

Hosting a Strategic Visioning Session

“Planning,” so the saying goes, “is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now.”

That was the mission given to 23 women who met on a July weekend at the site of the future Women's Leadership Center at Williams Bay. Their task was to deeply imagine a time when the Center is open and has become the place where conversations happen that could change the world. What might that look like? What's possible? What would it take to make that future happen? What hurdles might arise?

Exploring those questions was a diverse group of women leaders, invited because they represented a broad spectrum of experience in various industries. There was a former Chicago television news anchor and a board member from the Chicago Public Schools. There was a director of a bank for women and an executive producer for Oprah Winfrey. There was an award-winning commercial interior designer and a nonprofit search consultant—plus CEOs, company presidents, principals of consulting groups, and more.

These women didn't all know each other, but they did know the founder of the Women's Leadership Center, Ann Drake. “I would love to have your wisdom and experience in this planning process,” she had written to them in the spring. “And I want to update you on everything we've done so far and where we still hope to go.”

The strategic visioning work of this team began late on a Thursday afternoon in the architecture-award-winning Mabel Cratty Hall on the campus of George Williams College. As the sun began to sink, the group set out on a walking tour of the land where the Women's Leadership Center will rise. Leading them was a landscape architect who has been deeply connected to the project. He helped them understand the significance of the site and its unique natural resources. Throughout, the team was asked to ponder: What would it take to make this Women's Leadership Center best in class?

Afterwards, the group gathered back at the college for a reception and working dinner. They discussed what they'd seen and what they'd imagined. As stars came out, the day ended around a firepit on the campus lawn, enjoying s'mores. The women went to bed in the dorms, each in her own room with bathroom.

Friday dawned warm and sunny. Before breakfast, the women could opt to do a yoga class on the lawn (mats provided) or walk the Geneva Lake shorepath. Breakfast was a buffet in Mabel Cratty Hall. The morning was spent reviewing all the designs created by the Studio Gang architecture team for buildings at the Center. While learning about the proposed structures—in a setting designed to spur innovation and the exchange of ideas—the group was asked to brainstorm potential uses. What could happen here? Who might use this place, and to what end? They journaled for a while in notebooks they'd been given.

After a buffet lunch along the lake, the afternoon was dedicated to sharing the ideas generated during the morning's work. One participant wrote, “I was excited to hear so many ideas around “interdisciplinary” programs. These will be key to defining the Women's Leadership Center. That's how you spark breakthroughs, innovation, and new business.” “Thank you,” wrote another. “I felt personally invigorated by an expanded vision of what might be, in the company of women who intend to improve our environment and champion future generations of female leaders.”

After a quick break, the group convened one last time to talk about the future and next steps. “This was two days of inspiring, transformative conversations,” one woman wrote. “I feel free now to share information about the Women's Leadership Center so others can look forward to embracing this beautiful place for women in Williams Bay.”

The two days of strategic visioning ended with a reception and dinner at a private home near campus.

“I love that you brought together people who wouldn't otherwise intersect,” wrote one participant after the weekend. “The setting was magical.”

“I'm still glowing from our two phenomenal days together,” wrote another. “It was such an inspirational experience. Thank you and thanks to your team for your leadership and generosity of spirit. I'm looking forward to hearing how our ideas from this weekend evolve. It was an experience I will never forget.”