

Force field analysis and strategic change management: A case study of Colorado Mountain

College

Margaret Gaddis

University of the Rockies

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In this case study, Lewin's force field analysis is applied to the Colorado Mountain College (CMC) and change strategies are proposed. The history of the college and evolving trends in demography in the service area play a large role in this analysis. The continued vision for the college since its inception has been to promote educational opportunity in the remote mountains of Colorado. This vision presents challenges and opportunities for the institution. These challenges and opportunities are analyzed using force field analysis, which was originally developed by Kurt Lewin in the mid-20th century. Lewin's force field analysis originates in social science. It divides the forces inherent to an environment in which social interaction takes place into three categories: facilitating, constraining, and blocking forces (Lewin, 1947). The *field* is a dynamic phenomenon in which environmental conditions are constantly evolving. The field in this context is the higher education institution, specifically the Colorado Mountain College.

To develop the field, it is important to understand the history of the institution. The history of the Colorado Mountain College was exceedingly difficult to piece together. There are no published documents about the history of the institution on the current website, on the CMC Foundation's website, or in any other dedicated publication. There is no narrative of the institution's history in the current strategic plan, which is one weakness in the strategic plan. According to the tenets of Jacobides strategic planning process, the playscript is paramount to numeric data, which cannot describe the culture of an institution. The playscript includes a rich understanding of the field, its stakeholders, and their interactions.

Popular literature revealed two potential origin stories. The first is that the CMC was originally founded by Colorado pioneer Lucille Bogue in 1962 as the Yampa Valley College (Bogue, 1987). Her vision was a small, private, four-year, co-educational, liberal arts school that emphasized a worldly perspective for students in the Colorado high country. Yampa Valley College persisted for two decades until it eventually fell to financial hardship. In 1981, CMC acquired the campus, which is now called the Alpine campus in Steamboat, CO.

The other origin story is that CMC was founded as a public institution in 1967 as a result of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which intended to expand higher education resources in America to improve access and affordability for a broad student base (Higher Education Act, 1965). CMC now operates eleven campuses in a 12,000 square mile service area spanning nine counties. It serves 25,000 students annually, half of whom enroll in non-credit courses. 63% of students taking for-credit courses attend college on a part-time basis. Tuition rates are much lower than average college tuition costs at comparable colleges (MIG, 2013). CMC bachelor programs were recently ranked third in affordability by the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education College Affordability and Transparency Center, 2013). The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program recently named Colorado Mountain College as one of the nation's top 150 community colleges in 2013 (Colorado Mountain College [CMC], 2016).

Since the advent of the ski industry in the mid-20th century, the Colorado mountains have been a mecca for international athletes, travelers, and immigrants. Bogue's original vision for the college was and remains apropos to the communities' demography. In recent decades, the proliferation of resort development and industries tangential to nature and ski tourism have given rise to a robust Hispanic/Latino population that immigrates for the ample service industry jobs. 22% of students enrolled in 2012 were taking English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.

Eagle, Garfield, and Lake counties within the service area boast Hispanic/Latino populations as large as 30%, 28%, and 38% respectively. The 25-year projected population growth in the service area is 76% compared to the 45% projected population growth in Colorado in general (MIG, 2013). These forces provide for a growing and diverse human population in a remote geographic location, which is an unusual reality for American communities. These forces ensure a growing and captive potential student base, which can be viewed as a facilitating force for future institutional success.

On the other hand, the great diversity in geography and demography across the service area is a potential constraining force in terms of economics. Recent trends in federal support for public higher education institutions suggest that future public funding will continue to decline. The typical response to this declining revenue stream has been increased tuition at American institutions (Rosow & Kriger, 2010). However, the vision of the institution explicitly provides for inclusivity: “we aspire to be the most inclusive and innovative student-centered college in the nation, elevating the economic, social, cultural, and environmental vitality of our beautiful Rocky Mountain communities (“Colorado Mountain College,” 2016). As a district community college, tuition structure has to be set across the service area but there are huge discrepancies between counties in terms of economic prosperity. For example, 22% percent of the population of Lake county lives below poverty level, which is twice the statewide average while several counties within the service area have lower poverty level percentages than the statewide average of 12.5% (MIG, 2013). Not surprisingly, the counties with higher poverty levels also have higher ethnic diversity. Despite the fact that the current student population does not reflect this local diversity (Hauser, 2014), mending the state funding deficits with tuition increases is counterproductive to the goals of inclusivity and accessibility.

These demographic and geographic forces require CMC to provide an education that facilitates economic growth locally, which varies among the nine counties of the service area. Since commuting is virtually impossible between service area counties and to Colorado urban centers, CMC needs to provide curricula that are responsive to economic and commercial trends locally. For example, nearly 20% of the local employment opportunities exist within the entertainment, recreation, and accommodations sectors. Education services, health and social services, and construction combined provide another 30% of the employment opportunities (MIG, 2013). These opportunities are well-aligned with the potential educational offerings of a predominantly two-year degree institution as higher education training in these sectors requires less than a four-year degree for job attainment. As such the combination of geographic isolation and tourism industries provide a facilitating force for the institution, but the diversity between counties within the service area is a potentially constraining force.

Although it is possible to characterize some of the aforementioned forces as blocking forces, this is a cynical approach and one that is counterproductive to organizational effectiveness. As Cronshaw and McCulloch (2008) argue but do not substantiate with their research, the failure to recognize blocking forces is supposed problem among force field analyses in higher education. Their research did not substantiate this claim as their respondents misallocated constraining forces as blocking forces, not the other way around. The over-allocation of blocking forces in their analyses could be a result of decades of dismal strategic planning practices that have left many higher education professionals with cynical perspectives on the efficacy of strategic planning (Hinton, 2012). However, in the case of Colorado Mountain

College, the recent strategic planning cycle has been highly productive with great strides acknowledged by national organizations and affiliates alike.

None of the constraining forces described here are creating debilitating impasses to organizational functionality, although effectiveness can be improved. The current strategic plan names five goals and 15 subgoals. These goals are: 1) promote student success with relevant support services, 2) provide excellent learning opportunities for all CMC students, 3) improve our infrastructure and operations through ongoing assessments and capital investments, 4) support the economic vitality and quality of our communities and region, and 5) ensure that CMC has the internal systems, organization, governance structure, and the human and financial resources necessary to achieve its long-term vision ("CMC Strategic plan," 2014-2018). The main concern for implementation is the lack of specificity in describing the actions necessary to achieve these strategic goals.

The change strategies that follow are intended to build upon the current positive momentum rather than redirect the institution onto new pathways. As Hinton (2012) emphasizes, strategic planning is a continual process that thrives in environments where specific people have leadership over strategic committees that are perennially attended to and that incorporate new membership in revolving appointments that allow for significant overlap and thus peer mentoring. CMC appears to have adopted this strategy as evidenced by the assignments described in a 2014 strategic plan implementation memo written by the president that includes the names of faculty and trustee appointees (Hauser, 2014). The members of these committees were not determined at the time of publication and no follow-up documentation is published. Therefore, the first change strategy proposed includes a periodic newsletter that updates the stakeholders and affiliates of CMC of the strategic planning progress. This could take the form of

a presidential update on the website that is also disseminated via email to the students, staff, and faculty. During the gap analysis phase of the strategic planning process, faculty were informed and encouraged to participate in the process. Since the publication of the strategic plan, no subsequent communication has ensued. Regular communication promotes involvement and ownership within the community. It makes common the playscript that describes the culture and direction of the institution. It takes advantage of the ready connectivity that technology provides regardless of the geographic separation between the campuses of the organization.

In similar fashion, one culture-reinforcing strategy is more cross-campus communication in general. Student, faculty, and project spotlights shared between the campuses would fuel the pride the community feels for CMC. These could likewise be proliferated through the CMC website and its blogs, through email, and through local news media outlets. As noted at the beginning of this case study, virtually no published document carries the story of CMC's history. This living history needs to be written and spoken. Since great diversity exists between the campuses and communities in the CMC service area, the stories to be told are likely diverse and engaging. Telling and writing them in public forum provide the interconnectivity that drives the strategic narrative and playscript (Cronshaw & McCulloch, 2008).

In light of the discrepancies between student, staff, and faculty demography and the communities' demography, CMC needs to invest more in enculturating the Hispanic/Latino population into CMC life. Since employment is a driving motivation for immigrant residence in Colorado's mountain communities, more linkages between industry and the institution should be forged. School to work programs can foster college participation in the high school population and in turn, college participation should provide a direct linkage to employment opportunity. The fourth goal of the current strategic plan concerns community and economic development. The

tepid action call is to “serve the local economy to help local business thrive” (“CMC Strategic plan,” 2014-2018). To achieve this goal, strategic leadership teams should solicit voluntary pledges from local businesses to promote the employment of CMC graduates. In turn, local businesses should serve as curricular advisors in certain career-oriented programs to facilitate the alignment of learning outcomes to professional skills required for employment. This shared ownership of the curricular directions has the potential to facilitate capital investment in the institution. For example, Vail Resorts is a major employer in the service area. By enhancing the stakeholder role for Vail Resorts, CMC simultaneously can increase job attainment prospects for its students, provide career-oriented training for students and future employees of Vail Resorts, and incite Vail’s financial investment in CMC, which would lead to the economic sustainability of both organizations.

While 22% of the CMC student population is taking ESL courses, only 10% of CMC graduates are Hispanic/Latino (MIG, 2013). To improve retention and graduate rates among this population and to facilitate the first strategic goal of student success, CMC needs to increase support services for ESL students. This is a two-way engagement. Rather than simply encourage support for potential students who self-identify, CMC staff and faculty should engage in the social environments and activities that are central to this population’s culture. In other words, CMC needs to leave its own “field” and enter the field of its diverse populations. This could be promoted by allowing faculty to participate in external “committee” work, ie participate in community events, with community support services, and in local primary and secondary schools that are external to the institution as a means of student outreach and recruitment.

The change strategies presented here arise from the literature and the data about the current environmental and demographic conditions inherent to CMC. 25-year projections suggest

that diversification and increased populations will be the on-going trend in the CMC service area. Therefore, a future-focused approach embraces this reality and plans actions that anticipate increasing diversity and enrollment. CMC's vision is well-aligned to future realities as it calls for inclusivity and student-centered approaches. The goals described in the current strategic plan need to be grounded in real action-oriented tasks. Annual planning and implementation needs to be published with the same vigor that gave rise to the inspiration for strategic planning in the first place. This will not only facilitate the visionary changes described in the document, it will also promote the institutional playscript, indoctrinating more community members, CMC affiliates, and stakeholders to the rich culture and living history of the organization.

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