

# **Developing Institutional Indicators: The Role of Institutional Research**

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The name of DePaul has been replaced with the MdWest designation in all the citations for the purposes of the review

# Developing Institutional Indicators: The Role of Institutional Research

## ***Abstract***

Universities are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability in operations that affect student enrollment and that contribute to the increased cost of higher education. Institutional researchers are responding by working to provide strategic data-driven decision support that enables managers to evaluate the benefit of dollars spent on both instructional activities and non-classroom activities. While tools such as key performance indicators are useful for study of traditional activities, these tools frequently lack the flexibility to describe and generate all types of data required by the diverse, complex non-classroom activities of successful universities. This paper demonstrates how this problem can be addressed by involving relevant personnel in identifying mission-based success factors, indicators and learning assessments within key decision domains. A methodology is demonstrated that links assessed outcomes in Student Affairs to University strategic purposes.

### **What We Do**

“Information anxiety is produced by the ever widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand. It is the black hole between data and knowledge, and it happens when information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know.” (Wurman, R. S. 1989. *Information anxiety*. New York: Doubleday.)

## ***Introduction***

Universities are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability in operations that affect student enrollment and that contribute to the cost of higher education. Institutional researchers are responding by working to provide strategic data-driven decision support that enables managers to evaluate the benefit of dollars spent on both instructional activities and non-classroom activities. While tools such as key performance indicators can be shown to be useful for study of traditional activities, these tools frequently lack the flexibility to describe and generate all types of data required by the diverse, complex non-classroom activities of successful universities. For example, institutional managers need to answer questions concerning how expenditures for non-classroom, non-athletic student activities contribute to successful learning processes or to the overall success of academic program management. Data needed to answer such questions may not be found in all university databases.

This paper demonstrates how this problem can be addressed by involving relevant personnel in identifying success factors and indicators within key decision domains. The conclusions show that our institutions are continuing the move toward a data-informed decision process to include accomplishments at multiple levels of the university. With the partnership of Institutional Research and managers in functions such as Student Affairs, our universities can move toward the strategic capabilities we need to be sustainable in the future.

## ***Approach and Methodology for Identifying Indicators***

It is generally accepted that becoming a strategically managed university involves the use of metrics in a manner that causes our key activities and functions to be consistent with the

mission of the institution. This requires that decision makers go beyond the singular identification of expenditures for instructional services to a description of other value-added activities within the context of the mission. Even in cases where institutions have no pressing public mandate to "operate efficiently and with accountability," regional accreditations agencies encourage managers to recognize the need is to develop a culture of evidence and awareness of analytics consistent with its core values. We have sought to raise the analytical awareness at our institution by engaging in projects that use traditional strategic management tools and techniques. Tools such as the balanced scorecard have evolved to meet the specific needs of the university. We have also developed underlying conceptual models for situations where data needs surface. The case used to demonstrate these projects is "The Student Affairs Assessment Initiative."

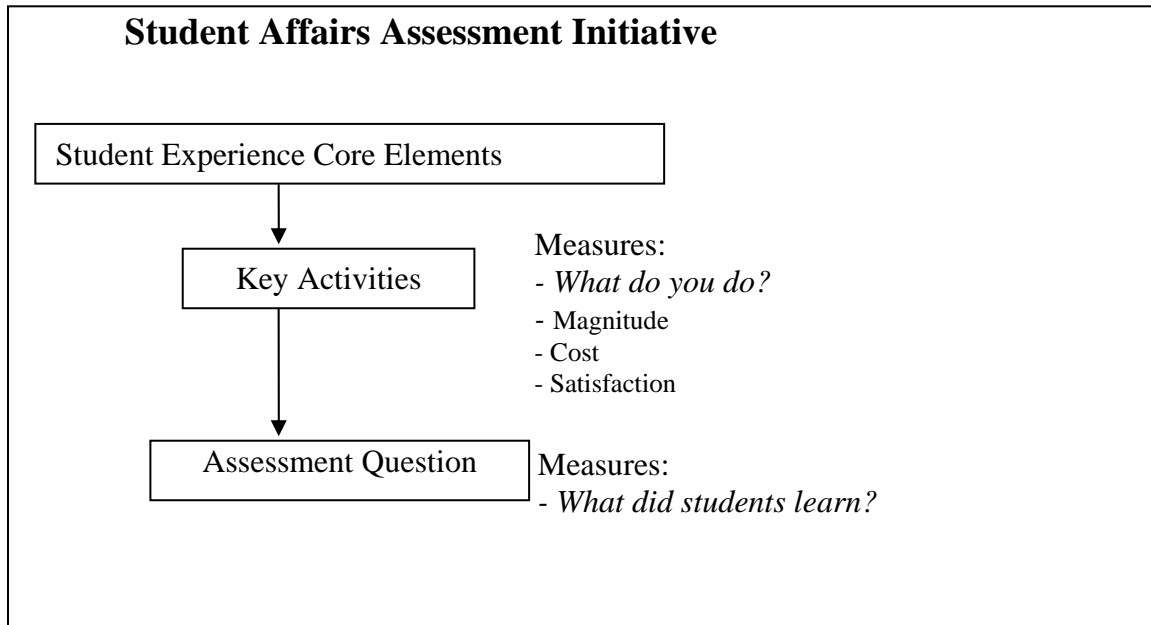
### **The Student Affairs Assessment Initiative**

Since January 2003, the Student Affairs Division has engaged the university community in a process to define and shape the "University Student Experience." The goal is to enhance the quality of life and the learning environment for all students. This effort supports several of the University Learning Goals such as increasing the understanding of multiple cultures. The outcome of this effort has been the development of a long-range strategic plan that includes the goals and strategies that support and enhance a successful student experience. Consistent with good practices in higher education, the comprehensive strategic plan includes an assessment plan that (1) measures how the Student Affairs Division is meeting its stated goals and (2) strengthens the work of the division by building systems of accountability and continuous improvement. With the inclusion of an assessment plan, named the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, the

project becomes part of the integrated university strategic plan that both enriches the lives of students and greatly contributes to the overall enactment of the university’s mission.

Two key components comprise the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative -- the Key Activities Report and the Learning Outcomes Assessment. The components are represented in Exhibit 1. The Key Activities component addresses the question: “What do you do?” Once completed, this report serves as a “snapshot” of the function’s activities, performance indicators and measurements. The second component of the Assessment Initiative, the “Learning Outcomes Assessment,” addresses the question, “So what?” In other words, Student Affairs assesses what they are doing and what students are learning from the programs and services they offer.

**Exhibit 1**



The action plan for implementing the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative laid out procedures and timelines for facilitating completion of the initiative. The tentative outline, due date, and suggested questions provided to jump-start the process are shown in Exhibits 2. In addition, the Student Affairs Division institutionalized its assessment activities through five

activities – (1) development of a Student Affairs Assessment Committee, (2) establishment of a connection with the Academic Affairs Office of Teaching, Learning and Assessment, (3) creation of the “Student Affairs Fact Book”, (4) involvement of Student Affairs in the North Central Association Review, and (5) development of a Student Affairs Annual Report. They are taking an active role in explaining to the state how the university is supporting and implementing the state performance indicators.

## **Exhibit 2**

1. Departmental 2004-05 Student Experience Report –
  - A. Mission
  - B. Goals
  - C. Strategies
2. Key Activities Report –

For each Key Activity:

  - A. How would you measure:
    - ❖ Cost?
    - ❖ Magnitude?
    - ❖ Satisfaction?
  - B. What are the learning outcomes?
3. 2004-05 Learning Outcomes Assessment Report –
  - A. Mission
  - B. Goals
  - C. Key Activities & Learning Outcomes
  - D. Assessment Project(s) 2004-05 Academic Year
  - E. Assessment Methods
  - F. Implementation of Assessment Project(s)
    - ❖ Who is responsible for what?
    - ❖ Timeline

The goals associated with the Student Affairs Initiative emerged out of its links to the university mission and were related both to support of the University’s efforts in quality improvement and its accreditation efforts. To meet these goals, Student Affairs personnel were engaged in discussions and workgroups to develop assessment at two levels. Level I was defined

at the level of the departments within the various areas of Student Affairs. These departments are where the programs and activities of Student Affairs are conducted. Level II was defined as the three areas of the Student Affairs Division – (1) Diversity Education/Leadership, (2) Student Advocacy/Community Relations, and (3) Student Development. This is the management level of Student Affairs. The following charges were communicated for each level:

Level I-Each department within an area of Student Affairs was asked to identify (at least) one question about student learning, engagement, or interest in the department and document its answer each year; and

Level II -The three areas of Student Affairs were asked to reflect on the individual department assessment reports within their area and to provide and document feedback to the units. The three areas could also engage in an assessment that cuts across the individual departments.

Exhibit 3 describes the basic steps for the individual departments. The most meaningful questions about learning/ engagement/interest in departments are expected to come out of conversations already taking place in the departments. These questions in turn provide the foundation for identification of performance indicators that are relevant to assessment of these activities. As a partner in the process, Institutional Research has been working with the departments to locate areas of possible inquiry and strategies for assessment. These questions are guided by the goals of Student Affairs, the University mission, and the University learning goals. The breadth of some questions may necessitate that assessment be spread over several years. In such cases, the division is asked to examine a different aspect of the question or problem each year and thus, document progress in assessment for accreditation and program reviews.

**Exhibit 3**

<p><b>Level I – Each Department</b></p>	
<p>The assessment process for each department consists of three basic steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posing and answering one question each year about some aspect of student learning, engagement, or interest:</li> <li>• Proposing any necessary changes to improve learning/engagement/interest;</li> <li>• Documenting this process.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Report Questions for Level I – Departments</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>What question was asked? What group of individuals did the question focus on?</b></li> <li>2. <b>Describe how the question was answered.</b></li> <li>3. <b>What was learned?</b></li> <li>4. <b>What actions did or will the department take or consider to improve learning/ engagement/ interest?</b></li> <li>5. <b>Are follow-up studies planned?</b></li> <li>6. <b>What can Student Affairs and/or University do to help?</b></li> <li>7. <b>What actions, if any, did you take based on last year’s assessment findings?</b></li> </ol>
<p><b>Sample Assessment Questions for departments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do students participating in events/workshops value and use knowledge gained from the event/workshop? To answer the question, the departments might develop and administer a survey to students asking questions such as: To what extent did your knowledge or awareness of ‘the topic’ increase? What is the likelihood you will participate in upcoming similar events? What information from the event might you use and incorporate in your courses/work-life/social-life?</li> <li>• Which of our events drew the largest number of participants and why? How can we use this information to improve attendance in the future?</li> <li>• Which elements of our publication are most interesting/helpful and which are less interesting/helpful to our readership?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Annual Calendar for Departments</b></p> <p><b>Nov. 1 –Submit proposed assessment question to TLA (<a href="mailto:tla@MdWest.edu">tla@MdWest.edu</a>)</b></p> <p><b>July 1 –Submit assessment report to TLA (<a href="mailto:tla@MdWest.edu">tla@MdWest.edu</a>)</b></p>



Exhibit 4 describes the basic steps at Level II for the three areas in the Student Affairs Division. The three areas of Student Affairs were asked to engage in assessment in two different ways: (1) by reflecting on department assessment reports to provide and document feedback to departments; and (2) by identifying one question about student learning in the area as a whole and documenting its answer each year.

**Exhibit 4**

<b>Level II – Areas of Student Affairs: Diversity Education/Leadership, Student Advocacy/Community Relations, and Student Development</b>	
<p><b>I. <u>Part I –Analyzing the department/program reports</u></b></p> <p>The success of the departmental assessment rests in large part on the departments’ sense that their work will truly impact student learning and engagement. To this end, this part of the Assessment Process asks that the three Student Affairs Areas review and reflect on department assessment reports -- analyzing them, noting any proposed changes, and sharing the best practices in assessment that appear in the reports with all departments. We further ask that the Areas document the way that they provided feedback to departments, for example, by having the Student Affairs VP or AVPs write an individual letter to each department or by distributing the Area Report. In any case, we strongly suggest that the Area AVPs and VP become highly involved in the review and feedback process, as it is their recognition that matters most to departments.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Part I Report Questions</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Summarize the department reports and/or assessments.</b></li> <li><b>2. Analyze and comment on the department reports.</b></li> <li><b>3. Summarize the actions that each department proposes to take to improve student learning.</b></li> <li><b>4. Describe the best assessment practices you see in the departments.</b></li> <li><b>5. Describe how you gave feedback to the department directors and staff.</b></li> <li><b>6. How can the University TLA Office support the assessment process in your Area?</b></li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Part II – Assessing one aspect of student learning in the Area as a whole</u></b></p> <p>The second part of the assessment process for each Area consists of three basic steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Posing and answering one question each year</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Part II Report Questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>What question was asked?</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Describe how the question was answered.</b></li> <li>▪ <b>What was learned?</b></li> </ul>

<p>about some aspect of student learning/engagement/interest, Proposing any necessary changes to improve student learning/engagement/interest;</p> <p>3. Documenting this process.</p> <p>We believe that the most meaningful questions about student learning/engagement/interest will come out of conversations already taking place in the Area. That said, given sufficient time, both TLA and OIPR are happy to help Student Affairs locate areas of possible inquiry and strategies for assessment. Some questions may be so large that you may wish to spread your assessment over several years, so long as you examine a different aspect of the question or problem each year and thus, document progress in assessment for NCA.</p> <p>In order to give OIPR the time to support your inquiry with any data that you request, we ask that you contact OIPR directly. Completed reports are due on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November.</p> <p><b>Sample Area Assessment Projects:</b></p> <p>Study of factors that affect learning and retention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Student Success – general satisfaction with MdWest; career preparation; academic performance; satisfaction with career development</li> <li>○ Academic Experiences – student reported information about, overall academic experience, campus-life experience</li> <li>○ Engaged Learning – learning outside of class</li> <li>○ Campus Environment – advising, inclusiveness, friendships, relationships, support, satisfaction ratings</li> <li>○ Mission – respect for individuals, issues of diversity, integration of the Mission, affordability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>What actions did or will the Area take or consider?</b></li> <li>▪ <b>Are follow-up studies planned?</b></li> <li>▪ <b>What can Student Affairs and/or the University do to help?</b></li> <li>▪ <b>What actions, if any, did you take based on last year’s assessment findings?</b></li> </ul> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Annual Calendar for Student Affairs Areas</b></p> <p><b>July-Nov. Read department reports and conduct its own study of student learning/ engagement</b></p> <p><b>Nov. 15 Submit College Report to TLA (<a href="mailto:sla@MdWest.edu">sla@MdWest.edu</a>)</b></p> <p><b>Jan – Mar. Meet with TLA Office to discuss assessment</b></p>
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The process described above is not isolated from broader endeavors at the University. In fact, it is based on conceptual and managerial models that are being institutionalized in the administration of higher education to help manage its unique abilities, opportunities, and

challenges. As noted, institutional indicators can be powerful tools in that effort, especially when development of the indicators incorporates attention to the contextual and operational goals of the university. Furthermore, they can provide substantive information for strategic decision making if they are tied to the values and goals of the university and emanate from the university's critical success factors (Stewart and Carpenter-Hubin, 2001). The Student Affairs Division identified success factors and documented outcomes that act as data points in assessment of the function. These and the related concepts will be discussed in the following section.

### ***The Strategic Context of Higher Education -- Laying the Foundation through Identification of Relevant Factors***

#### **Critical and Strategic Success Factors**

Universities need to be successful in some functions in order to survive and compete with their peer institutions. They need to provide a safe environment in which they educate students, attract students consistent with their mission, and educate students for a cost consistent with the benefits and services provided. These are key activities for Student Affairs at which they must be successful and through which they successfully address critical and strategic success factors.

Unfortunately, too frequently, the term "critical success factor" (CSF) is used interchangeably with the term "strategic success factor" (SSF). The difference is itself critical. While strategic success factors refer to those competencies at which the institution must succeed in order to be competitive or gain an advantage in the future, critical success factors are those

industry-defined competencies which all institutions competing in the industry must possess in order to survive and perform well. Failure to successfully perform on critical success factors leaves the institution vulnerable. Activities that support the critical success factors should thus be given priority. Discussions should differentiate between the two concepts as a means by which the Student Affairs Division's activities and contributions to the University can be evaluated.

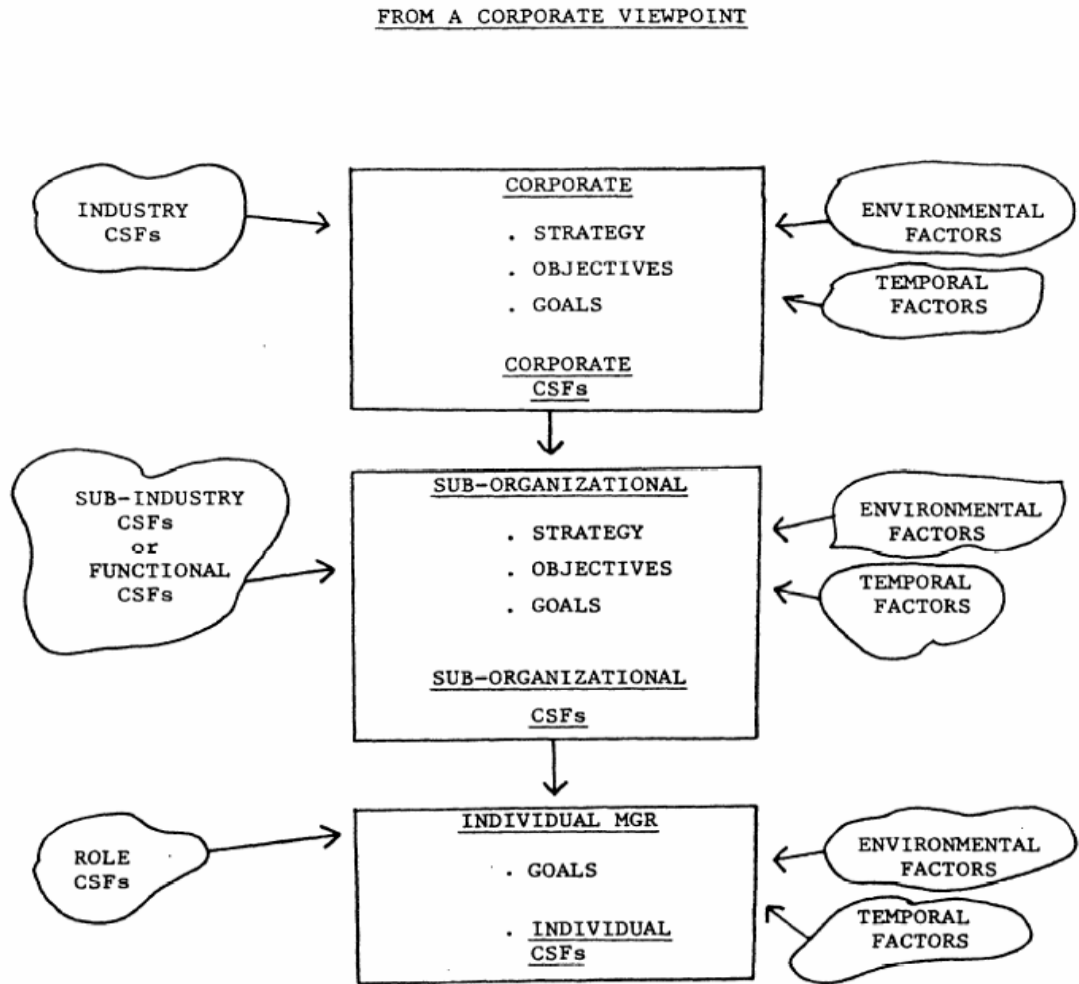
In their classic work on critical success factors, MIT researchers John Rockard and Christine Bullen (1981) defined critical success factors as “the limited number of areas in which satisfactory results will ensure successful competitive performance.” In business terms, they are the few key areas where "things must go right" for the business to flourish and for the manager's goals to be attained.” (Bullen and Rockart, 1981: 7) A graphic representation is shown in the Figure 1 that is taken from the work by Bullen and Rockart. In higher education terms, critical success factors are the few areas in which “things must go right” for the institution to flourish and fulfill its mission.

For Student Affairs, the concept of critical success factors would translate as the factors that must be addressed in order for the function and its areas to successfully support the mission of the University. The Student Affairs Assessment Initiative is one means by which the division can begin to better understand what those few critical factors might be. It should also be noted that the Bullen and Rockart definition of a CSF has several characteristics that are relevant to this effort by Student Affairs. First, the CSF concept is hierarchical in that for a factor to be evaluated as having satisfactory results, multiple initiatives must first be determined to have a successful outcome. Second, the factor is derived from what administrators within higher education agree is

important to success of Student Affairs' functions, even though the individual administrator or university may have a somewhat different perspective on the desirability of specific outcomes.

Figure 1

**Demonstration of Critical Success Factors**



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As noted, strategic success factors differ in that they are those areas in which an institution must excel if it is to gain and maintain a competitive position into the future. This necessitates that an institution be compared with other institutions with which it competes for students, faculty, donations, etc. Meeting the standard for critical success factors may enable an institution to sustain itself in a relatively stable environment but not enable the same institution

to gain and maintain a competitive advantage into the future where there exists a more volatile environment. The challenge for the Student Affairs function is to understand the types of activities it must be successful at in order to survive in the present and which types it must implement in the present to prepare for the inevitable changes in the future. This need necessitates that Student Affairs functions pay close attention to both categories of factors, i.e., critical success factors and strategic success factors. It is useful to have a conceptual framework or methodology to discuss the components of activities that support success. The University has addressed this need by developing a framework called The Program Portfolio through which a balanced approach to identifying factors can be pursued. It is based on a model proposed by Kaplan and Norton in their Balanced Scorecard but is modified to be consistent with the guidelines of regional accreditation and the linguistic culture of colleges and universities. We used this framework in working with our Student Affairs Division to further refine their search for critical and strategic success factors. The following discusses the Balanced Scorecard concept.

## **The Balanced Score Card**

Kaplan and Norton's introduction of the Balanced Scorecard into the business literature gave notice to managers that a more balanced approach to evaluating an organization was needed. In other words, concentrating on financial well-being to the exclusion of customers, business processes, and learning and growth would lead to sub-optimization of outcomes. A more balanced approach, placing the mission of the organization as the center of concern, was needed.

Universities, such as Jacksonville University in Jacksonville Florida, have used the basic principles underlying the model to develop a set of perspectives that are useful for institutions. They include categories such as (1) Students, (2) Financial, (3) Internal Processes, and (4) Development and Growth to describe their university's strategic objectives. A set of additional questions were identified to address department- and program-level areas:

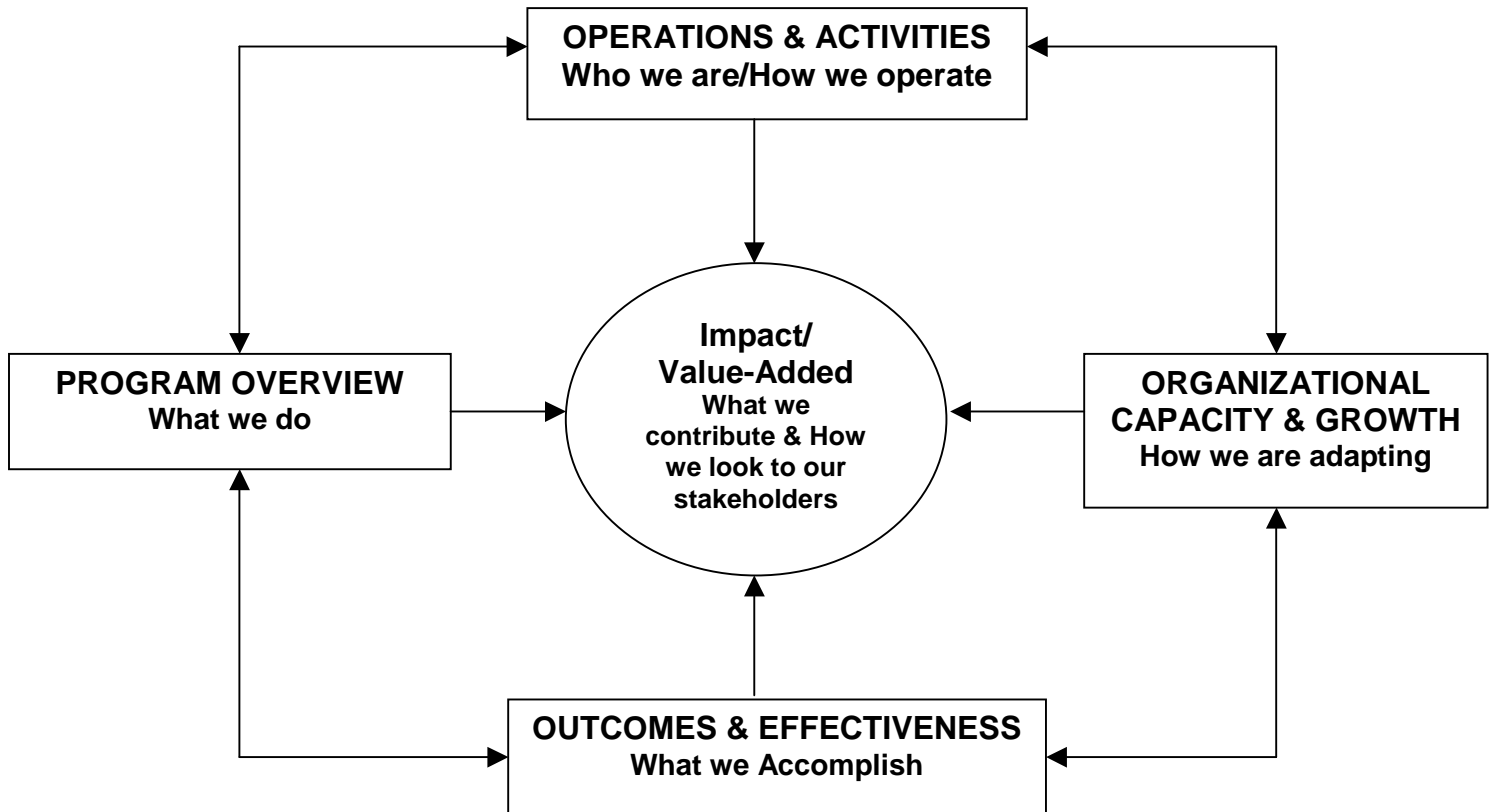
1. What are your objectives in this area (no more than four)?
2. What are your strategic measures (for each objective, no more than three)?
3. For each measure, what is your baseline?
4. What are the next three targets with time points in which they will be sought?

We also built on the balanced scorecard concept to create a Program Portfolio model. The goal of the model is to capture this same dynamic but adapting the concept to the unique aspects of higher education. (See <http://oipr2.MdWest.edu/portfolio/MdWest.asp>.) The model shown in Figure 2 was initially used to support Academic Program Review throughout the university as a means for developing questions to guide program assessment. This later became the basis for a current initiative in looking at the success factors for the university (Chmielewski, et al., 2001).



**Figure 2**

**The Program Portfolio**



The Program Portfolio has been used in several projects to organize university data to describe and then reflect of the key aspects of several of our departments. Used in this manner it has provided guiding questions to generate the discussion of “Who are we?” “What do we do?” “How do we do it?” “What do we accomplish?” As we have entered these discussions, we have

evolved a set of indicators that apply to a broad range of university functions. By identifying these as factors at which we need to be successful, we were able to facilitate a discussion with the Student Affairs Division in how to develop indicators. We thus used the balanced scorecard concept as a framework for discussing critical and success factors and indicators. This helped the Student Affairs Division identify and discuss the key activities they needed for their assessments.

The Program Portfolio as it evolved for use by the university and by Student Affairs Division is made up of five components -- Learning Environment, Student Success, Program Vitality, University Sustainability, and Mission and Values. The model is shown in Figure 3. Each of the five components is described below:

1. **Learning Environment:** *Do the activities create a strong learning environment?* This is the university's primary function and is inherent in both its instructional goals for Vision 2006 and in the activities of the Student Affairs Division. While it is generally recognized that Student Affairs can contribute to a better student environment through activities that support learning, service, and preparation for living in a diverse world, the charge to the Student Affairs Division is to determine how to measure those activities in order to establish accountability. Under the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, questions can be generated that highlight what attributes of the environment to measure, how to measure the impact of the activity on the environment, how to identify which measures are related to factors that fit the definitions of critical or success factors, and what the implications for the future are given the desired and realized learning environments.
2. **Student Success:** *Do the activities support the development of students within the learning environment?* If students are to be successful in the learning environment, there

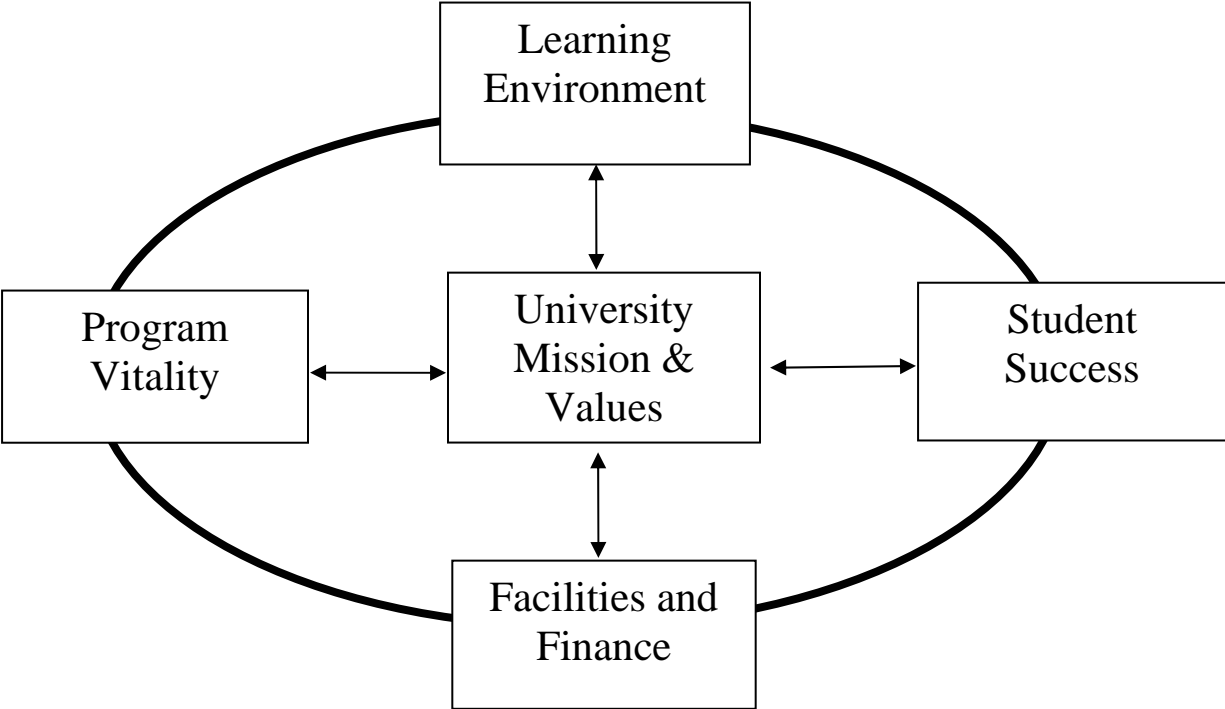
needs to be a supportive learning and development environment that extends beyond the classroom and the academics of the university. This support includes helping the students select their academic experiences, develop the appropriate skills for a career, manage the financing of their education, and persist to graduation. Under the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, the department can explore whether commonly used indicators such as graduation rates, student flow, job placement, and financial aid are also appropriate for use in assessment of the activities provided through the Student Affairs Division as a means to determine accountability.

3. **Program Vitality:** *Are programs provided through the Student Affairs Division strong and viable?* The activities and programs need to be sustainable in an economic sense. There needs to be an identifiable cost/benefit associated with the program. This includes having a core of relevant programs/activities, providing appropriate staffing those programs, and managing to improve the quality of the program as it supports the university and the student. It includes active student participation in the various programs. The challenge for the Student Affairs Division is to link measures of successful student outcomes to such things as program/activity participation, relevance, and contribution. Under the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, the department can identify what types of data are available and what types of data must be collected in order to make the needed linkages between programs and outcomes.
4. **University Sustainability:** *Are programs provided through the Student Affairs consistent with university efforts to remain healthy in terms of resources, alumni support, administrative compliance, attractiveness to potential students, debt burden, and financial stability and facilities well-being?* If we are to continue to maintain

institutional relevance in our community and to continue to strengthen our educational competency, we must balance our commitments with our resources. Financial well-being is important to attracting and sustaining a quality faculty and staff and to maintaining programs and facilities. The support of alumni is closely tied to donations and development. The challenge of Student Affairs is to demonstrate how activities contribute to the bottom-line sustainability of the university. Under the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, such traditional measures as retention and participation rates in student affairs activities can be examined for possible relevance to financial health. In addition, the department can use the initiative as a means for identifying other data that can be gathered for examination of performance on critical and strategic success factors related to finance and facilities.

5. **Mission and Values:** *Are activities consistent with the mission and core values of the university?* The fifth component, the University Mission and Values, is the center of our framework. This is symbolic of the fact that the mission and values describe the reason for MdWest's existence. As such, all areas must operate in a manner consistent with the beliefs, purpose, tradition and values of MdWest. In other words, creating outcomes that support the mission of MdWest is the core around which other concerns revolve. This requires that contributions to all aspects of the university and its community must fulfill our mission, from education and scholarly activities to enhanced learning beyond the classroom such as that provided by the Student Affairs Division.

**Figure 3: The Revised Program Portfolio**



At the university level, Institutional Research linked a set of categories with each component in the Program Portfolio. For example, categories of concern under *Sustainability* include affordability, attractiveness, revenue activity, facilities utilization, investment performance, programs and partnerships, and risk management; categories of concern under the *Learning Environment* include active intellectual engagement, rigor, service learning, and diversity. For each set of categories, we identified four or five measures that could be used. For example, measures under the category “Active Intellectual Engagement” include sizes of classes, participation in clubs and organizations, interaction with faculty, and internships and capstone classes. Some of these measures currently exist and some of them do not. We use this as a general reference guide to discuss metrics within a framework of critical and success factors, some of which are currently available and others that are not yet available. In cases where measures have not been identified, such as Student Affairs, an iterative process by individuals working in the area supports the identification and creation of the appropriate measures. This is especially critical in instances where questions concerning understanding “why” certain activities lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes need to be answered if good decision making is to be supported.

Though still evolving, one of the desired outcomes from developing a program portfolio model is the identification of a set of Academic Performance Indicators at the university level to examine outcomes. (For example, see Sapp, M. 1994; MdWest, 2005 <http://oipr.MdWest.edu/open/Academic%20Indicators/indicators.asp>.) These indicators are made available to our stakeholder and communicated effectively by grouping the indicators into the areas of Student Learning, Student Enrollment, Faculty, and Tuition and Financial Aid. The

same strategy is part of the process we using as we partnering with Student Affairs to generate development of sets of indicators at other levels of the university that support good decision making.

We do want to stress, however, that while program portfolios, performance indicators, strategic models and use of critical or strategic success factors can be useful tools for supporting strategic decision making, choice of the best strategy requires judgment on the part of the decision maker. The role of these tools is to provide a template for considering the major aspects of key activities and for suggesting how the measures might be developed. The act of making judgments then needs to be made through reference to absolute or relative standards that are identified through use of these tools. For example of absolute standards, one might say that any student who enters their university should have at least a 75% likelihood of graduating. More frequently such judgments are made relative to some frame of reference for the data. The data may be presented in one of three major contexts – trends over time, external comparison, and internal comparison. Questions that surface when looking at trends over time concern whether the outcome is changing as time passes. Under the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative, individuals can assess what trends should and can be measured longitudinally. In addition, the nature of the change can be factored in. For example, can the Student Affairs Division determine whether an outcome is actually changing in a systematic manner over time or in a statistically stable way with only random variations?

When overall performance of the university is compared to the overall performance of other universities, outcomes such as the retention rate at your university compared to similar universities can be evaluated. In the case where there are not sufficient similar universities for comparison, we can attempt to build a statistical similarity using various statistical modeling

techniques, e.g., multiple regression. At the university level, public domain data can be used where available so that assessments of competitors can be made with reasonable accuracy.

Unfortunately, institutional researchers may not be able to drill down to the level of the Student Affairs Division for comparisons with similar institutions. Recognition of this problem through the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative can lay the groundwork for cooperation across and between colleges that can generate the needed data.

The third type of judgment can be made using an internal comparison between departments of a College or areas within a division. For example, the Department of English may assess how it compares to the Department of Accounting on developing career skills. In the case of the Student Affairs Division, comparisons could be made between the three areas to consider the effectiveness of programs offered. For example where several areas have a similar goal of supporting student retention, the effectiveness of alternative student success programs might be considered. Other issues such as equitable financing, staffing balances, etc will be very difficult to do because of the differences in the purposes and processes of the areas. When indicators are considered in this manner relative to the purpose of the area, a key vulnerability might be identified where the area lacks the required skills or resources to function or compete effectively. On the other hand, where outcomes are favorable, the department can identify the core competencies on which future activities can be built. Core competencies are thus the key to department's ability to develop distinctive competencies that support the university in its efforts to build a competitive advantage. The use of absolute or relative standards enables the Student Affairs Division to set goals for their indicators. It also enables the Division to use the indicators to determine if a key activity is making a positive difference in some aspect of student learning.



## ***The Supporting Role of Institutional Research and Performance Indicators***

Given their access to data and training that creates an awareness of what it means to be “data driven,” institutional researchers have an opportunity to provide assistance to various departments within the university by helping them link functional-level data to strategic decision making. Institutional researchers have a heightened appreciation of the problems associated with data management in general. They understand that the presence of data may not be sufficient if that data are not the “right data” in the “right form” at the “right time.” Their involvement in identifying performance indicators that can be used by universities to monitor outcomes gives them an advantage in understanding the processes involved in identifying critical and success factors. The challenge is to get the numerous divisions and departments throughout the university (1) to buy-in to the need for data-driven processes and (2) to use the resources made available to them by their Office of Institutional Research.

The catalysts for appreciation of data-driven processes and the need for support services generally take two forms -- 1) the daunting process of preparing for accreditation reviews or 2) involvement in the strategic management process. For many universities, the latter process is being institutionalized. MdWest is currently refining and redefining its vision as it moves from its current strategic planning process, Vision 2006, to its next planning process, Vision 2012. The models and tools presented were developed to support the implementation of plans and assessment strategies associated with this initiative. MdWest University, like other universities, works to avoid the pitfall noted by Stokes (2002) who warns that that strategic planning exercises often fail because plans are frequently not implemented and strategy is forgotten. We

recognize the need to create support for strategic planning through a balanced approach. This approach must be sensitive to all aspects of planning, including growth and innovation with cost and efficiency, short term and long term objectives, internal and external views, and tangible and intangible results (Niven, 2002).

It is thus important to link the critical and strategic success factors to specific problems to be solved, decisions to be made, and resources to be allocated. Furthermore, the strategic management process must link unit goals to macro goals while focusing on both the tangible and intangible. Through this process, the Office of Planning and Institutional Research strives to support the university's efforts to develop strategies that lead to successful outcomes on success factors at all levels of the university. The performance indicators identified through the Student Affairs Assessment Initiative contributes to this effort and can be used to evaluate outcomes and to revise strategies as appropriate.

Student Affairs professionals have also recognized the need to address and identify success factors. For example, there are an increasing number of instruments and sites for Student Personnel professionals who want to assess specific aspects of the student learning . Among them are the sites developed by ACPA, the leading student affairs Association concerned with engaging students in lifetime learning and discovery. (See [http://www.myacpa.org/au\\_index.cfm](http://www.myacpa.org/au_index.cfm) .) The association's Commission on Assessment for Student Development Clearinghouse on Environmental and Student Development Assessment Instruments lists between 50 and 100 instruments organized along the subjects such as:

- Career Related Instruments
- Environmental Assessment Tools
- Higher Education Evaluation Tools
- Learning Styles Assessments
- Miscellaneous Assessment Instruments
- Outcomes Assessments

User Friendly Personality Instruments  
Retention Measures  
Student Development Instruments  
Values Measures

The ACPA initiatives exist within a broader initiative of assessment of learning – of which there are some excellent web sites that link together many of the current activities and issues. These sites, such as <http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm> at North Carolina State, make the process of measuring the learning a much more informed process.

Other sites, such as <http://www2.poly.edu/Info/Links1.shtml> of the Polytechnic University of Brooklyn, provide listings of many of the assessment web sites at colleges and universities with a short description of what is on the sites. Unfortunately only two of the mentioned institutions consider Student Affairs as part of their description.

On the other hand, the work done by Peter Ewell and others that evolved into the NSSE and the works that emerged from Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini. clearly indicate that the learning outside the classroom is a complementary aspect of student knowledge to that learned in the classroom in many cases. In other cases, the experiences outside the classroom may be the primary source of learning (NSSE, 2003). There are encouraging signs. For example, institutions such as the University of Hawaii at Hilo have moved to incorporate performance indicators from student affairs into their university goals.

**Exhibit 5: University of Hawaii at Hilo Statement of Goal III**

**Goal III: Build a learning environment that facilitates student development and success.**

We will design our services so that all our students - residential, commuting, and distance learners - may take maximum advantage of a learning environment truly conducive to educational effectiveness.

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Data Gathering/Reporting Means</b>	<b>Current Status</b>
Stimulating, supportive campus atmosphere	Track the # of cultural, social, and athletic events on campus	UH Office of Student Affairs/University Relations	
Stimulating, supportive campus atmosphere	Track responses to questions in campus surveys about quality of campus life	Graduating Senior Survey; CSEQ or in-house survey	New question on the GSS asks students to rate quality of campus life and availability of things to do
Increase capacity to serve commuting, nontraditional, distance learning students	Assess special needs of commuting, nontraditional, distance students	Extra questions in the CSEQ or in-house survey	Awaiting results of first CSEQ

<http://www.uhh.hawaii.edu/uhh/strategic/performance.php>

Progress in recognizing the need to move assessment beyond the classroom can also be traced to work by the American Association of Higher Education. For example, the 6<sup>th</sup> principal of the American Association for Higher Education: *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* in their recognition that “(s)tudent learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility.” The exact wording of the principle is as follows:

**6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.** Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment's questions can't be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement. (<http://www.aahe.org/assessment/principi.htm>).

In the final analysis, the strategic management process becomes a means for moving the university from external concerns focused on image and ranking to internally-driven concerns focused on improved institutional effectiveness. The Student Affairs Assessment Initiative is just one means for moving closer to that goal. It is one piece of a larger puzzle that includes other initiatives such as faculty committees involved in Teaching Learning and Assessment , the work being done on budgeting through Strategic Resource Allocation Committees, and the strategic planning done during a President's Planning Retreat.

Institutional Research can contribute by proposing conceptual models that demonstrate how the various factors discussed above can fit together. "The times they are a-changing." Evaluating only student learning in the classroom is no longer sufficient. Assessment performed absent a sense of the larger university is no longer sufficient. A more holistic approach is needed. As institutions become more complex and as they move toward accreditation, there will be an increasing interest in identification of the tools available from a variety of sources. Technology has made use of many new and traditional tools easier, but the challenges we face are not technical challenges. They are challenges within the processes of higher education, its unique abilities, its unique opportunities, and its unique challenges.

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