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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the success one institution achieved by placing a faculty committee at the heart of its effort to create an electronic institutional portfolio for accreditation, accountability, and assessment. Working in partnership with the institutional research office, the committee provided faculty opportunities to think about and discuss the larger questions of institutional priorities, faculty roles, and assessment of student learning in a cross-disciplinary environment. This collaborative approach to developing the portfolio drew institutional research to the center of campus planning and decision making and marked a change in the perception of institutional research on the campus. (Author/SLD)

ENHANCING THE ROLES OF FACULTY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCHERS IN CAMPUS-WIDE INITIATIVES

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Enhancing the Roles of Faculty and Institutional Researchers

In Campus-Wide Initiatives

This paper discusses the success one institution achieved by placing a faculty committee at the heart of its effort to create an electronic institutional portfolio for accreditation, accountability, and assessment. Working in partnership with the institutional research office, the committee provided faculty opportunities to think about and discuss the larger questions of institutional priorities, faculty roles, and assessment of student learning in a cross-disciplinary environment. This collaborative approach to developing the portfolio drew institutional research to the center of campus planning and decision-making and marked a change in the perception of IR on the campus.

Enhancing the Roles of Faculty and Institutional Researchers In Campus-Wide Initiatives

As pressure grows to produce accountability and assessment information for internal and external audiences, campuses are looking for better ways to engage faculty in institutional initiatives. This paper discusses the success one institution achieved by placing a faculty committee at the heart of its effort to create an electronic institutional portfolio for accreditation, accountability, and assessment. The committee provided faculty opportunities to think about and discuss the larger questions of institutional priorities, faculty roles, and assessment of student learning in a cross-disciplinary environment.

Another important result was the emergence of a new perception of institutional research among faculty and administrators on campus. Through its collaborative approach to developing the portfolio, the project drew institutional research to the center of campus planning and decision-making. Faculty and institutional researchers worked together, as partners, to address important issues surrounding the institutional mission and its relationship to teaching and learning. This partnership marked a change in the perceived role of institutional researchers as simply information providers toward a new role as "information architects, change agents, and consultants of choice" (Matier, Sidle, & Hurst, 1995).

The Urban Universities Portfolio Project

In 1998, the Oregon University System adopted a new funding model that prompted the state's higher education institutions to find ways to become more flexible and adaptive. In light of this, Portland State University (PSU) sought external funding for initiatives that

emphasized flexibility, responsiveness, and accountability. One of these was the Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP), funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education.

PSU joined six urban universities in the three-year project to develop electronic institutional portfolios that would communicate their work to external and internal audiences through the World Wide Web. The UUPP emerged from discussions at the national level on the reform of self-study practices in accreditation. It looked to the Web as a new medium for communicating quality assurance and institutional improvement information to various audiences.

Institutional Portfolios

A portfolio is a folder, either real or virtual, that contains a selection of information on a particular topic. Institutional portfolios contain examples of a university's work in relation to its mission and goals, featuring the elements of reflection and self-assessment. Rather than showcasing everything the institution is doing, a portfolio contains a focused selection of evidence in the form of numerical information, narratives, graphics, and video or audio clips that can be used to document improvement and accountability.

With their focus on reflection, assessment, and accountability, portfolios provide a place where many of the "big" questions facing universities today can be addressed. For many faculty members, the work of the administration in grappling with these questions may seem distant and separate from their own concerns. Web-based portfolios allow information about institution-level initiatives, and about individual faculty work, to be more widely available. Through discussion boards and other interactive tools, portfolios also can support on-line discussions about important issues facing the campus.

Decision-Making Environment

Often, management and leadership in institutions of higher education are equated with herding cats. While administrators may feel that they have a broad and overarching view of institutional priorities, many faculty are loyal to their disciplines first and the institution second. In many instances, executive officers find that they must rely primarily on moral suasion to convince faculty that certain ideas make sense, or that changes should be considered. As a consequence, university officers whose style is primarily top-down normally do not last long in their positions.

Yet, the issues currently facing higher education call for decisive action, and there is a need for more campus-wide involvement in decisions (Matier, Sidle & Hurst, 1995). While resources are at a premium, the demand for services is increasing. The university's constituents are more diverse than ever, and each expects to be heard and accommodated. In this environment, colleges and universities are being called on to play key roles in such major policy areas as public school improvement, workforce development, and increasing the civic capacity of communities. These factors, and more, speak to the need for faculty and administrators to be on the same page regarding the future directions of the university.

Organizational Context

Universities are similar to all large organizations in that they often make an artificial distinction between administration and the "work" of the institution. As Mintzberg (1987) notes: "Large organizations try to separate the work of hands and minds. In doing so, they often sever the vital feedback link between the two" (p. 69). Establishing this link may require a change in our academic culture to

one in which interactions between faculty and administrators regarding institutional priorities are a natural expectation of doing business.

Morgan (1997) discusses organizational culture as the patterns reflected in the values, ideologies, and norms that are enacted in day-to-day rituals and routines. Stated somewhat differently, a culture is not something that can be simply mandated or wished for. Rather, it is the sum total of how the organization actually works. University cultures are ripe for examination, as the issues facing higher education bring to the forefront issues that traditionally have existed below the surface.

If we bring the hands of administrators together with the minds of faculty to meet these challenges, we should expect to witness a change in their respective roles. Faculty would need to "develop a stronger sense of obligation to the institution that supports their teaching and research." Administrators, on the other hand, would "…include a willingness to act from a genuine commitment to sustain what faculty value and seek most to preserve in their professional live" (Policy Perspectives, 1996, p. 8).

Pressures exist for a more collaborative, inclusive culture, one in which both administrators and faculty play a key role in the process of charting a direction for the campus. In this model, faculty are involved in these activities from the beginning. This marks a departure from the historical norm, for as Floyd notes (1985), "…faculty are particularly frustrated by considerations of timing. Sometimes they perceive that they are consulted only after a course of action has been decided upon" (p. 55).

Involving Faculty

Recognizing the central role faculty could play in the development of the portfolio, PSU's provost appointed a ten-member

committee consisting of individuals who were not the "usual suspects" for committee service. They were, instead, individuals who were known to be involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning. A current faculty member who had been the Dean of the Graduate School of Education for over twelve years was asked to serve as chair.

Assessment of student learning was a key component of the UUPP, prompting the need for direct faculty involvement in development of the portfolios (Ketcheson, 2001). The importance of including faculty in initiatives focused on teaching and learning and assessment has been noted in the literature. As Morse and Santiago (2000) state: "Faculty leaders knowledgeable about outcomes assessment can and should take the lead in educating peers about assessment and in setting up institutional structures that facilitate the planning process, and in guiding institutional initiatives toward institutional change" (p. 33).

The committee met twice per term during the three-year project. Meetings were organized as working sessions, in which the conceptual framework, principles of design, and plan for gathering content were developed. Initially, the committee identified three broad categories of evidence that reflected the university's mission: academic, external, and student issues. It then divided itself into small groups to begin identifying content to be included under each of these headings. As the portfolio began to take shape, the committee provided feedback to the IR staff on technical and content-related issues, and formulated strategies for integrating the portfolio into the campus culture.

Floyd (1985) summarizes the literature on successful group leadership by identifying a number of steps a leader should follow to guide group-decision making. They are:

> …presenting a problem in goal-oriented teams, presenting a problem free of any implied decision, encouraging participation by all group members, creating a free enough atmosphere for disagreement and conflict on ideals and proposals to be expressed, and taking periodic action to keep the group on the problems, thus giving the group a sense of accomplishment (p. 59).

Throughout the project, the committee chair and project director provided an open environment in which creative ideas could be offered, discussed, and tested on the web site. Faculty developed a sense of ownership of the portfolio and felt invested in its future because they had been actively involved, as a team, in bringing the project to a successful conclusion.

The Changing Role of Institutional Research

Institutional research (IR) may not be the place one would look first to enhance participation of faculty in the key issues that define the future of a university. Hutchings and Schulman (1999) have noted that, traditionally, IR's function was primarily a "…company audit, sitting outside the organization's inner workings but keeping track of 'effectiveness' as witnessed by graduation rates, student credit hours, faculty workloads, and so forth" (p. 15). Indeed, that has long been the historical role of most IR offices—a role that has played out relatively well within the university that was largely a closed system and considered that the way of doing business yesterday was sufficient for carrying out business today.

Yet, some have called for a change in the role of institutional researchers from information providers to information architects (Matier, Sidle, & Hurst, 1995). The information architect uses data to bring together constituent groups to help identify problems and generate an array of proposed solutions. This requires skills in not only in identifying useful and reliable data, but also in facilitating the process by which disparate groups can come together to interpret

the data. These activities form a basis for a better understanding of the present culture, as well as setting the stage for cultural change in the university of the future.

In this sense, faculty and administrators are key participants in the co-creation of the adaptive university. As PSU discovered, IR can play an active role in this process, residing somewhere between faculty and administration. As Hutchings and Schulman (1999) note:

> Imagine, instead, a kind of institutional research that asks much tougher, more central questions…If we reconceived institutional research to be about such questions, in the service of its faculties, led by faculty members, then the scholarship of teaching would not be some newly conceived arena of work, or a new route to tenure, but a characteristic of the institution that took learning seriously (p. 15).

PSU's Collaborative Approach

In selecting the campus project director, PSU's provost made an unusual decision. Rather than appointing a faculty member, as provosts at the other five UUPP institutions had done, he appointed the institutional research director to lead the project. In doing so, he hoped to better integrate institutional research data into discussions surrounding mission, priorities, and goals. The appointment coincided with changes that were just beginning in the IR office.

In May 1998, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning began moving toward a more collaborative, team-oriented approach to institutional research. Literature on the challenges in meeting information needs of the next century suggests that increased interactions with constituents, team work and group process, and flexibility will come to characterize the work of institutional researchers (Hurst, Matier, & Sidle, 1998). At PSU, the institutional portfolio project supported this notion of institutional research as a

collaborative enterprise, linked to faculty work and the broader objectives of student learning.

Implementation of this idea on any campus is difficult, as long-held cultural notions and traditional hierarchical structures often work against shared decision making. As faculty and institutional researchers at PSU began to collaborate, they found that they had much in common. They shared a degree of frustration with their roles in institutional decision making, and similar values regarding the goals of the institution in promoting and documenting excellence in teaching and learning. This newfound collegiality elevated the IR staff in the eyes of faculty, and prompted reconsideration by the administration of their position in the decision-making structure.

Faculty Perspectives

Through their work in developing the institutional portfolio, the faculty committee gained the opportunity to articulate a connection between their work and the mission and goals of the institution as a whole. In periodic interviews throughout the project, members commented that they saw their work as "creative," "exciting," "something with real meaning." They appreciated the faculty-driven nature of the project and felt that the lack of administrative control gave them the freedom to do what they do best: think, discuss, and create. Being included in the project was important to them; they felt "special" and "honored," and were enriched by the opportunity to work with colleagues from across campus with whom they otherwise might not have the occasion to interact.

Most of all, they appreciated being asked to produce something, rather than to comment on work that had already been completed. The project, both at PSU and on the national level, allowed faculty and IR staff to follow many different paths in developing their web sites,

creating a situation in which learning was encouraged and mistakes were seen as opportunities for improvement. In fact, as Peter Ewell has commented, PSU and the other UUPP institutions effectively "blew up" their sites several times before they found designs that met their objectives. At PSU, this process of experimentation allowed faculty and IR staff to bring hands and minds together in a creative process that helped them to gain a new, and shared, understanding of institutional mission, goals, and priorities.

Toward the end of the project, some of the committee members reflected on what they expected when they were first asked to join the project. One comment illustrated the perceived distinctiveness of the committee's work:

> I saw the portfolio project as an opportunity to think differently—and in a big way—about how the university was represented, both the stories and the manner of their telling.

These initial expectations were, for the most part, borne out during the course of the project. This was reflected, most obviously, in the active participation of members over the three years of the project. Attendance was high not only at regularly scheduled meetings but at special sessions, such as site visits by members of the national portfolio project. Participants expressed their continued interest in "wrestling with ideas that demanded the use of my intellect," and "working with an intelligent, creative, and serious group of people." Indeed, it became clear that the committee came to see themselves as a sub-culture of sorts, one that demanded the best of them and to which they owed their best performance.

The relationship that emerged between the IR staff and the faculty committee was a surprise to nearly everyone. Throughout the project, the IR staff and committee members became equal partners, co-

developers of the portfolio, both conceptually and technically. One member commented:

> It was surprising to me that [the project director] and her staff took seriously what we said and acted on it between meetings---often, when I have served on advisory boards, the staff do what they want and often ignore the advice of the board.

Institutional Research Perspectives

One result of the participation of institutional researchers in the portfolio project was to increase the use and credibility of IR data by faculty. During the course of the project, more faculty members approached the IR office when they had questions or needed information for departmental management or for their own research. The faculty began to view the IR office less as the "numbers office" than as a center for information and research on topics of interest to them. As one IR staff member commented,

> Because IR and faculty worked so well together as a team, faculty were able to learn more about the skills we have to offer and the resources that we can make available to them.

Institutional researchers have experienced greater involvement in initiatives focused on teaching and learning. For example, IR staff worked with a faculty senate committee to solicit feedback on a list of proposed markers of the baccalaureate degree. The project included a discussion board on the portfolio on which campus reactions to the proposed markers were posted, and then summarized by the faculty committee, working side by side with IR staff. Another key role for IR staff was on the assessment resource network, a team of individuals experienced in assessment tools and techniques who were available for consultation with departments and programs in developing and implementing assessment plans.

Participation in the portfolio contributed to the refocusing of institutional research at PSU. The portfolio concept, combined with the environment of the web, allowed IR staff to begin thinking about presenting information in new ways, beyond the traditional tables and reports. As one IR staff member stated,

> We had to stop thinking in terms of summary reports, or the old fact book formats. We learned that, in a portfolio, those methods of displaying information are just not enough to show the link between institutional objectives and data.

Portland State University's Portfolio

PSU's institutional portfolio is built on a conceptual framework developed by the faculty committee and their IR colleagues. Portfolio content is organized around five central themes: Teaching and Learning, Research and Scholarship, Community and Global Connections, Student Success, and Institutional Effectiveness. As the institution began absorbing the portfolio into its decision-making processes, two new themes were added: Vision and Planning, and Self-Study (this theme will form the basis for the university's reaffirmation of accreditation in 2005).

During 2001-02, the administration envisioned a use for the portfolio in focusing strategic priorities, documenting actions, and in stimulating internal and external conversations about values, vision, and mission. Faculty continued to play a role in the evolution of the portfolio through membership on the university's planning committee, focus groups on vision and values, and participation in other campus-wide discussions regarding institutional priorities.

Conclusions

PSU's experience led to learning within the organization not only about how best to involve faculty in institution-wide initiatives, but in how to create an effective and engaged institutional research

function, based on collaboration with the faculty. It remains to be seen whether or not this model will be extended to other campus-wide projects. The portfolio project was, in many ways, unique; it provided more opportunities for creativity than can be said for many other initiatives. As one faculty member commented,

> You can trust the creative process of people when they are motivated to be creative…on the other hand, there is danger in simply giving people creative freedom when there is no accountability. Lucky for us, [the project director] was accountable, and she was invested in keeping the project on track. She and her staff also participated in the creativity and envisioning.

Committee members felt a commitment to the project because they were asked to do something they felt had value and provided them with opportunities to use their talents. As one of them said,

> The greatest satisfaction may come from participation in large scale (sometimes high stakes projects). This project seemed to be the "real deal" and not a pale, housekeeping project…Given the possible impact of the portfolio, the faculty work done would seem to have a multiplier effect that's often missing in one's committee work as a faculty member.

Did administrators change as a result of this project? It is true that the administration adopted the portfolio as part of its planning strategy, and planned to use content in the portfolio for the university's accreditation self-study in 2005. But, increasing administrative participation has led to a slight change in focus from student learning to one that is more concerned with managerial processes. In an example of this, some administrators expressed concerns that the portfolio themes may be too "faculty-oriented," and suggested that they might focus, instead, on broader institutional themes, such as "partnerships" or "initiatives." By sustaining the faculty committee beyond completion of the grant project, the project

team hoped to ensure that checks and balances between faculty and administrative objectives were maintained.

The processes used at PSU were very successful, ensuring faculty involvement and a tangible product. Issues concerning resources and the sustainability of the portfolio into the future still linger. But, the collaboration among faculty and institutional researchers in this project produced lasting results that may influence the implementation of other campus-wide initiatives.

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