faculty, staff, and students participated in a series of focused discussions about the five goals and their thoughts on where STC was doing good work, areas for improvement, and strategies to remove obstacles where applicable.

The analysis suggests that South Texas College is doing well in a number of items that are moving the college forward on the path toward implementing the goals. However, these same individuals noted where the college many encounter areas that may hinder advancement of the goals. A few of these recommendations included:

- Being more intentional and strategic when engaged with the external community.
- Ensuring that all campuses are treated fairly and equitably.
- That here is true collaboration within a campus, but also across all the campuses.
- Enhanced use of technology where warranted, especially among faculty

The report is a qualitative analysis of themes generated from individuals across the college and it should not be generalized to all faculty, staff, and students. However, it does provide insight into how these staff and students think about the overall direction of the college as it relates to the goals and strategic direction of the college.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to provide South Texas College (STC) insight into their strategic planning process. Faculty, staff, and students were able to review and discuss the five goals that will shape the 2019-2025 Strategic Plan. In addition, they provided their thoughts on the currently approved Mission and Vision statements. as well as, offered opinions on items that were not included in the strategic planning discussion.

Methodology

Data Collection

Over the course of two days, February 28 and March 1, 2019, 82 faculty, staff, and students participated in eight focus discussions.[1] These conversations occurred mostly at the Pecan campus (5), but also at the Mid-Valley campus (1), Nursing & Allied Health campus (1), and the Starr County campus (1). Of note, one of these focused discussions was with students at the Pecan campus, which had 12 students who attended. The largest group occurred on Friday, afternoon at the Pecan campus (21),[2] while the smallest group was at the Mid-Valley campus (4) early Friday morning.

All participants were asked the same questions (semi-structured interviewing) which pertained to the mission and vision; the overall five goals associated with the strategic plan; the definition of those goals, and how either South Texas College's current work connects with these goals or if there are opportunities for the college to be more connected.[3] Most of the interviews lasted the full one hour and thirty minutes which was allotted to each session.

While the facilitator of these conversations directed the discussions, each of the groups had a dedicated note-taker who was "scribing" the responses to each set of questions, and deeper follow-up questions.

Data Analysis

The facilitator reviewed and analyzed the notes from each of the eight groups to create the following observations for STC. Also, remarks and thoughts after each session were written down after each group session by the facilitator as well.

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[1] An IRB was not needed for this project since it was for college specific work.
[2] Six students were part of this group.
[3] The full set of questions are in Appendix A.

Results from the Conversations

Mission and Vision

Respondents were asked to take a few minutes and read through the new version of the Mission Statement and Vision Statement for South Texas College. After reviewing those narratives, they were asked about their reaction to the statements. Did those statements make sense? Did they reflect who STC is and should aspire to be? What was missing or unclear?

Feedback

Overall, respondents seemed to agree that that new mission and vision statements set the context moving forward; there were few to no surprises. Participants suggested that the college has a "family feel" to it which helps the faculty and staff feel connected to the institution. Some suggested that the new mission takes STC to the next level.

One group discussion focused on the "global collaborations" statement. They suggested it was rather a "grand statement" and did not really align with the local economy. They indicated that STC "does not create citizens of the world." Another said it was a lot of "fluff wording," but overall agreed with the rationale of the statements.

Next, the five strategic goals are listed together to get a reaction of whether those statements were broad enough and would connect with the Mission of the college as well as anchoring the new strategic plan. The five goals under discussion were as follows:

- Create Educational Opportunities for Students
- Foster Student Success
- Cultivate Institutional Collaboration
- Promote Academic Integrity and Excellence
- Encourage Community Engagement

Each of the goals are listed separately and aligned with a stated definition which is noted below for each of the goals. Then each question that pertained to that goal is listed and the respondents' answers are noted.[4]

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[4] Only narrative themes are provided since the notetakers could not capture all individual's specific narrative; just the themes of the groups being interviewed.

Encourage Community Engagement

Definition: South Texas College is a catalyst for engaging the public and strengthening communities through diverse efforts that increase college readiness and job development.

Does this definition capture the intent and spirit of this goal?

Participants noted that while they agree that STC should be engaged in the community, there was a sense that the definition may not fully articulate to what STC should be doing. One group even offered that to "encourage' was not very strong and offered "foster" or "demand" engagement since it is imperative that STC be integrated into the whole community, not just asked to do it.

What does STC do well in this area?

All described that the college was aligned with community events (social, cultural, and educational). They also agreed that there were engagement activities with employers in the area, as well as events where STC was present at job fairs and presented at conferences (local, regional, and national).

Where are there opportunities for improvement?

Participants stated that there needs to be more faculty engagement in the community. When pressed, individuals noted that some faculty are just not as engaged as they should be in engaging with residents from the Valley outside of the classroom. It's more than just hosting events and activities.

One group tossed around just what is the definition of "community?" Are we referring to the larger geographic footprint that STC services or is it something else?

Another group talked about the branding/awareness of the college in the community at large. They argued it was lacking. Individuals do not even know that STC exists or that it's as large as it is. Sometimes the college gets confused with other institutions in the region, mostly Texas Southmost College.

There were discussions around taking students on college-sponsored events and that it has become too much of a "bureaucratic headache." Some staff have stopped involving students in off-campus extra-curricular activities, which limits engagement with the community.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

Helping create a culture in the community to value higher education---some noted the low college attainment in area as well as high poverty rates.

As a college, we need to find a way for STC to give back to the community more than it already is. Others asked if the messaging and/or branding was correct or working since there seemed

to be a large percentage (according to respondents) of community members who are just not aware of the college.

Promote Academic Integrity & Excellence

Definition: South Texas College is dedicated to creating a dynamic and innovative educational environment based on excellence and continuous improvement.

Does this definition capture the intent and spirit of this goal?

While most were okay with the definition, one group was not sure how integrity was defined. Some individuals wanted to know if this was just for on-line courses? Also, how are we defining excellence? What is the lens of this concept of excellence (e.g., academic excellence)? Is it local, regional, national, or global?

One group thought a better naming construct for this goal would be: Academic Excellence and Integrity, with the focus on excellence around the academic lens. Another group thought "promote" sounded strange in relation to this goal—that this academic integrity and excellence is a given.

What does STC do well in this area?

STC continues to hire great faculty who are credentialed, and the college provides them professional development opportunities to continue to be better instructors. There are learning outcomes aligned to courses, so the college makes sure students are learning the content and is measured on this aspect. There is a culture of "never stop learning" at STC. This not only applies to students, but the faculty and staff as well.

The facilities (at most campuses) are great in terms of classroom sizes and student services that are provided to help student be successful (i.e., the library, tutoring, CLE, etc.).

There was also a discussion about how STC has become a model for Dual Enrollment programs throughout the country and how other institutions visit STC and then go back to their home institutions to model the Dual Enrollment process for their college.

Where are there opportunities for improvement?

There was a suggestion that STC should be more intentional in hiring throughout the college. There should be a the diversity of thought on how to teach or manage the various departments/units. The college needs to be more mindful on how and who STC hires throughout the organization.

The on-line environment had a lot of discussion around authenticating that "Student X" is really "Student X" when turning in assignments or taking tests. The concepts mostly revolved around cheating on exams and plagiarism.

Integrity is a two-way street. It's not just that the student who need to be truthful, but that the faculty are honest in bringing their "A game" to the classroom be it on-line for face-to-face. Feedback here was that there are some faculty who cut corners as well as teach excessive course loads which may affect how much students are getting from specific courses. Furthermore, some faculty may not be equipped to teach on-line courses—it's not a matter of just putting their material on Blackboard and having students do discussion boards.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

STC does have a national reputation for helping Dual Enrolled students, but not so much for the traditional student-body.

The college needs to continue to support and encourage academic excellence and integrity throughout the organization, this will also positively affect other parts of the institution.

Engage students in learning the material. Faculty should just not stand and lecture. What are other pedagogy ways to teach and learn?

We should be listening to our students as well as faculty and staff. The only way to become a better institution is to consistently get feedback from those who are in the classroom learning, those teaching, and on the front lines helping students.

Create Educational Opportunities for Students

Definition: South Texas College is committed to provide affordable and accessible educational opportunities that enable a seamless transfer to advanced degrees to align with emerging workforce needs.

Does this definition capture the intent and spirit of this goal?

Most of the groups who read through the definition indicated that they agree with the definition that has been created for this goal.

One group of faculty and staff did note that being affordable was the key concept of the definition. Yet, the idea of transfer may be somewhat confusing. Especially if the college want to matriculate associate degree graduates into a Bachelor program instead of having them transfer to another institution.

What does STC do well in this area?

Affordability was a concept that individuals discussed most about in terms of students being able to have enough money to attempt and obtain their educational goals. The affordability concept seems to separate STC from all the other colleges in the region; it's STC's competitive advantage.

The ability of transferring was evident in the conversation. Faculty, staff, and students discussed the transfer/articulation agreements with other institutions, especially in the Valley, as well throughout Texas.

The number of degrees or offerings of classes and programs of study, which include CTE and non-degree programs, also provides students opportunities to obtain a degree or enroll in another college /university after graduation. Individuals also suggested that professional development is readily available for faculty and staff to continuously learn so they can help students be successful.

Where are there opportunities for improvement?

While overall affordability was deemed an advantage for students to acquire their education, there was some lively discussion around the cost of textbooks and how OER may help students financially, but the "jury was still out" on some of the rigor of the open-sourced material in certain subject areas. There was also some talk around how some faculty may have found cheaper alternatives, but the department mandates a specific book that may cost more and therefore becomes a financial impediment.

Participants, especially those at other campuses, indicated how there are not the same student focused services or opportunities for students on those campuses that are available on the Pecan campus.

There is a sense that the larger outside community still is unaware or does not understand that there are currently four bachelor's programs available at the college. A few in attendance even noted that Dual Enrolled students are not really made aware that they can remain at the college to obtain their bachelor's degree.

There is still a perception that STC is still a community college and only offers two-year degrees. One group mentioned that on their campus, people external to the college, think they are part of Texas A&M because of the signage on a water tower which is in close proximity to the campus. Others noted that the college gets confused with Texas Southmost College.

A few noted that there are communication or "elitist" perceptions in the high schools. How do you get the counselors of the local ISDs to promote STC to all their students? There seemed to be some thoughts that the college was either an after thought or not included in the discussion when students were thinking of where to attend. Also suggested, was that transfers to out-of-state colleges are still bit of challenge and complicated.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

Create an in-house conference for students to understand how their educational pursuits maps with their career or transfer choices.

The college should do better on creating awareness on all aspects of STC of those in the Dual Enrollment programs and promote the opportunities afforded to them while they are still at the

college.   Furthermore, what are some strategies to promote not just the college but individual academic departments. Current students, who were prior dually enrolled, could help in this area.

Foster Student Success

<u>Definition: South Texas College is devoted to providing students with an accessible pathway and an effective support structure that promotes success---persistence, educational attainment, academic achievement, and holistic development.</u>

Does this definition capture the intent and spirit of this goal?

There was a good amount of discussion around this goal. While the overall goal seems to resonate with individuals in the focused discussions, more talk was around the definition. One group noted that it was too long and not sure if it connected to the stated goal. Others suggested that it should have the words that represent the ideas of inclusiveness and accessibility in the definition. Some wondered what was the thought process around "holistic" and what that means in relation to development?   Also surfaced was that there seems to be something missing in the definition but those that brought this up could not define what that missing element was.

What does STC do well in this area?

Individuals noted that there are academic resources available to students so that they will be successful. This includes tutoring centers, computer labs and the library.   Part of this great resource base is also faculty and staff's ability to act as advisors to ensure students are on the correct path and to keep them on the right path.

STC is also focused on student success outcomes. For example, students are getting employed at STC, even after graduation.   The college's graduation numbers are relatively high and there are some stories around how well Dual Enrolled students perform academically since they are being admitted into prestigious institutions.

The college has created an inviting environment where students feel comfortable. Also, specifically as it relates to all the campuses, their reach into the surrounding community makes a positive difference for those individuals who live in your service region.

Engagement also was an area that faculty, staff, and students alluded to in their discussions. This could be by faculty and students having conversations in and out of class, to having small classroom sizes that create intimate learning environments.   The early alert system (Starfish) was mentioned and is used in order to intervene where faculty recognize at-risk behaviors or academic concerts, or conversely, to provide "kudos," for students performing well.

One of the groups noted that STC is a member of Achieving the Dream and are student-centered institution. Belonging to the ATD network, there is the statement from the leadership that the college is focused on student success.

Where are there opportunities for improvement?

For all STC students to be successful, services that align to "student success" should be available on all campuses—not just at Pecan.

There seems to be a perception that students who take on-line courses may struggle academically and do not have the same ability to connect with tutors, or get faculty feedback, in a timely manner via phone or email. Also suggested was that some faculty (not all), who teach on-line, are not posting student grades in a timely manner or not at all in the "grade book" so that students can decide whether or not to stay in the class or withdrawal. In addition, not specific to on-line courses, not all faculty use Starfish, which could affect student performance.

Some individuals suggested that it is imperative that STC needs to change the culture where families value education and not focus solely on economic drivers, which may cause individuals to leave the area. This comment, which also connects with the "Community Engagement" goal, is one way to foster student success.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

Are there opportunities to enhance the student experience in relation to faculty's use of some of the technology already provided? That is, would the student success experience increase with full adoption of the use of Starfish? How would students' pivot if they knew what how they were doing academically, especially in the online courses, where consistent feedback is needed for their academic success?

The college should promote student/alumni success stories more so students, faculty, staff, and the community know the good things that happen to students while they are at the college and post-graduation/transfer.

Is there a way to strengthen pathways to ensure students are progressing? Not just on the technology side, which is important, but the people and process of the institution to make sure all are in alignment? How does advising and technology play a role in this work?

Cultivate Institutional Collaboration

Definition: South Texas College is an advocate for creating a culture of collaboration through transparency, consistency and effective communication practices that enhance institutional operations.

Does this definition capture the intent and spirit of this goal?

There was nearly universal agreement around this goal in how important it is for the college in terms of how we (cumulatively) should be working together and effectively communicating. While some groups seemed fine with the definition, others had different thoughts. Some believed the definition was sort of nebulous and vague and needed more clarity. Another

group noted that they did not like the last three words of the definition: enhance institutional operations. What exactly did the authors suggest with this wording? Some thought to "advocate" was a non-committal; they argued individuals could advocate all day, but no one has to do it. Collaboration should be more proscriptive in having individuals actual do collaboration and communication, not just "advocate."

A good majority of faculty and staff noted that if STC did what the goal and definition stated, the college would probably have better success all around.

What does STC do well in this area?

Professional development has helped STC work more collaboratively throughout the years. Also, there is a true desire to work together to accomplish the work of the college. There is also a lot of email to faculty and staff in terms of communication, yet a lot of it goes unread. Overall, faculty and staff have a mindset to work together for the good of the student and the college.

Where are there opportunities for improvement?

This question probably garnered the most reaction and discussion among the groups where faculty and staff were present.

Suggestions on this noted that internal communications are not always consistent (i.e., travel). That the culture of the college is slow in moving approvals through the process as well in just changing for the better.

There also seems to be a communication breach from the top level. Once messages are communicated from the leadership they rarely make it down the chain of command to inform those on the front line.

While there is communication among individuals at the college and individually among individuals at other campuses, there seems to suggest a lesser role of collaboration between various campuses. There was a suggestion that there is a need for all employees to come together in various areas to discuss any issues that may be affecting their work or how to make students be more successful. The current argument is that the faculty is the only group with this "voice" but not the other staff do not have the same opportunity to have conversations around similar topics.

The term "silos" and "isolation" also surfaced the need to be more collaborative. There is sense that everything is top-down with little transparency.

Strategies to Overcome the Challenges

There needs to be a way that information can flow unencumbered throughout the organization—from the leadership to the front line and vice versa.

Individuals noted that they needed to keep each other accountable for ensuring collaboration and communication.

Final Questions:

Only four of the eight groups had enough time to have limited discussion on these questions.

Are there other opportunities for STC to be more intentional about their engagement with the Valley?

STC should do more to highlight its affordable cost, but there is concern that we don't want to be considered a "cheap" alternative.

Continue to promote our student success efforts and stories.

The college should do more to help students, especially in high school, understand life skills (i.e., paying taxes, insurances, banking, buying a home, etc.). This could be addressed in the larger community which may assist their parents/guardians as well. There were also discussions in other groups that the college should go into the elementary schools more frequently to establish a culture of education and college-going.

There was discussion that STC only covers two counties. Since there are on-line students and various partners who reside outside the two-county service region we should be thinking more globally (per the mission statement).

Are there other areas of strategic focus that have not been captured in the goals section?

The goals (and even mission and vision) mostly capture where we want to go as a college moving forward.

Discussion

The process of vetting the mission and vision statements, along with the five strategic goals, to individuals within STC is to be commended. The narrative from your colleagues will help the college move forward in the creation of a strategic plan to guide the institution over the next few years. The feedback you have been provided will help your work be that more in alignment in how faculty and staff organize and plan in their efforts to assist students.

As with most organizations, there are opportunities to think through how you message and communicate important facts, news, communiques on what STC is doing or what it has occurred. This topic surfaced during the discussions around the Mission and Vision statements, before even discussing the specific goal around collaboration. Participants, while they liked the new declarations, suggested they were not aware that these were not only being redeveloped, but were approved by the Board during the fall semester. Faculty and staff noted that if it was not for their participation in these groups, they would have not have know these changes had occurred. So how do you create and manage a communication system (that's just not email) that will get in front of all employees that are salient for the efficient operation of the college?

The goal around community engagement resonated with most of the participants. While they noted STC does a good number of activities in the community maybe it is not as focused or effective as it could be. Therefore, how could the college be more strategic and intentional about engaging the community and giving back where appropriate? This not only includes faculty and staff, but students. If the notion that there are too many administrative and legal obstacles to include students off-campus, then policies around this should be reviewed on its overall effect. Usually, especially in large organizations, creation or modification of new edicts can cause ripple effects throughout the institution and create "unintended consequences."

The "on-line" challenges around authenticating who is enrolled and completing assignments and exams seems to be of a concern, especially among faculty, which is where they seem to be connecting with excellence and integrity. While (if not currently addressing this internally) committee structures work to negate many issues, this might be an opportunity to look externally at how other colleges have overcome these concerns. Rio Salado College, part of the Maricopa system in Arizona, is majority online. There should be best practices that can be learned from this institution, as well as others, to ensure integrity in the process is adhered to and accepted by all. Another possibility to review is the Educause Learning Initiative as you continue to build out your on-line platform.

Furthermore, as it relates to fostering student success, is there a way to scale up the use of technology for academic purposes? Examples noted is that Starfish is not being used by all faculty, nor are those who teach on-line utilizing the gradebook feature in a timely manner. If true, what can the message moving forward be to motivate faculty to use these tool for student success?

Also, while not specifically stated, there seems to be "equity" issues in terms of not all campuses having the same student supports as those at the Pecan campus. While this may be a perception item, it may also be true and possibly affecting student success. What do you know about your students' success of those who take most of their classes at the "other" campuses and on-line?   Is there any evidence that the absence of certain services is impacting their success from entry through completion?

There was much discussion around the affordability index and how STC's low cost is a driver for students looking for a quality education. Yet there seemed to be an acknowledgement that there are other factors besides tuition that also impacts the affordability factor. There was a great discussion around the cost of textbooks and OER (Open Educational Resources) and if they are right for the college now. Since you are part of the ATD network, you may want to investigate the Teaching and Learning service, in which OER is a track, to further explore this opportunity as you find additional ways to mitigate the expense of the overall cost of college as it relates to textbooks.

Additionally, there was some conversation about how STC should just not help students but assist families (the community) understand not only the cost of attending college, but the economic and intellectual return that higher education affords them.

While students are why individuals work at STC, faculty and staff are the ones that make the college operate. With such a large and decentralized operation all focused on ensuring students are successful, how can you get more participation of employees to work collaboratively and communicate more effectively, especially among the multiple campuses? Is cross-training and rotation a possibility if it's not currently happening?

Conclusion

The openness of the faculty, staff and students in providing constructive feedback should be celebrated and continued in different platforms at STC to provide feedback on your work. These individuals proved that they truly care about the college and want to be part of the continuous improvement and growth going into the future. As you begin to craft the strategic plan and the objectives that will frame your document, I would suggest you go back out to some of those that participated in these discussions to "pressure test" how well the ideas align not only to the strategic goals but to the work of the college, so individuals begin to understand how all this connects.