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Closing the Loop: Strategic Planning and Assessment

In the current age of assessment and accountability, the need for universities to develop strategic plans for the utilization of resources is routine. The challenge now is to clearly link planning goals and objectives to outcomes and to any actions taken as a result of assessment information gathered by the institution. This article is one example of how this process can be achieved.

Both strategic planning and assessment have been part of the rubric of higher education for decades. Public higher education is now required to demonstrate, in a concrete manner, the success of its educational missions through production of highly qualified graduates and good stewardship of resources.

The changing demands for accountability have also been apparent through the regional accrediting bodies that review higher education institutions. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is typical in requiring higher education institutions to demonstrate that they have a campus planning process in place to determine goals and objectives, that they enunciate that process, goals, and objectives in measurable terms, that they collect appropriate information to measure the goals and objectives, and finally, that they demonstrate how the information they have collected has been used to support or modify existing policies and processes within the regular planning process. All of the regional accrediting agencies, as well as accrediting bodies for professional programs, e.g., ABET and AACSB, have adopted similar expectations for programmatic and student learning outcomes for reaccreditation purposes. There is no place where planning, assessment, and "closing the loop" between the two can be avoided in higher education today.

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte will be used to illustrate one method for linking the campus strategic planning process with collection and use of assessment information.

The Process for Developing Strategic Academic Plans

In 1980, the academic planning process at the university was reflective of that on most campuses. Individual departments and units were required to write plans for their respective units for the next five years. On the whole, these focused on the development of new courses and programs, new faculty positions that would be needed, and the problems that they encountered in trying to meet the plans they presented. Every two years, the plans were updated.

The college deans and the Office of Academic Affairs read the plans and recorded the requests, but in reality, the plans were then filed and not used to any large degree to drive the day-to-day operations of the units, the colleges, or the division. The exercise was not actually an exercise in futility because it did inform major decision-making with regard to new projects, such as degree programs. The major perception across the campus among department chairs and faculty, however, was that the plans were merely one more thing that they had to do that did not make much difference in what actually happened. For most people involved in the development of the plans, there was little evidence that they indeed influenced the flow of resources or the day-to-day operations of their units. Instructions were issued centrally, documents were written, and documents were then forgotten. Regardless of how much the plans truly drove decision-making and planning, the widespread perception was that they did not serve a useful purpose.

In 1992, a new Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs instituted a revised planning procedure, emphasizing the strategic nature of the process. Through broad consultation with administrators and faculty, major themes were identified and developed for a new strategic plan for the division of academic affairs. A draft of a plan was written by the provost and widely circulated across the campus and through the Board of Trustees for comments and suggestions. After several months of drafting and redrafting, a finished document was submitted to faculty governance for approval. Additional hearings were held and the new plan was finally approved by the Faculty Council and was then forwarded to the Board of Trustees and unanimously approved.

This long and public process began a strategic planning exercise with high visibility and broad opportunity for participation. Within a general commitment to be inclusive of all major parts of the university community, there were also deliberate decisions made to exclude some items. In other words, not everyone's wish list was included. Priorities were established and items that had previously been on top, e.g., tailoring curriculum to meet individual faculty desires, dropped in their importance, while new issues emerged as critical to the mission of the University, e.g., the development of targeted programs in health.

The plan was structured around a five-year interval, initially for the years 1996-2001. Departments and colleges developed plans during the first round of planning, and administrative support units did the same during a second round. This established the primacy of the academic departments and the instructional mission of the university. Administrative unit plans were built not only on the campus plan, but also on the department and college plans as they related to their respective units.

It was clear from the first year of the process that not everything would be included in the plan, e.g., not all new faculty positions would be approved if they did not directly support basic educational programs or designated new degree programs. When department and college plans were sent back with requests for revision of goals and objectives and when units were asked to clearly indicate their wish lists in priority order, the significance of the planning process began to be understood across the campus. In addition, when new degree programs were not approved for submission to the general administration or when new budget monies were allocated or existing money re-allocated to new priorities, the message that strategic planning was necessary became clear.

To further illustrate the importance of the planning process, the provost implemented a new allocation policy that brought faculty positions back to the provost's office that had previously been essentially guaranteed to the respective departments and colleges. In order for deans and departments to keep a faculty position vacated by death, resignation or retirement, a case had to be that the position was crucial within the context of department and college plans. This policy change was an example of the need to tie critical resources to the planning process to demonstrate the importance of setting priorities and of the process itself. Without this clear link between plans and resources, which had been lacking in the earlier planning process, broad buy-in on the campus would not have occurred, nor would the process itself be taken seriously.

Planning and Assessment

Establishment and implementation of the strategic planning process is an important early step. However, the continuation of the planning process relies heavily on the assessment of the extent to which a plan's goals and objectives have been achieved and how the respective unit has modified its plans, policies, and programs, on the basis of the assessment findings.

Initially, plans for assessing goals and objectives were separate plans developed for the specific purpose of laying out how a unit would assess what it proposed to do. The exercise of preparing assessment plans was illuminating in that it resulted in plans that were equal in length to the unit's strategic plan, but bore little resemblance to specific goals and objectives in the strategic plans and were extremely general and vague about methodology to be used, who was responsible for conducting the assessment, and a time frame for accomplishing the assessment and use of its results. Many of the plans would have required doubling department budgets in order to actually accomplish what was proposed as an assessment plan. It quickly became apparent that in order for such plans to be truly useful, they would have to be integrated into each strategic plan and not be separate documents. When the cycle to revise the strategic plan for the 1998-2003 time period began, the instructions from academic affairs required units to incorporate their assessment plans into their strategic plans.

Part of the process for incorporating assessment into the academic strategic plans was the provision of open sessions that showcased how some departments and colleges had successfully accomplished the melding of the two. Deans and department chairs in particular were invited to attend these to better learn how planning and assessment

could be combined in a single document that met both the internal institutional needs and those of external accrediting agencies. As an example, the College of Engineering showcased its planning process within the context of the university and the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET).

In addition, a position was reallocated and redefined as a Program Evaluator with responsibility for providing feedback and assistance on the development of assessment measures, methods, and benchmarks, as well as on student learning outcomes. For the first time in the planning process, resources and expertise were provided to assist in the development of plans and measures of outcomes.

Individuals who are involved with program evaluation and accreditation on an ongoing basis often take for granted the methodologies, strategies, and terminology of planning and assessment. For most department chairs, faculty and deans, however, these components may be very foreign to them and not always embraced with enthusiasm.

With the offer of assistance to develop assessment plans within strategic plans, department chairs expressed surprise at the realization that someone at a central level within the Office of Academic Affairs was actually reading what they had prepared. It was also a realization that they too might have to pay more attention to what they wrote in their reports.

Annual Reports

The usefulness of assessment plans is in the results. In the university's planning process, departments, colleges, and support units have been required to submit annual reports on their accomplishments for years. Obviously, when five-year strategic plans are the foundation for the planning process, and assessment plans have been embedded in those plans, there will be goals and objectives that are not accomplished in a particular year. This created trepidation for some department chairs, who feared that they would be "graded down" because they had not met all of their goals and objectives. The effort to have units report on their accomplishments linked to specific and measurable objectives in their plans raised nightmare visions for many. The specter of evaluation had hit with a vengeance— "I'm making a list and checking it twice; gonna' find out who's naughty and nice!" Since resources were now tied to the plan, would they also run the risk of losing them if they didn't achieve their objectives?

This anxiety became apparent for many unit heads when the link between the plan, assessment, and annual reporting became clear, but was not simply self-serving. It was a new way of operating for most of these professionals, who had been trained in a system where plans were developed as wish lists designed to garner additional resources. Assessment was something akin to the Supreme Court's dictum on pornography, "I know it when I see it." And annual reporting was an opportunity to showcase and brag about what your faculty and students had achieved in any arena in the preceding year regardless of whether it had anything to do with an earlier plan.

Linking objectives, assessment, and reporting outcomes was precisely what accrediting agencies and state legislatures were pushing in their efforts to create greater accountability. These agencies were not so concerned with what the objectives were;

they were concerned, rather, with being able to point to clear indicators of achieving them, especially when tax dollars were funding the educational enterprise.

The instructions issued to the campus for the preparation of annual reports explicitly indicated that progress on achieving goals and objectives contained in the unit's strategic plan had to be the primary substance of the report. For each goal and objective, progress had to be documented through the appropriate assessment methods and measures and recorded in the annual report. The use of the assessment information had to be included as it related to changes in policies, procedures, actions, or curriculum—what actions were being taken in response to the performance information gathered through the assessment process?

One of the unforeseen results of requiring the inclusion of assessment outcomes in the annual report was the recognition by many departments and units that they needed to revise their goals and objectives to improve both the manageability of the assessment process, and to provide information that was more useful to them in making changes in curriculum and the allocation of resources. The recognition that objectives could be changed, and that information on student learning actually existed that could be used to improve program delivery and impact, was a welcome realization for some.

Lessons Learned

Strategic planning in one form or another has been around long enough in higher education to be a normal part of what institutions do. Assessment of our activities is also something that we as faculty and administrators engage in all the time, but often call something else or think about in a different context. As faculty we assess student performance in our courses continuously; we assess how well we did in teaching a particular course; we assess our own research and that of others. We are constantly assessing the substance of being a faculty member. As administrators we engage in deciding new positions, new hires, budget allocations, and the success of programs and services for students and other constituents. We are making decisions based on our assessments of situations and information every day.

The difference now is that we have moved to insisting that objectives or goals for what we want to do be explicitly enunciated, as should the criteria or expectations we have for our actions or programs, and the collection of outcome indicators in a measurable and reproducible form. We not only have introduced greater specificity into our work, but also the ability to replicate what we do. For institutions of higher education, accustomed to engaging in systematic research on a broad scale, the introduction of current assessment processes and expectations should be a natural for most of us—it fits with our graduate training and the importance of conducting research to discover knowledge, and to test hypotheses.

Educating the university community to the connection between planning (whether it be a new course or a campus academic plan) and assessment of the goals and objectives of the plan (whether it be student success in learning the course material or the approval of a new degree program), is a major challenge for any campus. Relating the overall campus planning/assessment process to activities and language that individual

faculty and administrators know improves the opportunity for a successful campus outcome. The applied nature of the curriculum in most urban universities and the emphasis on the connection to the community complements an assessment approach that stresses collection of information that is useful for improving program delivery and success. If it isn't providing you with information that helps to determine whether what you are doing is beneficial and effective, then don't continue to collect the information. If the goals and objectives are not reflective of what you wish to accomplish, then you had better adopt different or modified ones.

The linkage of planning and assessment can be accomplished successfully, but it requires consistent support from key academic administrators starting with the chief academic officer, to the deans, to the department chairs, and to unit heads. Consistency and frequency of communication are essential to a successful process. When changes occur in key administrative positions, there is also frequently a delay in implementing the overall process the danger for disruption in the process until the new person is comfortable with the existing process or changes it to accommodate new preferences.

It is also critical that the planning/assessment process be widespread and public. Every unit on campus must be involved, or at least given the opportunity to be involved in the development of the strategic plan and in assessment of goals and objectives of the plan attained. The widespread involvement maximizes the sense of commitment and buy-in for the process. It also allows for those closest to the delivery of programs and services to indicate, within the broader institutional goals and objectives, what is important to them. By insisting that every unit enunciate in measurable terms how what they do fits within the overall campus planning priorities, every unit is linked to the whole, and each can see how they contribute to the overall mission of the institution in ways that are also meaningful to them on a day-to-day basis. The actual assessment process of collecting and using data to evaluate achievement of goals and objectives fairly quickly reveals which unit goals and objectives are inappropriate or ineffective in achieving desired outcomes. It also may reveal where institutional goals and objectives do not reflect what is actually occurring at the university.

Successful campus assessment processes also have an administrative home. A central administrative officer with a clear assignment of responsibility for overseeing the ongoing assessment process is essential: the actual responsibility for conducting assessment tasks can be decentralized, but someone must oversee the campus process to ensure that it stays "on track." Planning and assessment are not decennial activities, but ongoing activities every term and every year. If assessment information is to be useful, it must be collected on a routine schedule and used on a routine basis to make critical resource decision within the institution.

Planning and assessment also require a budget to support activities. The planning and assessment processes must be clearly integrated into what everyone does at the institution, but the reality is that it does require people, time, and resources to accomplish. Money must also be available to meet the costs of conducting both planning and assessing across the institution. It is definitely not something that can simply be added on because what people are already doing looks to be successful.

Web-based Framework for Planning and Reporting

At UNC Charlotte, one of the greatest challenges was to determine a way in which the mechanics of reporting on progress for every goal and objective in the strategic plan could be achieved with minimal hassle at the unit level. Departmental chairs were not pleased with the prospect of having to list all of their goals and objectives and then report their assessment of each and how they had used the assessment information to make changes or maintain performance.

To facilitate the process, an assessment team developed a Web-based template to allow each unit's planned goals and objectives to automatically appear within a Web template with space for entering assessment information and subsequent action based on the outcomes assessment. The original strategic plans are entered centrally so that units are able to start the reporting process without having to enter their original set of goals and objectives.

A Web template was also developed in-house that reflected the components of the academic strategic plans for each department and unit in academic affairs. Since the annual reports were to be the mode for reporting assessment of progress on achieving goals and objectives, a parallel template was developed that built off the plan template. When a unit reached the point of submitting its annual report, it could pull up its Web-based plan, and click on the appropriate button to pull up the template for the annual report. Windows would then appear allowing units to alter their mission statements, discuss limitations and opportunities during the preceding year that affected their ability to accomplish goals, and report unanticipated accomplishments during the year. For each goal or objective in the plan, a parallel window appears for reporting assessment data and the subsequent actions taken by the unit as a result of the assessment information. Units can even submit their annual reports via the Web if they desire to do so.

The Web-based system, named ASPIRE (for Academic Strategic Planning and Institutional Reporting Environment), was designed to both facilitate the annual reporting process and to directly connect it to the strategic planning process. At the same time, it was designed on the Web to be available to anyone who was interested in a similar system for their campus, for community access, or to others for benchmarking purposes. Limited but strong resistance developed from some department chairs, who feared that posting the information on the Web might air "dirty laundry." The underlying fear was that it would encourage units to post only goals and objectives that were easily attainable, popular, and acceptable to important constituencies who might view them. In order to preserve the system as an option and to demonstrate the utility of the system for linking planning and reporting, the Web system was made optional and restricted to on-campus usage, i.e., not published on the Web—at least in the initial rounds of reporting.

The Web-based system also allowed for ease in collecting and reading reports. All reports were in a standard format or template, but within the template there was opportunity to present information and accomplishments in different ways that reflected individual differences among departments and units. It also became possible to adjust and modify the strategic plan and its priorities on an ongoing basis to more accurately

reflect the changing realities of conditions on most urban campuses. The artificial five-year plan with two-year updates became a more seamless process that was able to reflect the rapidly changing and fluid nature of circumstances confronting metropolitan campuses. Major alterations to the campus strategic plan could still be handled on a more formal two-year cycle to respond to external schedules for submitting new degree programs for approval, such as budget cycles. But as a living document that actually reflected what was occurring on the campus, the Web system provided a vehicle for a truly meaningful process of planning and reporting that was both timely and accurate.

Conclusion

The primary nemesis of assessment in higher education has been the use of outcome measures to influence subsequent actions and decisions. An important step in overcoming this challenge is the direct linkage of strategic planning with annual reporting. By insisting through the planning process that units include specific and measurable goals and objectives for the specified planning period, the foundation is laid for making the annual report a valuable means for updating the plan. Once the plan is in place, the annual report can become the tool to require units to report on their progress in achieving each of their goals and objectives contained in the plan. The assumption is, of course, that if a goal or objective is in the plan, it is worth trying to achieve; and if it is worth achieving, then reporting on progress toward that end needs to be recorded at least on an annual basis. Even if a particular goal or objective is scheduled to be addressed in the third year of the plan, insisting on a progress report each year ensures that the goal or objective remains in someone's awareness; that it remains to be achieved and is still on the agenda for action. Reporting on progress toward achieving goals and objectives through the inclusion of assessment data also provides the opportunity for discussion of actions and decisions taken to enhance or sustain achievement of the goal. In short, it begins to institutionalize the expectation that assessment information will be used to inform actions and decisions.

The linkage of planning and assessment and annual reporting has provided a framework on at least one urban campus that allows the institution to better publicize its accomplishments in meeting student educational needs, to be more responsive to various external constituencies, and to be better informed internally about the success of the overall educational enterprise on the campus.

Suggested Readings

Banta, Trudy W., *Making a Difference: Outcomes of a Decade of Assessment in Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

Banta, Trudy W., J. P. Lund, K. E. Black, and F. W. Oblander, *Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).