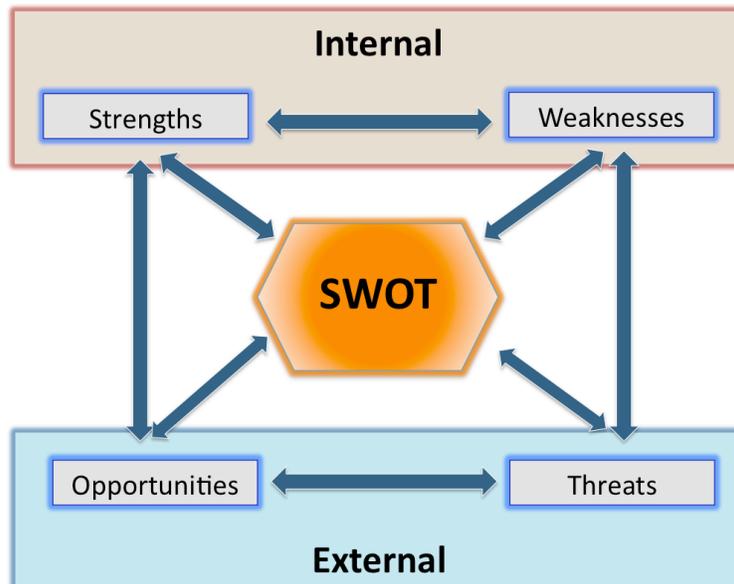


**Planning Observations and SWOT Analysis  
Community Colleges of Spokane**

**Dr. Richard A. Voorhees, Principal  
Voorhees Group LLC  
October 2010**

This report summarizes a three-day visit to the Community Colleges of Spokane (CCS) in mid-October 2010. This visit was intended to engage CCS' stakeholders in two critical areas: (1) the student success agenda in the United States and (2) the elements of effective strategic planning. Interactive sessions were conducted for students, faculty, classified staff, administrators, professional exempt, board members, foundation members, and the chancellor's cabinet. Participants were also invited to participate in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.



SWOT is a traditional tool that combines perceptions to help organizations identify issues during the early stages of a planning process. The diagram above depicts the relationships between SWOT categories. Strengths are the strong parts of the organization that can be directly controlled. Weaknesses, on the other hand, are those elements of the organization that are not positive but CCS can also control. Weaknesses represent areas that CCS can improve itself. Opportunities and threats operate outside the organization and while they are usually beyond control, CCS can perhaps influence their impact. The most productive use of energy, however, is on those elements that an organization can control, i.e., strengths and weaknesses.

SWOT responses were gathered from 78 individuals associated with CCS. Their perceptions were categorized and the ten most frequently occurring categories are presented below as broad themes underneath each SWOT area. The appendices contain a visual depiction

of each SWOT category as “word clouds” generated by Wordle that give prominence to words most frequently mentioned (Appendix A). Original responses from all participants sorted by category (Appendix B).

### **What, So What, and Now What**

A SWOT analysis can help an organization to determine “what.” What do we see? What does the SWOT tell us? What emerging patterns can we see? Often, these perceptions need to be tested and verified before firm conclusions are made. For this reason, and because perceptions are subjective, a SWOT analysis is only a beginning to answer the “so what” and “now what.”

The “so what” is found in efforts to make sense of the information collected by SWOT. What does the SWOT information mean to the Community Colleges of Spokane now and in the future? What effect is the information likely to have on the organization, students, and to CCS’ overall work? The “now what” explores options, resources, and how and when the organization can act. This report does not address the “so what” and the “now what” since both require CCS to integrate these SWOT results within its strategic planning process.

### **Cautions**

A few cautions about the use of SWOT analyses to inform planning are in order. First, SWOT analyses are highly subjective. When a wide range of participants are asked to complete a SWOT analysis, not all will have a deep understanding of the organizations strategic position. Second, the premium is on perceptions and most often these perceptions are gathered at the *beginning* of a planning process when dialog about organizational strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities is in the early stages. As the Community Colleges of Spokane engages in strategic planning these perceptions may grow deeper or may change as new perceptions are created. Ultimately, perceptions that are based on data and fact will be most helpful to the planning process. Last, what may be regarded as strength by a given respondent may be viewed as a weakness by another. Understanding these differences can help the Community Colleges of Spokane to plot future strategy (the “now what”) that makes the most sense in its context.

### **Strengths**

The top ten strengths are summarized below (Table 1). Nearly half (36 of 78) of those surveyed believe that CCS’ employees are its top strength. Included were comments on employee commitment and dedication, their longevity, and outstanding teaching. Community ties were the second most mentioned area. These comments include the District’s positive presence, its interaction with the community, and the reputation of the colleges. Third, many commented about the leadership of the District including the board’s stewardship, the new chancellor, and the previous leadership that produced a viable financial foundation for CCS.

Instructional programs were a notable strength, especially the wide range of programs. As noted above, however, what is regarded as strength frequently can also be regarded as a weakness in a SWOT process. For example, others regarded a wide range of instructional

programming as a weakness. It is interesting to note that the word “quality” was mentioned in only a few instances in connection with any of the strengths mentioned (see Appendix B).

<b>Table 1. Ten Top Strengths</b>	
<b>Count</b>	<b>Area</b>
36	Employees
23	Community
21	Leadership
19	Programs
13	Student centered/student success
12	Finances
10	Collaboration
9	Regional service
8	Commitment
7	Facilities and affordability (tie)

### **Weaknesses**

Table 2 presents the top ten elements that are less positive. It represents a subjective assessment of where the institution could improve itself and represent areas that CCS could control, at least in the eyes of the respondents. The most frequently identified weakness the need to clarify distinct roles for the District’s three delivery arms: SFCC, SCC, and IEL. These comments point to perceived unhealthy competition and lack of collaboration among these units, especially the impact on students wishing to take courses at more than one college. Lack of collaboration may be a result—or may be a cause—of the second most mentioned weakness, processes/bureaucracy.

The topic of finances also was frequently mentioned as a perceived weakness. Most of these comments were directed at the state budget situation (over which CCS has little control) while other comments about finances focused internally including comments about the need for budgeting to be transparent and connected directly to planning. Comments about leadership as weaknesses were mostly centered on turnover and loss of expertise although, as expected, there were several comments about style.

Comments about technology focused on outdated software and administrative systems in addition to perceived duplication. Faculty contracts also were mentioned as a perceived barrier to progress. Traditional mindset/Resistance to change was also mentioned as a barrier to progress. This can occur when new thinking has not yet crystallized and/or when those within the organization do not challenge traditional thinking. The Community Colleges of Spokane will want to examine all perceived barriers to action during its strategic planning process and look to eliminate the barriers it can and work with those outside its control with student success as the guiding force.

<b>Table 2. Ten Top Weaknesses</b>	
<b>Count</b>	<b>Area</b>
30	Lack of collaboration/territory
21	Processes/bureaucracy
19	Finances
19	Leadership
16	Technology
14	Contracts
14	Traditional mindset/Resistance to change
12	Programs
12	Student success
11	Communication
11	Disconnections

### **Opportunities**

Opportunities are those positive events occurring *externally* to CCS that might be pursued with new strategies. CCS could *influence* most of these events and circumstances in some way as it makes choices and applies its creativity. The top ten opportunity areas appear in Table 3.

New programming was mentioned most often including suggestions for programs in the green economy, health care, and aerospace. Suggestions also included expanding Running Start, dual admission/enrollment with universities, and developing expertise to further the student success agenda. Other suggestions were made for new collaborations including potential partnerships with the 4-year institutions in Spokane that are now operating under new leadership and to further relationships with K through 12. Increased collaboration with business/industry was mentioned as well as workforce entities.

Opportunities provided by new leadership were also mentioned including new ideas and perspectives, leadership for student success, and the commitment of the board to move forward with new ideas. One individual commented that the time appears right for change within CCS. Finances were mentioned in the context of an opportunity for CCS to examine what it currently does (and what it wants to do) and to make tough-minded decisions about future finances.

Opportunities were also identified in distance/online education, planning, and technology areas. These comments hold that new student markets can be identified through these avenues as well as their potential to create new cost efficiencies.

<b>Ten Top Opportunities</b>	
<b>Count</b>	<b>Area</b>
32	New Programming
27	Collaboration with External Entities
14	Leadership
13	Student success

<b>Ten Top Opportunities</b>	
<b>Count</b>	<b>Area</b>
10	Finances
7	Distance/online learning
7	Planning
7	Technology
6	Grant funding
5	Changing demographics

### **Threats**

Threats occur outside CCS' control and, while they are important, organizational energy is most efficiently focused on strengths and weaknesses that CCS can control. For example, the Washington State budget looms large. At the same time it is a significant threat, CCS may wish to enhance its performance in key areas, examine its own data to make rational decisions about internal budgets and resource deployment, and otherwise prepare coherent strategies to counteract what appears to be a prolonged period of declining state support.

External threats mentioned in the SWOT data collection include competition from private and public higher education land-based providers. It is also likely that online providers also pose a source of competition for CCS. Contracts were also mentioned as an external threat, perhaps because the perception is that unions also operate outside CCS.

<b>Ten Top Threats</b>	
<b>Count</b>	<b>Area</b>
54	Finances
14	Competition
8	Economy
5	Contracts
3	Collaboration/territory
3	Demographics
Tied (2)	Data, enrollment trends, Financial aid, K through 12 Dropout rates, Misfocused priorities

### **Other Planning Observations**

Several brief observations about planning appear may help the Community Colleges of Spokane as it engages in strategic planning during the 2010-2011 year.

1. It is very apparent that a “can do” attitude exists throughout CCS. Participants were energetic and eager to participate in planning that elevates organizational viability and student success.
2. CCS appears to understand the imperative for student success in its planning. Organizing its planning with student success as the ultimate, most important goal will bring all other lesser goals and activities into sharper focus.
3. Executed well, CCS’ new strategic plan will help the District work smarter and not harder. The new strategic plan can be the foundation for accountability, budgeting, as well as accreditation.
4. Many individuals remarked that strategic planning needed to be tied to budgeting and accountability for results. The presentations made during this visit provided several models for building on current operations to enhance budgeting for results that CCS might consider.
5. CCS’ planning process will be data-driven but will require more than just data. All data needs to be translated into “actionable information,” that helps answer questions about “so what” and “now what.” A revision of the District’s 2007 Environmental Scan, for example, should focus on the “so what” as should other data generated for the new plan.
6. The SWOT analysis is a beginning to the strategic planning process. The information presented here will require judicious interpretation before CCS turns from the “what” to the “so what” and “now what” in creating its new strategic plan