

Mary Ellen Mazey

This article describes the process involved in creating a regional strategic plan that encompasses a seven-county metropolitan area. Wright State University, located in the Dayton-Springfield, Ohio, Metropolitan Statistical Area, played a facilitative-leadership role throughout the strategic planning process. In a region politically fragmented by over a hundred local governments, the strategic plan and process created a greater appreciation and understanding for a focused regional priority agenda among key leaders and governments.

The Role of a Metropolitan University in Facilitating Regional Cooperation

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States has experienced significant population losses in its central cities along with subsequent population gains and development in the suburbs and exurbs. During this period, particularly since the 1960s, a number of metropolitan universities have developed within our central cities and also on the periphery of America's urban areas. These metropolitan universities have a unique role to play in developing a regional perspective that encompasses a focus on central city issues within a framework of the population, economic, and demographic changes that have occurred throughout metropolitan areas including the suburbs and exurbs.

One such institution is Wright State University, located in the Dayton-Springfield, Ohio, Metropolitan Statistical Area, an area also known as the Miami Valley region. Universities such as Wright State increasingly find that they are being called upon not only to serve the students' educational needs in their region, but also to become proactive leaders in the economic well-being of their metropolitan area. This latter function is exemplified by the facilitative-leadership role Wright State University has played in a

regional strategic planning process titled CHALLENGE 95 and is the focus of this article.

As the Miami Valley and other metropolitan areas/regions move into the 1990s, the tempo of social, economic, and political change will be unprecedented. Planning can no longer be left to public officials and the typical governmental planning process, which tends to be limited in geographical scope, reactive, short-range, staff-oriented, and dominated by single issues. Actions from such planning are typically hierarchical in nature and lack community support. In addition, such planning efforts tend to be without a regional, state, national, and international strategic perspective.

Metropolitan areas are on the threshold of an opportune time to build public-private partnerships to resolve their problems and plan for the future. The decade of the 1970s, in which the federal government financially supported local projects, is gone and will not return in the foreseeable future. In all likelihood, the decade of the 1990s will continue the trend of public-private partnerships born in the 1980s. These partnerships are a "bottoms-up" approach to planning and demand a comprehensive approach from individuals and organizations that represent a cross section of a metropolitan region. Although the overriding focus of such efforts is economic development, the social and political elements that impinge on economic development plans force a comprehensive perspective. This perspective includes the human needs of the regions as well as an approach to restructuring

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the political environment and targeting the region's economic development efforts for the global marketplace.

Metropolitan universities such as Wright State University (WSU) have a unique role to play in building the partnerships to create a regional perspective. The metropolitan university can serve as a catalyst to initiate change on a broad geographic basis within the university's service area. As an institution of higher education, the metropolitan university, with its status and prestige, can institute a new way of thinking about the regional concept through the development of a strategic planning process. In addition, the university is a neutral entity and does not carry the baggage of existing regional organizations such as regional planning agencies or a regional chamber of commerce. Furthermore, the university possesses a logistical infrastructure to facilitate such a process and the substantive expertise to provide technical assistance to a comprehensive strategic regional planning effort. If an existing regional entity were to undertake such a comprehensive grass-roots planning effort, it could be seen as a means to enhance its own well-being. Whereas the university, without power and authority, but with prestige and leverage, has the power to broker the influential community leaders and other citizens into working together to build a regional plan and a spirit of regional cooperation in both the private and public sectors.

Development of a Regional Strategic Plan

In 1987, the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce contracted with two WSU economics professors to analyze the region's economy. The two main threats to the economic development of the Miami Valley were identified as "turfism," i.e., promoting the self-interests of one political entity over another, and lack of leadership. In response to these threats, the CHALLENGE 95 regional strategic planning process was created to promote regional cooperation and establish regional leadership.

The CHALLENGE 95 process was initiated by the private sector, the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce, soliciting the assistance of the public sector and initiating a contract with the Center for Urban and Public Affairs (CUPA) at Wright State University. The Center for Urban and Public Affairs, an outreach unit for WSU, focuses upon applied research, training, technical assistance, and data base development primarily in the Dayton-Springfield Metropolitan Area. However, as part of the Ohio Board of Regents Urban University Program, CUPA works with other urban centers and members of the urban university program to foster on urban policy agenda in the state of Ohio.

In CHALLENGE 95, the center faculty and staff were not the planners, but rather the facilitators of a process that produced a regional strategic plan. The year-long process involved over ten thousand hours of citizen participation that included over five hundred individuals serving on the CHALLENGE 95 steering committee and nine task forces. In addition, the public forums held throughout the region at two different stages of the process allowed input from a broad cross section of the region's population. By allowing the process to develop over a year with broad-scale participation, political agendas and barriers were dismantled, and the building of mutual trust was established. This latter product of the process was essential in a region composed of approximately one million inhabitants plus 171 general purpose governments, 32 chambers of commerce, and 55 school districts. If a metropolitan region like the Miami Valley region is to continue to be competitive in a global economy, its strategic plan has to unite the citizens as *one* interdependent entity that is able to compete as a whole with other regions. The region cannot continue to prosper with over a hundred different localities focusing upon their conflicts with each other.

Because a strategic planning process had never been initiated on a regional basis in the Miami Valley, CHALLENGE 95 instantly became highly visible. With such a broad cross section of the region's citizens involved in task forces and the steering committee, Wright State University established a leadership role on a regional basis for the first time in its history. This is particularly noteworthy in a metropolitan region well-endowed with higher education institutions. This latter strength of the region comes with the added problem of inter-institutional turfism among the public and private colleges and universities and with well-respected community colleges. Therefore, it was of utmost importance that WSU be a neutral facilitative leader throughout the CHALLENGE 95 process in order that the buy-in and ownership

would come from the region's citizens and those directly involved in the regional strategic planning process. In addition, WSU had to ensure representation on the task forces and steering committee of *all* institutions of higher education in the region. Again, it was paramount to the success of the process and its ultimate end product that CHALLENGE 95 not be seen as a WSU initiative, but rather an effort of the region's citizens.

In maintaining a neutral, facilitative role, the faculty and staff within the Center for Urban and Public Affairs at WSU were able to orchestrate the process with minimum center staff but with maximum utilization of university personnel outside of CUPA's administrative realm in addition to resources outside the university. For example, the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce produced a video explaining the process, published two newsletters and a newspaper insert detailing the work of the task forces, and supplied the technical expertise for all press releases and public service announcements. In addition, numerous entities, internal to the university, provided logistical support and substantive expertise throughout the process.

The CHALLENGE 95 Process and Plan

When the project began, the overall objective of the CHALLENGE 95 process had an economic focus oriented toward the development of an action program to provide rewarding jobs and satisfying lives for the current and future residents of the metropolitan region. The CHALLENGE 95 process offered the region an opportunity to identify where it wanted to be in 1995 and, consequently, where resources should be invested to realize this vision. The 1995 date was chosen because the target offered sufficient time to enable the public and current leaders to implement the goals of the process.

Since the university played a leadership facilitative role in the CHALLENGE 95 process, it was important to design the process to be widely participatory in order that the final plan could not be faulted as an academic one compiled by university faculty and staff. Instead, the plan was to represent a synthesis of ideas and agendas of those who participated in the process. The approach was to create ownership among a broad cross section of the region's citizens. In order to foster this approach, the county commissions, city councils, chambers of commerce, religious community, health community, education community, labor unions, industry, the media (newspapers and television), and civic groups were all requested to designate appointees to the steering committee chaired by Paige Mulhollan, the president of Wright State University. The steering committee in turn appointed an equally broad cross section of the region's population to nine task forces formed to address strategic issues delineated during an initial two-day retreat.

At this retreat, the steering committee divided into small groups in order to address a series of questions focused upon what the region would be in 1995 without regional planning, what it could be with regional planning, and what could be done to make the difference with

a strategic planning effort. This facilitative process produced nine issue areas for the task forces:

- economic development
- education
- environment
- infrastructure
- human needs/human relations
- regional cooperation
- resource enhancement
- technology and innovation
- transportation

Subsequent to the steering committee retreat and within a six-month period, each task force met eight times to pursue the following questions from a regional perspective:

1. Where is the region today?
2. How did we get here?
3. Where are current factors and momentum taking us?
4. What's working—what are our strengths? What do we have going for us?
5. What's broken—what are our weaknesses and problems?
6. What are the region's opportunities on which we should capitalize?
7. What must the region address before 1995?
8. What are the key issues that must be addressed?
9. What should an overall objective statement (vision) say?
10. How does the vision relate to the scope, background, and key issues?
11. What are our strategic goals? These goals should be strategic in character and represent what needs to be accomplished or begun between now and 1995. They address the key issues and move us toward our vision statement.
12. What are the strategies or mechanisms for accomplishing the goals? Prioritize the goals and develop the action plans for accomplishing the goals. The criteria used for prioritizing the goals include what is critical, doable, and regional.

The synthesis of the material compiled from the dialogue of eight, three-hour meetings, plus a public forum held in three different locations within the region for each task force, provided the information and material for the task force reports. The reports were a consensus of the material generated in response to the questions each task force addressed.

The task force on regional cooperation provides a typical example of the process. The group was composed of elected officials, appointed officials, not-for-profit administrators, and representatives from the private sector, and chaired by a major private sector representative. During the course of their meetings, the CHALLENGE 95 Regional Cooperation Task Force members analyzed current, successful regional efforts in order to understand the positive aspects of these efforts. CUPA

staff compiled for the task force an inventory of existing regional efforts. These efforts included emergency services such as the 911 hotline, general government consolidation of services, health services, utilities, education, and private sector efforts. By using this base knowledge and working through a total of twenty-seven hours of task force meetings, the regional cooperation task force initiated two efforts that moved the region toward tangible, positive results.

First, the regional cooperation task force empowered the county level of governments with taking the lead in the regional cooperative efforts. Therefore, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the county commissioners from each of the participating CHALLENGE 95 counties proclaiming an agreement to cooperate when it mutually benefits two or more parties. This memorandum was signed as the CHALLENGE 95 strategic plan was being formulated and before the elected officials were totally aware of the plan's final recommendations.

Secondly, as an implementation mechanism for the strategic plan, the regional cooperation task force recommended that the CHALLENGE 95 Leadership Network be created. The task force saw the network as a citizens' umbrella organization composed of representatives from the county commissions, cities and villages, townships, and chambers of commerce. Additionally, in order to ensure that all constituencies be adequately represented on the network, this specified group of elected and appointed officials would select members from the not-for-profit sector, from the special districts, and from the public-at-large. The task force explicitly stated that the network's composition of representatives was to be balanced by race, sex, geography, and public-private sector interests. The regional cooperation task force believed that by convening these leaders, the region would establish a leadership forum to build consensus and create a regional perspective. In addition, the task force charged the network to continue to build and advocate regional solutions to regional problems and encourage innovation and change within existing entities.

After six months of task force meetings, final reports of each task force covering the nine strategic issues (including regional cooperation just described) were released to the public and forwarded to the steering committee. The task force recommendations were a product of the process with a focus on regional consensus building. Although 1995 was set as the target date for implementation of the CHALLENGE 95 plan, a number of the task force reports formulated long-range goals important to the region beyond 1995. These long-range goals represent a potential agenda of critical *regional* actions and directions.

In the early stages of the task force meetings, and again after the task forces had issued their final reports, public forums were held in multiple locations throughout the Miami Valley. The earliest forums were oriented toward the substantive issues of the task forces, and in retrospect this was a mistake. Although the philosophy of public input is essential to a strategic planning process, most citizens within the region who attend public forums cannot provide meaningful input on regional substantive issues. Therefore, the major purpose of the forums became public education, and they served as a public relations effort to

explain the process, the importance of a regional perspective, and the importance of regional cooperation and coordination. However, the second set of public forums elicited respectable dialogue between the public participants and CHALLENGE 95 leadership. The impressive response was the product of 500,000 newspaper inserts consisting of summaries of the task force reports. These inserts were distributed through all regional newspapers prior to the forums held in each county involved in the strategic planning process.

The final CHALLENGE 95 strategic plan set priorities based upon the recommendations of the nine task force reports. The steering committee analyzed the task force reports and the recommendations based upon the following criteria: regional in scope, measurable, doable (accomplished or initiated within the next four or five years), and critical to the region. Based upon these criteria, the final plan identified and worked to emphasize regional strengths and opportunities. In so doing, the plan itself set twelve priority issues that the region should address immediately. In addition, the plan proposed the creation of the CHALLENGE 95 Leadership Network as a body to monitor and implement the CHALLENGE 95 regional agenda. The CHALLENGE 95 Leadership Network, along with its subject area committees (similar to the original CHALLENGE 95 task forces), composes a regional, voluntary citizens organization intended to help the existing, local organizations work as a unit and provide personnel and funds where possible. In this way, duplication of efforts and the cost of an expensive continuous bureaucracy is avoided.

The CHALLENGE 95 plan is comprehensive in scope and is focused on strategies to realize the full potential of the region. It promulgates the vision for the Miami Valley to become a national leader in:

- “applying science and technology in innovative ways to enhance strengths in the aviation/aerospace and information systems industries and to continue the revitalization of the region’s traditional manufacturing base.” In all three of these sectors, the region has economic strengths and potential opportunities.
- “extending educational excellence through regional cooperation.” The citizens of the region realize that no educational institution in the region by itself can establish an international reputation, but by combining educational strengths, particularly in the arena of public and private higher education, the group and, therefore, the region does have the potential to be a center of excellence.
- “preserving and enhancing the region’s environmental assets through regional cooperation.” The aquifer system, one of the region’s strengths, knows no political boundaries, but unless the environment is protected, it cannot be promoted as a regional asset.
- “championing the CHALLENGE 95 Leadership Network.” This model of regional leadership champions regional approaches to regional success and emphasizes a continuous involvement of the region’s citizens in planning and implementation.

Finally, the twelve priority issues delineated in the plan involve specific action items that implement the vision statement. They range

from training of graduate level scientists and engineers; to supporting of technology initiatives; to providing support to "Parity 2000," a strategic plan of the city of Dayton's black community as a means of improving the economic, educational, and social conditions of blacks.

The purpose of the strategic plan was to identify and set direction toward regional strengths and opportunities, and the final report fulfilled that purpose with comprehensive recommendations. Prior to the release of the plan, some of the priorities delineated in the plan had already been initiated, but none had been initiated on a regional geographic scale prior to the regional strategic planning effort.

Role of the University

The primary role of Wright State University's Center for Urban and Public Affairs in the CHALLENGE 95 process and plan was one of facilitation. Although the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce contracted with the center for \$200,000 to create the plan, WSU President Mulhollan committed an equal in-kind contribution to the effort. In so doing, he demonstrated the university's commitment to a regional agenda and ensured the university's independence of any one particular entity in formulating and facilitating the plan. The latter point is extremely important, because the university's neutrality was an asset throughout the process. As a neutral entity, the university was able to minimize the political turf battles that could have destroyed the process. The university faculty and staff continually had to emphasize that the threats and competition were not within the region but rather with other regions. The importance of planning regionally in order to act globally was a major focus throughout the strategic planning process.

Because of the breadth and comprehensiveness of the plan, the university's wealth of expertise and resources was necessary to facilitate the process. Students were indispensable in orchestrating the effort, and they were provided with hands-on experience about the region and its citizens as the plan unfolded. Paramount to the effort was the support within the university by not only the president, but also vice president for Academic Affairs Charles Hathaway, dean of the College of Liberal Arts Perry Moore, under which CUPA is administratively housed, and the university's planning director Robert Fenning, who maintained intense involvement as a facilitator of the task forces and composer of task force reports. In addition, the assistance of numerous university support units, such as printing and duplicating plus university and community events, was essential to the logistical implementation of the process. Logistics are an integral part of the process because if done and done well, the logistics create a positive attitude on the part of the participants.

As a result of the university initiating such a massive and highly visible effort of the region's citizens and facilitating the entire process of over 125 meetings, forums, retreats, and focus groups in fourteen

months, its reputation was constantly being scrutinized. In the end, the test of Wright State University's stated metropolitan mission was its ability to assimilate an internal team effort of university administrators, faculty, staff, and students and make our regional weakness, the lack of regional cooperation, into a regional strength: the CHALLENGE 95 regional strategic plan.

Since Wright State University has defined itself as a metropolitan university with a metropolitan mission, it was only appropriate that the regional university provide the leadership for such a plan and develop the partnerships to commence the plan's implementation. However, throughout the process, community leaders were suspicious of the university's role and were constantly questioning the university's purpose or agenda. This is to be expected when the process creates a plan for a region and, therefore, is working at a scale that is larger than any entity represented in the plan's creation. In fulfilling a metropolitan mission, a university must be willing to undertake such risk-taking ventures and never waiver from a neutral position in facilitating such a process and, ultimately, a plan.

At the conclusion of the process, the question becomes: how can a university extricate itself from the plan, but yet monitor its implementation? Such a plan provides such high visibility to the university that the region now sees the university as a key to not only creating the plan, but also to implementing it. As a metropolitan university and independent entity, WSU has the ability to set its own strategic directions based upon the CHALLENGE 95 regional strategic planning process. The university must decide where its strengths lie in addressing the opportunities that have arisen from the plan's strategic priorities. The university will find that the majority of the strategic issues that need to be addressed over the next five years will require public-private sector partnerships, financial partnerships, and inter-institutional partnerships. The challenge for Wright State University is to place itself in a leadership role to build these partnerships on a regional basis.

At the present time, the Center for Urban and Public Affairs is playing a brokering role to implement the major recommendation of the CHALLENGE 95 plan—the creation of the CHALLENGE 95 Leadership Network. Since it was never the intention of the plan to create a new bureaucracy to provide staff support for the network, the Center for Urban and Public Affairs can solicit in-kind contributions from other regional entities, and in turn provide an in-kind contribution to monitor the implementation of the plan's recommendations. The center, through the work of tenured faculty, has the ability to foster change with new partnerships without constantly weighing the political circumstances. Perhaps the tenure of faculty gives the assurance and independence necessary to broker partnerships that otherwise would be too risky to venture.

In the end, the test of WSU's stated metropolitan mission was its ability to assimilate an internal team effort.

Suggested Readings

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