

# The Strategy of Strategic Planning

By James P. Clements

When I was selected as the fifteenth president of South Carolina's Clemson University in fall 2013, one of the first—and most frequent—questions I heard was, “What is your plan for Clemson?” People were surprised that I didn't come with a fully formed strategic plan, but based on my experience at three institutions, a successful strategic plan can't be the “President's Plan.” It has to be the university's plan.

That's especially true for a new president. Leadership changes create “transition jitters,” and a rapid shift in goals and priorities will only make these worse. An unhurried planning process gives the new leader time to learn the campus culture, a chance to get to know the faculty and staff (and vice versa), and ample opportunity to assess existing plans.

That was particularly important at Clemson, where I broke rule #1 for presidential succession by following a successful president, James F. Barker. During his 14-year tenure, Clemson saw unprecedented rise in the national ranking (#20 among national public universities, according to *U.S. News & World Report*), record numbers of applications, and a steady rise in private fundraising.

Much of Clemson's success could be attributed to its previous strategic plans, which I had used as models at my previous institutions. It would have been a mistake to ignore Clemson's financial and emotional investment in their Road Map—or the very real results the plans had yielded.

I approached the task of planning for the future by listening and learning. I remembered one of the many lessons taught to me by my first and best teacher—my mother—who said, “Jim, you have two ears and only one mouth for a reason.” And as I listened, I learned that there was great support for the plan, but also a sense that it could be improved.

For example, a strong focus on undergraduate quality helped to attract top students, increase retention and graduation rates, and increase engagement opportunities for students. State economic development incentives had helped fund enterprise campuses to support core economic sectors. And a major main campus development project was under way.

But I heard a clear message that more should be done to increase research, improve the quality of graduate education, and enhance diversity; that the capital plan needed more focus on core teaching and research facilities; and that Clemson's collegiate structure, designed in the mid-1990s, should be re-evaluated.

So as we worked on what would become the 2020Forward Plan, we kept what was working and added what was missing. By refocusing, not rewriting, we saved months of time and allowed faculty and staff to focus on identifying new goals in areas where Clemson could differentiate itself in an increasingly competitive and disrupted market.

To ensure broad participation and avoid committee burnout, we used a two-phase process: phase one committees identified broad recommendations and institution-wide issues; phase two committees focused on implementation strategies and metrics.

We maintained open communication through town meetings (web streamed live), a dedicated website that allowed for comment and discussion, and frequent updates not only in-person, but also in our internal newsletter, blogs and emails.

Through this process, we have been able to move expediently and yet allow for extensive campus engagement and transparency. As a result, there is excitement and a sense of optimism and confidence, both in the 2020Forward Plan and the future of Clemson University. **P**

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