CHAPTER 2

To Improve Institutional Performance, Aim High and Go "BI"

By President Larry Goodwin, The College of St. Scholastica

Several years ago, The College of St. Scholastica—a Catholic Benedictine school in Duluth, Minnesota—purchased a business intelligence (BI) system to improve our ability to make data driven decisions. Along the way we have learned some important lessons that have made us stronger, and that may be of use to other institutions.

A bit of background might be helpful. The College of St. Scholastica was founded in 1912 by the Benedictine Sisters in Duluth. We were a women's college until 1970, when we became coeducational and independent, although still sponsored by the Sisters. The school has a modest endowment and is tuition-driven. We offer programs in the liberal arts and several pre-professional areas; more than half of our students major in health care fields.

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Over the past decade St. Scholastica has changed considerably. We entered the education market for working adults, opened three new campuses, added Division III football, expanded our master's programs, added two clinical doctorates, and entered the online market. Enrollment has grown from 2,000 to 3,600; faculty and staff have increased by 65 percent; we have more than doubled the number of traditional undergraduates living on the mother campus; the budget has grown from $28M to $60M. We anticipate more growth as we expand online programming.

These changes are a result of ongoing strategic planning, and they have caused us to improve our planning process. We have been clear all along that mission and vision should shape strategic priorities, and these priorities should inform annual college goals and departmental action plans. We operate on the belief that the budget is the price tag for the plan, and we have gotten better at connecting everything in the plan with a budget number, and vice versa. If there is something in the plan that has no corresponding budget number, we take it out.

As we tightened the connection between action plans and budgets, we began to realize the importance of data-driven assessment of results. If we committed a hundred thousand dollars to a retention initiative, did we achieve the anticipated results? If we increased our marketing budget by a half-million dollars, can we tell what difference it made? Looking at our set of aspirant

institutions, what benchmarks can we establish from them and how should we strive to realize them? Where are the most effective returns on our investments? Getting answers to these kinds of questions is essential in an environment where there is increasing competition for limited dollars.

A few years ago we began reporting important dashboard indicators to our trustees on an annual basis. The effort to refine and expand these measurements has now led us to establish key performance indicators (KPIs) for every goal in our strategic plan. KPIs are three dimensional: they give a snapshot of where we are, a trend line showing the direction we are moving, and a benchmark we are trying to achieve. For example, we want to realize a four-year graduation rate of 60 percent; we are currently at 55 percent; we have been moving slowly but steadily in the right direction for the past five years.

Overall, then, the past decade has been for us an exercise in trying to refine our answer to the question: How do we best link planning, budgeting, and assessment in a dynamic environment? We believe that our competitive advantage lies in our ability to answer that question effectively.

The ongoing attempt to establish meaningful KPIs caused us to look at purchasing a BI system. We had the right insight—use data to measure the effectiveness of planning and budgeting—but we struggled to get clean and consistent data. Until very recently, we faced the following challenges:

❑ Departments tweaked and manipulated data on our administrative computing system to best serve their own departmental interests. Finance might define "full time student" in one way to meet its needs; the registrar's office might define the term slightly differently to meet its needs.

❑ Dozens of homegrown "datamarts" emerged, each very good for local tactical purposes, but increasingly unable to converse with one another at the all-college and strategic level.

❑ A general mess resulted: Differing definitions of basic terms ("full-time student," "campus," "term"), inability to report historical trends, increasing use of IT time to reconcile reports and data, lengthening lag time between senior administrators' requests for and receipt of important data for strategic decisions.

It was in this context that we purchased a BI system. The first lesson we learned was that selecting the right tool required us to be clear about our needs. What are the criteria for "right"? We needed data that was reliable and accurate, dynamic, serving constituents across the institution, conveniently accessible online, and scalable. We chose a tool that allowed us to create a Data Store to collect discrete information (Jane Doe's year in school, major, financial aid package), a Data Warehouse to collect aggregate information (how many sophomore English majors on the Duluth campus receiving Benedictine scholarships?), and the reporting tools that allow any budget manager or administrator to access the store and the warehouse to create reports.

Sounds wonderful! And it is wonderful, but putting the BI system into operation was not easy. The difficulty was not technological or quantitative; it was political: Who controls the fundamental data definitions? In the push and pull of meetings of a large committee established to implement BI, it gradually became obvious that people whose primary interests were tactical and departmental simply could not agree on common definitions. Senior administration had to take hands-on control of the process. This was our second lesson learned.

Accordingly, we formed an Institutional Reporting Committee (IRC) consisting of the vice presidents of academic affairs, of finance, of enrollment management, the chief information officer, and the institutional researcher. While seeking input from the larger committee, the IRC moved "top down" to establish data definitions to meet the broadest set of organizational needs, to establish reporting standards, and to guide process improvement. It was not the democratic process that campuses often prefer, but it worked. Overall, people are pleased with the results. When the registrar's office, admissions office, financial aid office, and student accounts office access the data warehouse, they draw from exactly the same data. The result is that reports are timely, accurate and consistent—and they provide the data we need to move forward, confident in our mutual understanding.

In the end, arriving at common data definitions requires attention to college strategy. Data should serve strategy, not just discrete tactical purposes. This was our third lesson. As already noted, our former set of data definitions had evolved in a way that served the day-to-day needs of operating departments, but limited our access to strategic information. One key priority for the College is to increase enrollment in our non-traditional offerings; with this in mind, the IRC retooled our data definitions to accommodate this strategy. We can now view and analyze unlimited combinations for headcount or student FTEs or credits taken by program, by campus, by term. The tactical need for efficiency in operations yielded to the need for strategic information.

A BI system can be costly (our upfront investment was $250K) and require a lot of staff training (intensive for key users for three to eight weeks; ongoing, but more moderate, for about a year). But the payback is generous and quick. Data reporting at St. Scholastica has increased ten-fold. Time spent retrieving information has been reduced by 50-75 percent. Collections work that took a half-day each month now takes less than a minute. The Controller saves over eight hours each semester on reconciling numbers. And so forth. Best of all, data is reliable and consistent, allowing for accurate and integrated planning, budgeting, and assessment. That's the whole point.

About the Author

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Larry Goodwin has served since 1998 as the 11th president of The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, MN. He was also the College's vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty.

During his tenure as president, enrollment has grown from 2,000 to 3,600. The College has opened three new campuses offering accelerated learning for adult students and has put several of its graduate programs online.

President Goodwin earned his doctorate at The University of Chicago, and he taught philosophy and theology at the College of St. Catherine for twelve years. He has particular interest in conceptions of deity and the problem of evil, reflecting his experience as a soldier in Vietnam. He is author of *The Ontological Argument of Charles Hartshorne*, and co-editor (with Philip Devenish) of *Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert Ogden*.

President Goodwin is active in the Duluth community as a Rotarian and board member of the United Way. He is past chair of Minnesota's Campus Compact and has served as a consultant/ evaluator for The Higher Learning Commission. President Goodwin currently serves as a board member of the Minnesota Private College Council as well as the Council of Independent Colleges.