Creating a Quality Program by Linking Strategic Planning and

Assessment through Collaboration

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Abstract

Strategic planning is complex (Dodd, 2004), and when managed well, it requires deliberate incorporation of evidenced-based data and the collaboration of key stakeholders. Thus, it is essential that the planning process includes the integration of data that are collected regularly and that both internal and external professional partners have the opportunity to reflect upon and respond to these data in systematic ways.

This paper presents a viable process for accomplishing the effective drafting of a strategic plan. It includes the following components: (a) an assessment system, which drives continuous improvement and includes feedback from professional partners, alumni, and program completers; program level goals based upon performance candidate and enrollment data; departmental goals based upon alignment with institutional goals and program goals; and goals established at the faculty level, as articulated through college-wide committees; (b) an organizational schemata in the form of a data matrix that streamlines and reports upon the goals as established by all constituencies; (c) a schedule of meetings among upper leadership, as represented through the administrative council and chairs of college-wide committees; and (d) a final faculty retreat and meeting scheduled to allow for presentation and reflection upon all data in the matrix, to collaboratively articulate clear and measurable goals and objectives for the strategic plan.

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Strategic planning provides a guide and model for institutional effectiveness (Dodd,

2004). The strategic planning process, as a catalyst for continuous improvement, can be highly

complex, drawing upon numerous factors of quality assurance. An effective strategic plan should

incorporate deliberate data-driven commonalities that have emerged through an assessment

system.

Strategic planning can be enhanced through collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

Such collaboration promotes ownership of the plan and a commitment to its execution. If a

commitment does not exist from all partners, the probability of committed involvement during

actual implementation of the plan is diminished. In addition, it is essential to have

"communication with all members of the organization about the needs, options, and actions"

(Ferren & Stanton, 2004, p. 5) that informs the plan throughout the planning and implementation

process.

Since there are often many constituencies served by these plans, the process is often

enmeshed in conflict. Because strategic planning in this real-world environment often becomes

complicated and convoluted, there is a tendency to create silos resulting in competing systems

and voices when trying to create a strategic plan. This conflict can be alleviated by creating a

structure that provides key participants with a clear understanding of their roles and

responsibilities (Albert and Pet-Armacost, 2002).

Seymour, Kelley, and Jasinski (2004) assert that deliberate linking of planning, quality

improvement, and research and assessment systems can result in enhancing performance of

programs and operations in higher education. It is an integration of systems within the planning

process, with assessment feeding and looping into each process phase, which appears to support

institutional effectiveness (Battersby, 1999). An example is an integrated system of strategic

planning in use in Arizona that supports an initial phase of data collection followed by a second

phase of in-depth review by individuals through committees to evaluate the strategic plan as it is

created and implemented (Paradise Valley, AZ, 2000). This planning process has proved very

effective.

The primary importance of a strategic plan is to provide "a tool for planning, a method of

documenting outcomes, and a system for recording the summary and analysis of data during the

process of developing short- and long-term goals" (Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges

and Schools [ACICS], 2004, p. 3). Numerous studies have attempted to measure the

effectiveness of strategic planning in organizational improvement, yet most remain anecdotal at

best, with few reporting measureable outcomes. One of the reasons for this is that "strategic

planning occurs in a complex, dynamic, real-world environment, not readily amenable to

controlled studies" (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004, p. 9).

A History of Strategic Planning and the Need for a New Process at Auburn University

Strategic planning, "as a structured management discipline and practice" (Dooris, Kelley,

& Trainer, 2004) is relatively new in higher education. However, most universities that are

accredited tend to have strategic plans and assessment systems that are interactive and

systematic. This is true of the university in this study. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, the

university had an online system of drafting and assessing goals and plans that was mandated

from the university level. This system was viewed as part of the process of meeting the Southern

Association of Colleges and Universities Accreditation requirements as well as a system for

continuous improvement. The process involved requesting administrators from colleges and

respective departments articulate goals and measurable outcomes and place these goals in

publicly accessible online systems. Although the online system required that college departments

and the college central administration link their goals to data and define goals in measurable

outcomes, little training or assistance in organizing or making sense of the data to support and

inform the goals was provided by the university.

      Although the process in use throughout the 1990s attempted to use prior data to drive the

strategic plan, as with any system, flaws existed. Each department created their own goals, which

could possibly be fragmented and highly unique from goals provided by other departments

within the same college. Deans were challenged with finding commonalities among the

departmental strategic plans and articulating a data-driven plan at the college level which

incorporated the needs and outcomes of all departments while also remaining constant to their

respective college's common mission and vision.

      With a change in leadership in 2005, the online reporting system of goals and strategic

planning was placed on hold by the university's administration. A university-level committee

was formed to address systematic strategic planning, discuss strengths and weaknesses of the

current strategic planning process, and explore new methods for approaching planning

throughout the university. To assist the efforts of this university committee, external corporate-

based consultants were invited to the university campus to begin dialogue within and across

colleges regarding strategic planning, and by spring of 2007, the consultants assessed the

climate, strengths, and needs of the university and presented them in a detailed assessment

report, which was intended to be used as a springboard for strategic planning.

      In Fall 2007, with another change in the university's upper administration, a new

dimension was added to the strategic planning process that was underway. Faculty, staff,

program graduates and professional and community partners, were asked to provide feedback online through a newly-created survey system in an effort to assist the university administration in establishing priorities. Face to face meetings were set up throughout the state to gather additional feedback from the broader community. With the rethinking of strategic planning systems and processes happening at the university level for over three years and the recognition of the complexity of strategic planning, administrators in a College of Education at Auburn University set forth to develop a process which deliberately and systematically included data gathered through the college and university assessment systems. The process includes multiple steps to ensure democratic participation throughout the College of Education while also relying upon evidence-based information.

<div align="center">A Model for Developing a Strategic Plan: A Proposed Process</div>

The Assessment System

The college has an extensive assessment system that involves having each program, each department, and the college as a whole report on their progress toward college-wide and programmatic goals. These goals are set from previous strategic planning processes and are used to formulate new strategic plans. Goal collecting and analysis occurs continuously through different components of the assessment system. All stakeholders, including those in the field and graduates of the program, have abundant opportunities to provide input into the goals of the College of Education. The goals are collected within departments and programs, such as through the reporting systems and through the committee system. A visual representation of the involvement of goal setting and its circular and equitable nature is provided in Appendix A.

Programmatic goals are formulated that relate specifically to the direction a program is taking or a need that the program wishes to address. For example, a program might have a goal

of expanding the master's program enrollment by 20 percent. The program faculty would report

on this goal on an annual basis comparing their data to the previous year's level of success.

These data are reported in program portfolios.

Departments report on their progress through annual departmental reports, which

illustrate the productivity of the department as a whole, based on number of publications, courses

taught, enrollment, and other data typically accessible through institutional research. The

department chairs complete these annual reports, including the articulation of goals, based on

institutional data and in response to the specific program portfolios within their departments. In

the case of both the program annual reports and the departmental annual reports, goals generated

from the prior year's data are established and articulated annually.

In addition to the goals in the annual reporting system, the assessment system also

garners feedback from professional partners in the community through online surveys. Partners

include cooperating teachers in the local school system who have worked with interns through

the teacher education programs, alumni who have graduated within the past three years, and

employers who have hired graduates of the programs. Specifically, correspondence is sent to

these partners, through both electronic and traditional hard copy mail, asking the individuals to

respond to an online survey. The surveys vary slightly in format to ask the most meaningful and

specific questions respective to the respondent audience; however, many of the scales are

common and reflect the College's mission and vision. Hence, the assessment system can also

track the trends in responses from the three groups of professional partners.

The assessment system also monitors college-wide goals which are established in

conjunction with the administrators and committees of faculty, staff, and school/community

partners. The committees focus on assessment and program review, undergraduate issues, graduate issues, diversity, technology, student affairs and activities, and field placements.

The College also has an external National Advisory Committee comprised of alumni and friends that provides input and feedback on current programming. The minutes of these committees, specifically items related to recommendations and goals, are analyzed to discern patterns of responses.

Recommendations regarding the operations and outcomes of the college also come through the Dean's Partnership Council. This group is composed of representatives from fifteen school systems that serve as sites for interns and practicum experiences and who work in partnership with the college in various research and outreach endeavors.

The dean of the college has also formulated the Dean's Council on the Education Professions. This Council, composed of faculty and administrators from colleges throughout the university who provide courses and majors for our students, meets each semester. College-wide data are shared, and the group provides input into improvements and potential goals. These recommendations are integrated into the college database related to developing goals and priorities.

In order to cull the vast quantity of goals at the various levels (program, department, and committee), the Coordinator of Assessment completes a content analysis of them and places the results of the content analysis into a data matrix. (See Appendix B: 2006-07 Data Matrix of Goals.) Essentially, the data matrix acts as the final visual map of overall goals, combining the feedback of all College of Education stakeholders. This data matrix aids decision-makers in prioritizing the goals and objectives for the overall college and helps them to make meaningful decisions about future program developments and action steps.

Collaboration

After the college dean and associate deans have had the initial opportunity to examine the primary goals that evolved across constituents as displayed in the data matrix, the information, in the form of a draft of a strategic plan, is shared in a training meeting and working session attended by the Administrative Council, or department heads and directors, as well as the chairs of each internal College of Education standing committee. At this initial point of discussion in drafting an effective revision of the strategic plan, the use of assessment data through the data matrix is explained, and the goals are discussed and revised. The large group of individuals is divided into smaller subgroups, with each subgroup focusing on an assigned goal and its related objectives. The individuals at the table, representing various committees and departments, participate in a working meeting that clarifies language and prioritizes objectives within the goal. The notes per goal are shared prior to the adjournment of the meeting, and the strategic plan is revised.

At this point in the process, a full faculty meeting is called to focus on the development of an effective strategic plan. At the full faculty meeting, individuals are randomly assigned to tables and given an activity which prioritizes the objectives within each goal. Individuals per table collaboratively revise the language of the objective so that measurable outcomes are drafted as a result. The strategic plan is then revised a third time, based on the notes from the faculty meeting, and the third draft is posted publicly for final feedback from all partners.

In sum, the collaboration of draft writing moved from a smaller group of leaders within the College who focus on broader and more global goals within the strategic plan to a larger group of full faculty and staff who focus on specific objectives within each goal. These collaborative sessions provide all members of the faculty an opportunity to interact with the

entire plan while simultaneously narrowing the focus and input on specific areas of the plan at the measurable objective levels.

Essentially, the meetings among faculty and staff accomplished two important components of strategic planning: (a) educating faculty on the process and the data that informed the strategic plan; and (b) providing an opportunity to actively take ownership in the development of the strategic plan. Ultimately, final approval of the strategic plan occurs at the Administrative Council level, with the Dean presenting the relevant components on how to best implement the plan; however, all members of the faculty, staff, alumni and other partners have played a role in the collective drafting of the plan.

Final Thoughts

With so many layers of assessment data available—from student outcomes to perspectives on program success garnered through committees, alumni, employers, and other professional partners—streamlining the data into a meaningful representation and including key stakeholders in the strategic planning process becomes a daunting task. Nonetheless, quantitative data collected through an assessment system can be folded into strategic planning and college-level policy making in a meaningful and manageable manner. This model, adaptable for use at other institutions, can jump start the strategic planning process and incorporate multilayered assessment and collaboration of multiple stakeholders.

Using assessment data provides one method for demonstrating accountability in student performance, program development, and operations. The impact of effective assessment can be felt when it leads to continuous program improvement and organizational development, which in turn will result in high quality programs for all. Strategic planning provides the link from assessment to deliberate and data-driven planning for institutional effectiveness. The

communication and understanding of data derived from the assessment system as well as common goals articulated in response to that data can eventually result in policy, as one of many potential positive outcomes, within an organizational structure.

The collection of data alone will not produce quality planning. Collaborative experiences must be programmed that allow faculty, staff, administrators, and partners to interact with goals as part of the planning process. Successful and meaningful strategic planning allows for an embedding of data-driven information, derived through a comprehensive assessment system, to inform continuous improvement and lead to organizational change as evidenced through policy and execution of plans by all key faculty and staff.
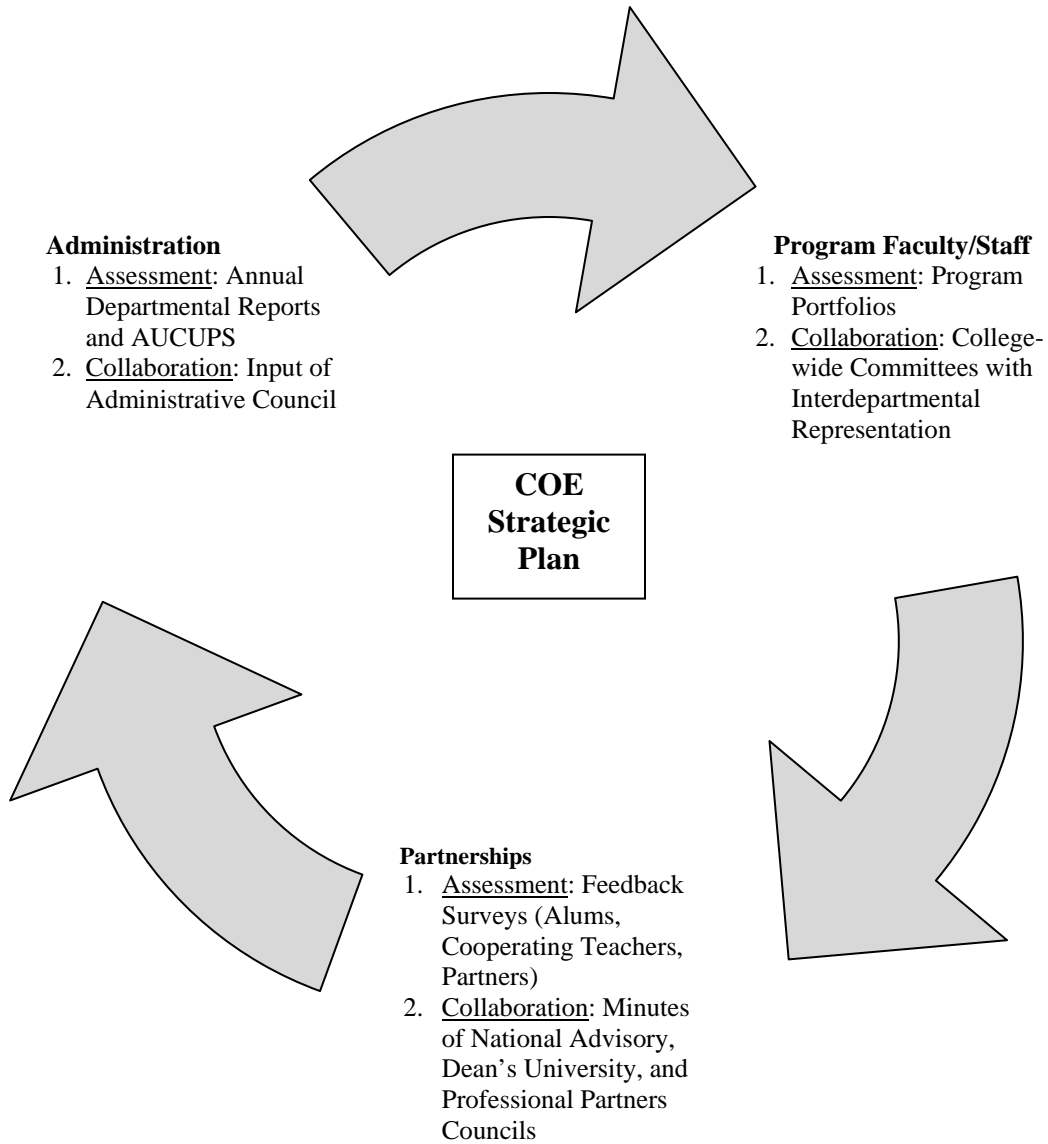
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Appendix A:

A Diagram of Internal and External Reporting Systems and Stakeholders

Providing Input into the College of Education Strategic Plan

Administration
1. <u>Assessment</u>: Annual Departmental Reports and AUCUPS
2. <u>Collaboration</u>: Input of Administrative Council

Program Faculty/Staff
1. <u>Assessment</u>: Program Portfolios
2. <u>Collaboration</u>: College-wide Committees with Interdepartmental Representation

COE Strategic Plan

Partnerships
1. <u>Assessment</u>: Feedback Surveys (Alums, Cooperating Teachers, Partners)
2. <u>Collaboration</u>: Minutes of National Advisory, Dean's University, and Professional Partners Councils

Appendix B

2006-07 Data Matrix of Goals

Table: Documentation of Patterns of Goals in Various College-wide Reports and Feedback

Collected through Assessment System

	AUCUPS ($N = 5$)	Program Portfolio Annual Reports ($N = 21$)	Committee Reports ($N = 8$)	COE Satisfaction Surveys ($N = 3$)	External Committees ($N = 3$)
Goal A: Promote **Diversity** among Faculty and Students	3 (60%)	1 (5%)	1 (12.5%)		
Goal B: Improve Resources: **Technology and Facilities**	2 (40%)	3 (14%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (66%)	
Goal C: Improve **COE Assessment Process** for Better Program Planning and Student Learning		6 (28.5%)	4 (50%)	2 (66%)	Dean's University Council
Goal D: Enhance **Support for Graduate Programs**	1 (20%)	4 (19%)	3 (37.5%)		
Goal E: Increase **Research and Scholarly Activity** Opportunities	5 (100%)	6 (28.5%)			
Goal F: Increase **Field Experience Sites** for Students and **Better P-12 Relationships**		2 (9.5%)	2 (25%)		National Advisory Council; Partnership Council
Goal G: Increase **Financial Opportunities** through Grants, Scholarships, and Donations		4 (19%)	3 (37.5%)		National Advisory Council
Goal H: Improve the **University Supervision** of Internships and Field Experiences				2 (66%)	National Advisory Council; Partnership Council