A Primer on Environmental Scanning in Higher Education

by Phyllis T. H. Grummon

*The author shares a basic primer on doing the kind of environmental scanning
that she has done for the society for the past decade,
resulting in the* Trends to Watch in Higher Education *series.*

INTRODUCTION

Our human history compels us to pay attention to our surroundings. We constantly sense our immediate environment and process information to decide what actions might be required to keep us safe. Environmental scanning is natural. When we use it to enhance our understanding of what events in the broader world—those beyond our senses—might mean for higher education, we can begin to predict the trends that will affect our institutions. A flexible mind furthers our ability to speculate about the future.

Environmental scanning is a disciplined engagement with our surroundings, writ large. It does not need to be complicated or time consuming. At its core, it simply entails reading, listening, and analyzing the media through the lens of higher education. Typically, scans are organized into a finite set of categories in which trends are followed. These are:

- Demographics

- Economics

- Global education

- Politics

- Technology

These categories are described in more detail below. However, each institution or organization should determine the categories that are most useful to it. Within a category, scanning as wide a variety of material as possible, at least occasionally, brings additional value to the analysis that results in identifying a trend. Trends point to possible paths to the future. While no one can predict what will happen with certainty, the accumulation of multiple indicators of change into a likely trend can help an institution anticipate its environment more effectively.

GETTING STARTED

The first step in initiating any scanning process is to record everything that is presently reviewed. Noting the items scanned on a card or in a spreadsheet allows them to be easily categorized later. Be as expansive as possible in what is

included on this list. Newspapers, radio, e-mail lists, websites, podcasts, magazines, television, movies, journals, friends, and colleagues are all legitimate sources of information. Those sources that are regularly scanned provide context for the local, national, and global environments. Also consider sources that may be reviewed more infrequently, in particular material outside one's discipline or general interest. These sources often contain insights that otherwise might be missed.

Once everything presently being scanned has been entered, begin to organize the sources by the categories in which they might be most useful. Some sources will likely appear in more than one category. Listed below are descriptions of the scanning categories that have proved useful over time.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic information is relatively static locally. The number of high school graduates likely to be available to enter postsecondary education is generally determined as a percentage of how many people were born 18 to 20 years ago. For example, if an institution typically draws its students from a region that sends 10 percent of its young people to college, then 10 percent of those born 18 years ago constitutes the number of students it can expect. As people move or an institution changes its recruitment or enrollment strategies, that number will change, but it is usually fairly stable.

Sources of demographic information include population estimates, enrollment figures for secondary schools, and migration data. These are generally available from local, regional, or national government agencies. Information on levels of health and disease should also be tracked in this category. Any changes in birth or survival rates, as might be caused by increases in fatal diseases or in successful disease prevention, will have an effect on the institution's potential student population. Likewise, significant changes in migration patterns may have effects on local institutions of higher education.

ECONOMICS

The reality of the global economy means that every scan should consider local, national, regional, and worldwide economic indicators. Factors such as the costs of energy, construction materials, and consumer goods, as well as increases in demand across the globe, have had significant effects on local markets and economies. If an institution draws its students and faculty from around the world, then following changes in economic indicators from high recruitment regions is a must.

Economic trends are also very local in that higher education is a source of highly skilled labor. Colleges are often driven by the needs of regional or national businesses for particular knowledge and skills. Campuses that are aware of what the labor market is likely to need can ensure that their graduates are prepared for available employment and that programs are in place to recruit and retain faculty and students.

Sources of economic information include national and international news sources; national, international, and United Nations reports; annual reports from businesses (global, national, and local); and reports from local non-governmental agencies. The latter often collect and analyze economics to enable them to better predict both the needs in a community and the resources likely to be available to the agency.

GLOBAL EDUCATION

As with the economy, postsecondary education trends have become global. Higher education increasingly drives the global economy, and investments in education are seen as leading indicators of economic growth. Students, faculty members, and administrators have all become globally mobile as they seek to maximize the value of their individual educational investments. The international mix of students and faculty means that scanning must attend to changes in educational strategies far beyond any individual country's borders. Online learning, for-profit educational enterprises, and accountability standards have rapidly pushed the global higher education marketplace.

Scanning for trends in global education involves attending to the economics and politics of education, as well as changes in the efficacy and delivery of instruction and research. As with economics, information about global education pulls from broad sources of national and international news, reports from agencies, and education journals. International research studies can shed light on those skills that are in short supply and those disciplines that are over subscribed.

POLITICS

How nations, regions, and localities govern themselves makes a difference for any postsecondary institution. Politics is about power, and understanding how power is being exerted is a necessary part of any environmental scanning process. Higher education contributes to political discussion, for example, through research studies that influence policy decisions. In many parts of the world, knowledge, as evidenced by educational attainment, is a path to political power. Postsecondary education is often funded and controlled by governments, thus making it ultimately responsible to the political process for its maintenance and growth.

Information on trends in politics is readily available on the World Wide Web through blogs, e-mail lists, news feeds, and online news sources. Newspapers and magazines often focus on political conflicts across the globe, as well as more locally. Movement toward more conservative or liberal policies is often evident in commentaries on popular culture, as well as politics. Any political changes that might affect the willingness of a country, state, or region to fund and support education are ones that must be watched over time.

TECHNOLOGY

Technological advances affect postsecondary education in many ways: how students are taught, where they learn, what research faculty members can pursue, how institutions are operated and managed—in short, the basic mission of virtually all campuses. For many years, campuses struggled to decide whether to invest in technology. Now, technological investment is a given, from wireless computer networks to electron microscopes.

Understanding what technology will appear next—in students' hands or elsewhere—should be a priority for any environmental scanning process. In reality, higher education creates and propagates advances in technology as often as it must respond to them from the outside. While once scanning needed to include specialized sources for technology information, this information is now commonly included in nearly all news sources.

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING TRENDS

The goal of the steps described above is to create a list of the knowledge sources you regularly review and to place each source into one or more category of trends. Next, review the spreadsheet/list you've made to identify any trend categories where you may need to add knowledge sources. While many sources of electronic media may serve for multiple categories, your scan will be more fulsome if there are a number of resources under review in each area.

There is no prescribed timeframe for identifying a trend or presenting information for a scan. Some scanners provide their readers with lists of events/data in categories every two weeks. Others produce detailed and lengthy analyses only once a year. What is important to keep in mind is that time is a crucial element in determining if a single event or piece of data has meaning for the organization.

Given that scans take place over time, it's helpful to have a way to organize and record what you're hearing, seeing, and reading as you encounter it. A storage and retrieval system for this information should rely on your own past practices. Some people use their computer to store all material, some use file folders for each category, and others use combinations of techniques. What is necessary, however, is that when it's time to engage in identifying and analyzing trends, the information gathered is already categorized and ready to be reviewed.

Select one category and revisit all of the material you have placed there. As you review it, consider these questions:

- Did the information surface in more than one source and/or at more than one time? (Frequency)

- What effect could the information have on your organization? (Impact)

- How likely is it to affect your organization? (Probability)

- How soon? (Criticality)

The combination of these factors determines whether or not the information you've collected constitutes a trend of importance for your organization. Identifying trends requires your subjective input, as only you can know what set of factors has significance for your organization's future.

If more than one person is engaged in scanning for the organization, then it is helpful to gather the group of scanners together every three to four months to compare what information has been collected and to discuss its meaning. Multiple scanners should consider reviewing different materials/areas to ensure the richest scan possible.

It's also helpful to review the number and variety of materials being scanned in each category at least once a year. While scanning can largely rely on information sources already under review, it may be necessary to seek out sources and to increase the number or types of resources reviewed in any single category. For example, the demographic category may not require as many inputs to determine trends as the categories of technology or politics do. The latter are more likely to change quickly or to have new developments affect trends more deeply.

Analysis requires that the scanner have a point of view for determining the likely effects of a trend. When reading or listening to an information source, it's helpful to ask yourself "what if?" questions. What if this trend continues to grow? How could it possibly affect our students and faculty members or the way our institution is run? Focus on the future to begin to see if a change could have a lasting or extensive impact on your organization.
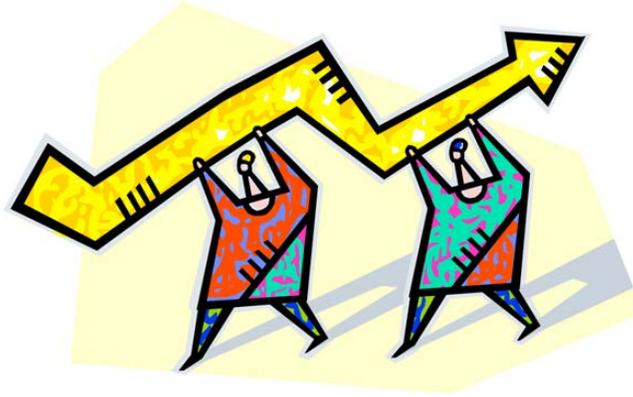
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Phyllis T. H. Grummon is the Director of Planning and Education for the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP). Her primary role is to shepherd the development of content that achieves the mission of advancing integrated planning on campuses. Prior to 2003, she was the Director of University Planning at Michigan State University (MSU) in the Office of Planning and Budgets (OPB). Dr. Grummon has written a number of articles and book chapters on planning.