

# Memo

To: The Muhlenberg Community  
From: Randy Helm  
Date: 10/10/2009  
Re: Back to the Drawing Board: Planning for Muhlenberg's Future

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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As you probably know, Muhlenberg has now completed the fifth year of its strategic plan, The Talents Entrusted to Our Care (TETOC). TETOC was designed as a ten-year plan with detailed goals and objectives for the first five years and, realizing the difficulty of predicting the future, a less detailed “sketch” of our priorities for the subsequent five years.

The world, of course, has changed dramatically since TETOC was completed. It is now time for us to begin thinking about the College's next strategic plan, a plan that will guide us through a time of severe economic turbulence, dramatic demographic changes, and a rapidly evolving technological environment – all of which are shaking the foundations of higher education and clouding the future of small private liberal arts colleges like Muhlenberg.

**1. A Brief Retrospective.** I hope you share my pride in all that we have accomplished together since TETOC's completion and subsequent approval by the Board of Trustees in the summer and early fall of 2004. We have published annual updates on our progress toward each of the Plan's 29 initiatives, and I am pleased to report that the final year's update is now available for your review at <http://www.muhlenberg.edu/committees/stratplanning/update.pdf>

A few of the noteworthy accomplishments of the last five years include:

- The construction of a new LEED-certified science building and the total renovation of Shankweiler (56,000 square feet of new and renovated space all together) that have enabled us to secure our reputation for pre-eminence in undergraduate science education and restore biology to its former place as one of the top three undergraduate majors.
- The creation of six new residence halls, resulting in 137 additional beds on campus (and the replacement of the crumbling McGregor Village). This has greatly reduced our usage of Tremont apartments, which has pleased both our students and our neighbors.
- The expansion of Seegers Union to include new meeting rooms and expanded quarters for Career Services, Academic Resources, and Disability Services (phase 1), with construction now underway for a new kitchen, servery, dining hall, student offices, and an expanded bookstore (phase 2).

- The addition of eight tenure-track lines to strengthen existing departments (Art, Music, Political Science, Biology, Sociology/Anthropology, and to catalyze the development of new interdisciplinary programs such as Neuroscience and Film Studies,
- The creation of other interdisciplinary programs such as Public Health and African-American Studies as well as the creation of a Finance concentration in ABE, and curricular innovation in Philosophy, Religion Studies, and other departments.
- A significant expansion of opportunities for summer student research (from 7 fellowships to 29 over the past five years), and the creation of student research assistantships.
- Creation of a robust service-learning curriculum, now providing 23 courses spanning the full range of the curriculum, which affords students opportunities to apply classroom theory to practice in service to the community.
- Dramatic expansion in study abroad opportunities (from 35 to 153 programs over the past five years) and a correspondingly dramatic increase in student utilization of such opportunities (from 32.3% to 52.4% of graduates over the past five years).
- The creation of 43 new techwalls (for a current total of 73) for new and existing classrooms, strengthening of the campus technology infrastructure, and expansion of the wireless network to 38% of campus building spaces.
- Development of a landscaping and tree maintenance plan for the campus, including the removal of approximately 14 sick and dying trees, the planting or replanting of 36 trees, and the renovation and re-landscaping of Parents Plaza. (Some other trees have been removed as part of construction projects).
- Strategic acquisition of real estate on or near the campus to provide additional housing for faculty families.
- The creation of a Multicultural Center guided by a student-faculty-alumni advisory board, and the recruitment of a new director in support of the College's diversity goals.
- The public launch of an ambitious \$105 million comprehensive campaign in support of the strategic plan, with fundraising efforts on track for a successful completion by 6/30/10.
- The creation of a "West End Theatre District" initiative, working with local merchants and others to revitalize the restaurant, entertainment, and shopping environment within walking distance of the campus.

Projects currently underway or ready to launch in the next 12 months include:

- The expansion of our overtaxed Hillel facility and creation of new academic facilities for Sociology/Anthropology (pending the success of our fundraising efforts); and
- The conversion of the former TKE fraternity house into a Rehearsal House for the use of the Music and Theatre Departments.

Throughout the five years of the plan we have consistently balanced our budget and, as recently as April 2009, our A1/A+ credit rating was upheld by Moody's and S&P – a claim that many institutions whose credit ratings have been downgraded this year cannot make.

**2. Prospective.** During the fall 2007 semester the President's Planning Group reconvened to review the strategic plan, recommend a few minor mid-course corrections, and to flesh out the "sketch" plan for the subsequent five-years. A few months later it became obvious that the world had changed dramatically. In addition to the challenge presented by the demographic decline (which we had anticipated and addressed in the original planning process), the sudden and violent contraction of the world's economy posed new threats that

we could not have anticipated. Consequently, the prudent course for Muhlenberg to follow at this time is to launch a new strategic planning process that keeps the elements of the “sketch” in mind while acknowledging new economic realities and threats.

It seems clear that Muhlenberg will be best served if we retain some features of the last planning process while acknowledging that others must be rethought.

*What will stay the same?*

- The plan must be based on a realistic financial model that assures a balanced budget.
- The process must be as inclusive, consultative, and transparent as possible to ensure that the resulting plan represents “a shared vision” of the path we will pursue together. This means that faculty, students, and staff must be represented on the central planning committee (a new PPG) and that trustees must be appropriately involved through the existing committee structure of the board as well as “committee of the whole” discussions. In addition, key documents and recommendations will be shared with the campus community at large, as well as with parents (through Parents Council), alumni (through the Alumni Council and alumni gatherings around the country, and the community (through the Board of Associates).
- The plan must be mission-driven, and it must be strategic (that is, it must leverage existing strengths to respond to imminent challenges and to advance the College). We must continue to evaluate new initiatives on the basis of enrollment impact as well as cost.
- The planning process will be data-driven and include benchmarking with peer/competitor institutions. While we should be prepared to take risks we will not make strategic decisions on anecdotal evidence, personal hunches, or comfortable preconceptions.

*What will be different?*

- The plan must address the new demographic and economic realities that challenge Muhlenberg and colleges like ours.
- There will be more emphasis on innovation by substitution and cooperative sharing. We cannot count on significant expansion of resources as we did in the first strategic plan: there is no appetite for expanding enrollments nor is it realistic to believe we can launch a new capital campaign immediately. We will need to focus more intensely on sharing resources and on reallocating resources from activities, programs, and projects of lesser or marginal importance to opportunities offering greater promise. As one result, the bar for major construction projects will be much higher.

*What issues are likely to be important?*

- We must seek to strengthen Muhlenberg’s competitive position in a rapidly changing admissions marketplace.
- We must review the current importance of previously identified priorities from the earlier plan that have not been completed (e.g. greening the campus core, construction of a new art studio building).
- We must think even more boldly and creatively about important emerging trends in pedagogy, outcomes assessment, public policy, technology, and the shifting structure of higher education.
- We must consider ways to leverage our LVAIC consortium and other collaborative opportunities to add value at low cost.
- We must consider how to make the most efficient use of our resources (facilities, academic schedule, academic calendar, time to degree, etc.).

**3. Beginning Fall 2009 – A New Planning Process.** I present for comment and advice a proposed planning process for the coming year. It is based on the planning process of 2003-2004 that provided representation of key constituencies and ample opportunity for community input:

A. Review of Key Documents. I solicit input from all members of the campus community – faculty, students, staff, parents, and trustees – on several key documents that are fundamental to the planning process. These include:

- The Mission Statement (<http://www.muhsenberber.edu/committees/stratplanning/proposed.html>)
- The Statement of Fundamental Institutional Values (<http://www.muhsenberber.edu/committees/stratplanning/scholars.html> )
- Strategic Planning Principles (<http://www.muhsenberber.edu/committees/stratplanning/spp.html> )

*Please submit your comments and suggestions to me via e-mail no later than August 31, 2009.*

B. Selection of President’s Planning Group members. Following the same procedure we used successfully five years ago:

- 3 faculty representatives, one each from the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences elected by the faculty of each division.
- 3 faculty representatives, appointed by the President to assure balance and diversity among faculty representatives.
- 3 student representatives, appointed by the President of Student Government Association.
- 1 manager, chosen by the senior staff from self-nominations
- 1 staff associate, chosen by the senior staff from self-nominations
- 1 service personnel, chosen by the senior staff from self-nominations
- Key members of senior staff as determined by the President

C. Discussion/input by Trustees. Appropriate committees and committee of the whole

D. Campus Forums. Scheduled as appropriate during the spring semester

E. Review by Parents Council. At the Fall and/or Spring meetings

F. Review by Board of Associates. At a regularly scheduled meeting, as appropriate.

G. Review by Alumni Council Executive Board. At a regularly scheduled meeting, as appropriate.

H. Final Approval by the Board of Trustees (anticipated summer or early fall 2010)

**4. In Conclusion.** I hope we can agree that Muhlenberg is best served by thoughtful strategic planning, while maintaining flexibility and agility in the face of unexpected changes and challenges. We live in challenging times, and developing an audacious and successful plan within current constraints will be difficult. Working together, I am confident that we can produce a roadmap for our College that will continue its momentum among the finest liberal arts institutions in the country. I look forward to receiving your feedback on the key documents listed above, as well as on the plan itself as it evolves.