How Do I Become a Skilled Long-Term Planner?

Long-term planning requires a special set of tools to add to our time management toolbox. Long term planning is like looking into the lens of a camera. We look through a wide-lens and see an entire mountain range, with snow-covered peaks that are literally fifty or a hundred miles away. Peering through a portrait lens we see only a portion of the mountain range but can clearly identify the people in our hiking party and establish the distance from the trail head to the top of the mountain. Finally, the zoom lens depicts each step we take on our path, noting the smallest wildflower nestled into the root of a tree on the hiking trail and calling attention to obstacles that might block the path to the top of the mountain.

Attaining a desired life-time goal requires awareness of the big goal to see the full scope of our desire and to decide whether or not it is achievable, but if we don’t have an action plan we will likely not achieve our mission. Once we know what we want from life, a map is required to move us from our present position to the desired destination in the far future. A good hiker never leaves home without a detailed trail map. Maps are the only way we will ever achieve the toughest goals we set for ourselves in life. For instance, if a TCC student named Sylvia wants to travel to France to study abroad for one semester, her goal will not happen without a plan of action, especially since steps for world travel must be completed months before the actual departure date. Maps break broad pieces of the life-time goal into manageable units that may require several weeks or months to complete. Sylvia will need to work with the college at least 6 – 12 months prior to the trip, planning travel arrangements, room accommodations, tours, and the specialized topics to be covered during the trip, such as French and impressionism for her art major. Mapping the big picture will be done with the aid of many school resource people, but Sylvia will be accountable for finishing the projects, not the staff.

Next, Sylvia will need to complete single tasks on a daily basis and monitor her progress. Performing single steps such as applying for a passport and visa, having a transcript sent to the visiting school, and seeing a doctor for required vaccinations to travel abroad are just a few of the items she will need to do.

Weekly and daily monitoring of her to-do list is critical; if Sylvia misses a task, she may not be able to go on her trip. For instance, a U.S. citizen cannot leave and re-enter the country without a passport. Creating a routine to plan her weekly chores and check them from the list when completed is a monitoring-system that will help Sylvia attain her long-term goal. Achieving life-time goals requires managing up to a thousand single, short-term goals, and before Sylvia reaches Italy. She will complete them and attain her goal, or she will be sitting at home while her friends make the trip to France. Which student do you want to be?

To understand the planning process, think of goals in these terms:

- **Long Term Goals:** A year or up to a decade may be required to complete a long term goal. These goals are the big picture of our futures, the desires we will fulfill to live a rich and rewarding life. *Example: Complete an Associate of Liberal Arts with a 2.8 grade point average by December of 2015.* (Three years in the future).

- **Intermediate Goals:** Breaking the big picture into manageable segments that can be handled in a month or multiple months helps motivate us by keeping us focused on an outcome, or prize, that is only a few months ahead rather than years in the distant future. *Example: Complete twelve hours with a 2.6 grade point average by the end of this semester.*

- **Short Term Goals:** Single tasks that we complete during a week to insure that we actually do the work to achieve the intermediate goal. The short term goal may be a task we do one time, or it may be the same task that we repeat three or four times on various days of the week.
  - Example of a one-time goal: *Complete my study guide for the Strategies exam by Friday night this week.*
  - Example of a repeating goal: *Take 2 – 4 pages of notes in every class this week.*