

Imagine that it is 2027, Mills College's 175th anniversary, and that the College has achieved its highest aspirations.

What will Mills be known for? I think there's a pretty good chance Mills does not exist, at least not in a form we'd recognize. But still, we can aspire to survive and reinvent. Thus my answer is much more a matter of what I'd suggest than what I'd imagine.

Mills could be a place that offers high quality practical preparation for productive/successful life in an evolving "information society." We offer people with various levels of preparation an opportunity to consolidate their learning and gain skills that will help them to be active participants in DOING things in the world.

It will be known as the place that successfully reimagined the liberal arts for the 21st century, one of the few SMACs that managed to conceptualize education as forward looking rather than backward looking, daring to imagine what the century ahead looks like rather than focusing on staying true to the conventions and practices of a bygone era.

What headline(s) would you want to read about Mills?

Mills Still There

Mills Center for Research and Development in Higher Education Makes Mark

Mills Develops Financial Model Making Top Quality Education Affordable for All

Given the image of a successful Mills in 2027, please identify what you think are the 4-6 most important institutional strategic imperatives, i.e. those things that the College must do in the next few years to allow Mills to realize its highest aspirations going forward?

Learn how to deploy faculty across disciplinary and departmental lines, hiring not to replace but to rethink.

Stop competing with state university system for students with marginal preparation and extremely limited resources. The mission should not be "provide private education for a lucky few" -- it might assuage the guilt of some, but a small institution cannot have as its mission the redistribution of resources in society. We should strive to be affordable and such but important not to confuse the mission for which the state gives us a charter with the mission that a public education system should be fulfilling.

Mills almost doesn't deserve to exist (in the sense of being permitted to exist as a non-profit organization) at its current size. We should be something like 1600-2000 undergraduates. At our current size there are stunning inefficiencies that in the private sector we'd be fodder for the forces of "creative destruction."

We should pick a number like 1800. Work out the rough outlines of the financial model associated with that, do a quick assessment of what facilities that would fully utilize or outstrip, and, most important, think through what kinds of things we could do educationally at that size. And then we should work out two things: what would it take to fund raise our way to that size and what would it take to recruit our way to that size.

A strategic plan for a school of 1000 undergraduates is to my mind a phenomenal waste of time. Strike a better (and braver) balance between legacy excellence and what is needed for the 21st century. Way way too much relative emphasis on the arts. Somebody has to have the guts to not feel like a philistine for saying "art and music are not everything." The degree to which non-artists are expected to honor,

learn about, and respect arts is completely out of whack with the degree to which folks in the arts respect and know anything about social and natural sciences.

Need to pay attention to the relative size of units. We've got efforts that are tiny playing in the same pool as efforts that are gigantic (and this means both personnel, budget, and students). It's a recipe for ongoing poor decisions, time wasted guarding turf and resources, failures to collaborate, and, most of all, it stifles innovation.

The place needs to be shaken up in terms of catching up with the rest of the world on so many things. People are so sure that they are doing innovative stuff when in fact we are often a decade or more behind. A commitment to being less insular, more connected to rest of country and world. One tiny piece of this will be to stop hiring so many faculty from Berkeley and Stanford! ;)

What aspects of Mills College are in your judgment genuinely excellent just as they are?

Despite the best efforts of some to screw the place up, our students seem to really enjoy the experience.

And they are, collectively, an amazingly mutually supportive bunch. Partly selection effect, partly culture passed from class to class, partly interaction with faculty staff. I think if Mills lost this it would very quickly become another run of the mill second or third tier institution that really was not worth keeping open.

Relatively flat hierarchy and small administration. I think this is one of the most underappreciated blessings the place enjoys. And I think there's a great danger that we'll fall in line with other places as we move forward and in the process will sacrifice really big chunks of our competitive advantage.

It's got an impressively nice campus. Important not to "pave it over." One should note, in this connection, that several of Mills' past "master plans" went out of their way to talk about how the essence of the campus was its meadows and that was the one thing that should be preserved, whatever else got changed. And, almost as soon as the ink was dry decisions contrary to this were made as the education school was built on one meadow, the pool and gym on another, the business school on yet another.

Which aspects of a Mills education do you think are critical for the College to maintain?

Same answer as to previous item: Despite the best efforts of some to screw the place up, our students seem to really enjoy the experience.

And they are, collectively, an amazingly mutually supportive bunch. Partly selection effect, partly culture passed from class to class, partly interaction with faculty staff. I think if Mills lost this it would very quickly become another run of the mill second or third tier institution that really was not worth keeping open.

It needs to keep a sense of "being the place that...." Doesn't much matter how that ends. I wouldn't even say it has to stay single sex. In some ways, being a women's college is a means to an end. It's the end that's important.

Flexibility. There is much that gets handled informally here. This probably alarms some folks who prefer tidy systems in which rules are always followed. But it turns out that this characteristic is not simply an atavism; it is part of our evolutionarily adaptive set. The capacity it affords us to respond to changing environment (especially the environment of student situations) is one of our few real competitive advantages.

It is critical, moving forward, that we do not fall prey to the idea that regularization for its own sake is a virtue. Nor must we allow (as we have a lot in last few years) the clerical problems of one or another office or department to be defined as institutional problems. Nor too can we make the mistake of re-rigging a whole set of procedures and rules as a response to the extra work created when one 35k secretary gets let go in a budget move.

Our de facto mission seems to be a sort of "value added" approach to higher education: whatever you come in with, we'll double it. That's not a bad brandable product.

The moderate teaching load for faculty. And other things that make it an attractive place to work (including flexibility, decent pay, etc.). Many will hear this as just another faculty member saying "my material concerns are paramount," but I mean it in a rather different way. The status quo on this front is an important organizational resource. It is important that we do not think of it only as a cost center.

Much of what students treasure about Mills does not occur in the classroom per se. When teaching loads go up, there's a shift in what faculty provide so that the not-in-the-classroom-per-se stuff goes away.

It's already an expensive place to live and Mills will never be able to compete with high end salaries. The complete compensation package and working conditions combine to mean that the school gets higher quality faculty than "it can really afford." It can recruit nationally. People move here. Strangle this resource and you start to have a more local and more parochial faculty with a drive-by relationship to students and, zap, there goes your product.

Because the overall work situation is basically a good one, the institution is able to extract a phenomenal amount of professional expertise and judgment out of the faculty. Tighten things up and turn the faculty into hourly workers as is happening elsewhere in higher education and you'll start to get what you pay for.

The distinctive product we offer is access to faculty -- not just office hours, but in terms of amount of attention available across the board. Very critical not to squander that. It would be like Apple forgetting that part of the reason we buy their products is because they look beautiful.

What would you identify as "core values" for Mills, both now and in the future?

Respect for the people who work here. This is partially true now, but I think a successful future depends on it becoming more so. There's a palpable lack of respect for faculty among administrators and board members. They'll talk endlessly about how important the faculty are and how excellent the faculty are, but actions speak louder than words and words not said on the podium speak loudly too. I think there needs to be a little soul searching on this front.

Accountability. Pretty much completely absent at present but important for future. And it has to go all around. The deep moral damage that's done when people do poor job and nobody seems to care (or they even get rewarded for it) is hard to overestimate.

Lots of folks at Mills are willing, for example, to blindly jump on bandwagons around faculty being accountable but most are not willing to be held accountable themselves nor are they willing to see the methods of accountability (assessment) held accountable to basic standards of intellectual rigor.

An open and affirming attitude toward difference

Folks of late have been saying "it's for the students" and variations thereon. Not sure we understand that or believe that yet. A simple idea like this should be palpably present when we make decisions: "which course of action will help the students who really want to learn?" So, let's move from talking about being student centered to not having to talk about it because it is visible and audible in the concrete decisions we make everyday.

Are there aspects of Mills that you think might productively be changed (in big and/or in small ways)?

It's a mundane thing, but way too little successful attention given to parking. It is a daily hassle for people, it wastes people's time, and people have to plan their days around it. If I cannot get to campus by 8:30 on a day I am not teaching, for example, I will not come in at all. There is a serious net cost to the institution originating in failure to figure out a solution to this problem.

IT needs an attitude change. It is a SERVICE but they frequently spend more time expressing how challenging their situation is than they do solving real problems. Don't get me wrong, they do a fine job with the resources they have and I've been lucky to have gotten good service personally, but I see this as a management problem: somewhere in the system is a failure to make it an operational principle that the task of that division is to support the work of the rest of us.

Lack of coordination/feedback between admissions and faculty is a problem. In 12 years that only conversations I have with admissions people are ones that I initiate. Staff and leadership in admissions should be hungry for contact and feedback from faculty. It's potential problem when they cook up in their heads a vision of who'd do well at Mills without real access to the feedback that comes from actually working with people after they get here.

Deans need to be careful about spending too much time with other deans and too little time with non-deans. There's a tendency to slip almost unnoticeably into us/them thinking and bunker mentality. Similar thing for other college officers whose only or predominant set of contacts are other college officers and their respective staff. Everything we know about organizations warns of the tendency toward silo-ing not just on official information but on mundane and ambience stuff too.

Leadership needs to branch out beyond the usual go-to people.

Mills has a rather pathological meeting culture. Most meetings spectacularly poorly run and waste lots of people's times. Develop a culture in which things that can be done outside meetings are, in which people do their homework before a meeting and get to use it when they are there, in which meetings

are planned and executed in a manner that focuses on things that one can do only in a meeting, in which people stop talking at attendees, in which minutes are promptly created, and I could go on and on.

People who call meetings should start the year with a time budget for meetings. A good thought experiment version of this would be to simply imagine that you have to pay people for their time if they come from outside your department (inside too, but that's your regular budget). By this method, a full faculty meeting would be charged at about \$7500 and a 6 person committee meeting for an hour costs \$300-500.

This principle could get carried further. The entire time budget for the campus is something like 500×2000 = about one million hours per year. Of this, maybe 100,000 is summer research work by faculty leaving something like 900,000 to work with. Of this perhaps 100,000 on instruction, 25,000 on advising, 200,000 keeping the facilities running,

Someone needs to keep a better eye on the relative power and influence of different units. Sometimes student life is way out of control in terms of steering the ship. Sometimes far too much authority given to institutional research or MCenter. Often what happens is that departments that are essentially staff not line start wandering into a vacuum and the results are not always pretty. But the "higher ups" don't seem to notice because said offices are in fact filling in the vacuum. Folks need to be mindful of tails wagging dogs.

Are there new initiatives and/or collaborations that you believe that Mills should consider?

The boundaries between social and natural sciences are disappearing. We could put together a leading program on women in (the hard) social sciences that would train young women for the interdisciplinary fields that are emerging.

Create some new media stuff OUTSIDE the realm of the arts. A program that would be new communication technologies across the disciplines. Let the development of technical expertise be the uniting factor and then underneath that people develop subject area expertise. It would be a whole new concept that didn't think of a BA first and foremost in terms of a major but rather a skill set with the major as a subordinate piece. I would have a degree in "new media with a concentration in public policy" for example.

Our failure to dominate in the natural sciences is shameful. Three cheers for the valiant work of the folks in this division, but it's always seemed like it just sort of doodles along as something we are sort of proud of but not nearly as proud of as our music, dance, art, literature.

We should get a lot more innovative in terms of how we deploy technology to allow faculty to do more of what they do well better and more easily. The institution is currently years behind the rest of the world. And one gets the impression that there is almost no informed creative thinking about such things going on "at the top." We can do a lot better than jumping late on the bandwagons that aren't going anywhere.

In my dozen or so years at Mills I can recall few instances of strategic investment. I have never seen an administrator say to someone "that stuff you are doing is great, what would you need to take it to the next level?" (Of course, it might just be that no one has ever said it to me!) The way to get resources around here seems to be to pander to whatever the "values" of the moment are or to stay completely

focused on feathering your own nest at institutional expense or to promise to be a cash cow. With the exception of this last, the rewards seem to go to the selfish, not the institution-minded.

I suspect part of this is that there is a culture of not actually talking with each other (certainly no culture of administrators or trustees talking much with faculty) and so the folks in charge don't have much of a sense of what folks are thinking about.

But it's also a fundamental worldview that's oriented toward muddling through and being most proud of what one stands for rather than what one does.

And so, the suggestion is for a new generation of leaders to really be thinking about innovation, change, and progress and to create an environment in which the faculty are the R&D division of the college and the administration has the job of venture capitalist providing resources to the most interesting and promising ideas.

What could it look like? Well, it would not look like a course release and \$2000 for summer project. We'd need a sense that the institution knows how to try things, to experiment, and to support people who experiment. The admin would have to do better job of outreach (so they weren't constantly trumpeting only those who themselves are the best trumpeters). We'd encourage folks to exchange ideas and techniques. Be supportive enough that people can actually think of the answer to "what do you need from me to make that happen?"

OK, rambling.

What else do we need to know about Mills that will facilitate the planning process?

Some things covered above.

Big thing: be a little irreverent. Admit that strat plans are often big wastes of time. Don't be pie in the sky, "but this one will be different." Admit that it's often the process that's really valuable, not the product.

Spend some time educating people about what "strategic" means.

Firmly tell people that a strategic planning process is not meant to be the vehicle through which they can lobby for resources for their little pet projects.

Figure out a way to talk about getting rid of things, stopping doing something, etc.

Do NOT place blind faith in meetings. Figure out ways for people to do what people in the academy do well -- think, write, and read. Do not give the floor to those who don't do their homework.

Do not pander to those who live OFF of social justice and diversity rather than living FOR them.

Build in to the process some things that force people to get outside their ego-centric (or disciplinocentric or schoolocentric) view of the world. For example, make people present other people's ideas. Or use a technique like DeBono's "six hats" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_hats) discussion model, or synectics (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synectics>). Just don't make people go through an exercise in which we watch the usual suspects trot out the usual values and proposals and waste everyone's time.

Think hard about the word planning. Almost nothing that happens during a typical strategic planning process is actual planning. Planning is not necessarily something one does in large groups. Try to show us that you really understand the verbs involved and we'll be far less cynical about the process.

Do not assign the writing task to the most mamby-pamby producers of blah-speak as is usually done. The documents should be provocative (at least the initial drafts) not pureed peas reduced to a set of

ideas to which no could object or with which one could disagree and rhetoric that plays like elevator music. So I guess I'm saying, please do not waste our time.