

Purdue Extended Campus: Transparency, Accountability, and Assessment in Strategic Planning

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THE CONTEXT

In 2002 President Martin Jischke initiated a new era in strategic planning at Purdue. Under his leadership, strategic planning became a centralized activity with unit plans aligned to the university plan. Strategic goals were designed to have maximum impact, which would be measurable through metrics. Strategic planning at Purdue would be an outward-facing activity—a public expression of the university’s progress and its value to the state and its broader constituent base.

The senior leadership team of Purdue Extended Campus (PEC) developed its first strategic plan in this new environment for 2003-2008. Departmental goals were aligned to those of the university’s plan and were broken down into strategies and then to specific tasks. Individual administrators responsible for the tasks reported on progress at monthly leadership meetings and to the Vice Provost for Engagement at midyear

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and the end of the year. PEC administrators met annually for a day-long retreat at which they analyzed progress and evaluated whether specific strategies and tasks were still viable, which helped to keep the plan relevant and responsive to changing needs.

This accountability-based approach to implementation worked well: by 2008 PEC had accomplished most of the tasks it had set out in the first plan and its metrics were strong. Under new President France Córdova, the university embarked on a second five-year plan. PEC had learned from its experience the importance of planning at a high level of granularity, delineating specific lines of accountability, and measuring impact by metrics. The adage, “If you measure it, it will improve,” had proven true because accountable individuals wanted to show progress and because measurement made processes more transparent and manageable.

Building on its success with the first plan, PEC had the confidence to make significant adjustments both in terms of focus and process. Where the first plan focused on the unit and, in turn, the university, the second, “Engaging Customers—Delivering Solutions,” sought to have an impact on the people that PEC served. And where the first plan was top-down, the second involved stakeholders more deeply at every phase of development.

This case study describes PEC’s experience with the 2009-2014 plan, from the process of planning to implementation and assessment, and concludes with lessons learned.

THE PROCESS

The second plan’s approach to the development process was significantly different from that of the first plan. Top-level administrators controlled the process with no formal opportunity for customer input and little opportunity for all members of PEC’s staff to participate. To build a plan that would yield results that engaged clients and stakeholders, PEC needed to know their views on matters as they were and as they could be. The department would also need the commitment of its entire staff in order to have an impact. In a departure from typical planning processes, the staff itself was tasked with developing the highest levels of the plan: the mission, the vision, and the strategic goals.

In summer 2008, Dean Mark Pagano formed a team for Strategic Planning Initiatives (SPI) consisting of two representatives from each of the four functional areas in the department—two programmatic (continuing education and conferences) and two administrative (business and technology/communication). The team included both professional and support

staff members. He named co-chairs from the two programmatic areas. A graduate student was added as recorder and to help pull together the final project, and a faculty member was engaged as a consultant to provide focus and direction for the team. These additional appointments were to ensure that the team had the human resources it would need to succeed with its charge, which was to:

- study the 2008 Purdue University Strategic Plan, the first PEC plan, and other appropriate inputs;
- conduct a PEC Stakeholder Forum;
- engage all PEC units and staff in the process;
- propose overarching themes for the PEC plan; and
- formulate a set of initiatives appropriately reflecting these themes.

The committee was tasked with developing a plan that would articulate PEC's customer-directed goals with the strategic directions of the university. The consultant helped the committee set a timeline to meet key target dates for the rollout of a final product within eight months.

In June 2008, PEC conducted a half-day input meeting attended by 25 key stakeholders (e.g., bursar, registrar, etc.) and clients (e.g., leaders of key programs in academic departments). The SPI team and PEC administrators also attended. The meeting's primary agenda was to conduct a SWOT analysis to identify PEC's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The attendees were divided into four groups, facilitated by two SPI team members, and were asked to brainstorm for ten minutes on each area of the SWOT analysis. After group ideas had been presented, an SPI team co-chair synthesized the input into several themes. At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to write down their individual vision for PEC on note cards.

In the following weeks, SPI team members participated in SWOT analyses in their respective PEC departments, ensuring that all employees had the opportunity to contribute to the plan at its formative stage. The team then analyzed the input from the external and internal SWOT analyses and identified five themes that served as "buckets" to organize ideas and eventually emerged as the structural basis of the plan. The themes were customer service, program development and growth, technology, marketing, and facilities.

Having absorbed SWOT input, the team turned its attention to identifying the culture or values of the department, its mission, and its vision. Values identified included customer service, responsiveness to constituent-

cies, development of the community and the staff, diversity, high ethical standards, innovation, and engagement at local, state, national, and global levels. In addition to SWOT data, the team also needed to reconcile the university's new strategic plan and national and global issues in the field. The team reviewed sample mission and vision statements from peer institutions and the private sector as well as the vision statements from the stakeholders' meeting and departmental retreats. After extensive research, analysis, and deliberation, the mission and vision statements emerged. The mission statement was as follows:

Purdue Extended Campus (PEC) exemplifies Purdue University's commitment to engaging participants of all ages, in the local community and the state of Indiana, across the nation and throughout the world. PEC seeks to promote excellence and innovation by providing facilities, services, and programs that foster effective collaboration and engagement with diverse internal and external constituents. Through meaningful partnerships, PEC offers high quality workshops, conferences, courses, and other lifelong learning opportunities, anytime and anywhere.

And the vision statement read:

Purdue Extended Campus embraces the pursuit of excellence in continuing education, lifelong learning and meeting services, guided by shared values and sense of mission. PEC seeks to be a world leader in providing quality programs, professional services, and exceptional facilities for all continuing education and conference programs.

PEC will:

- Deliver world-class customer care in a cost-effective, efficient, and collaborative manner.
- Foster a positive learning/meeting environment that exceeds the expectations of customers and clients.
- Cultivate professional development opportunities to expand the knowledge and abilities of our staff beyond industry standards.
- Strive for sustainability by promoting "green" initiatives in the delivery of all programs and services.
- Expand our technology, facilities, and resources to reflect current trends and evolve as an industry leader.

With the mission and vision statements established, the themes from the stakeholders' meeting and at the departmental retreats became the key areas around which PEC goals and strategies were defined. A draft document was sent to those who had participated in the stakeholders' meeting along with a request for a review of the document. After evaluation of stakeholders' input, the team submitted a final plan to the dean in October 2008, and PEC's designer created a full-color publication for subsequent campus-wide distribution.

With the SPI team's recommendations in hand, PEC senior administrators participated in a two-day retreat in which they analyzed the goals of the strategic plan, identified specific tasks that could help PEC reach its goals, and determined specific metrics to measure success. Tasks were prioritized and, to ensure accountability, assigned to individual administrators for oversight. Responsibility for keeping PEC focused on its strategic goals was assigned to the assistant dean.

At the conclusion of this process, PEC administrators were confident a customer-focused, accountable plan had been developed from a transparent, ground-up process.

THE IMPLEMENTATION: DOING WHAT MATTERS

In the discussion below, PEC's implementation of its plan is illustrated by representative activities that PEC has undertaken in each of its five key strategic areas. Multiple goals and strategies were identified for each key area, but to simplify the discussion each key area has been represented by tasks that have been or are being carried out in furtherance of the area's goals.

Key Area I: Professional practices and outstanding service focused on empowering our employees with a more professional attitude, which has, in turn, provided our students increased efficiency and quality service, and our stakeholders with a better understanding of our value to the university.

- Held webinars and retreats for customer service training.
- Established an "Employee of the Quarter" award to recognize excellence in service.
- Broadened senior coordinator designation to strengthen career tracks within PEC.
- Held annual clerical development retreats.
- Professionalized facilities to provide better customer service and to reinforce staff professionalism.

- Established student internships to assist staff and prepare future professionals in the field.
- Created point-of-service feedback opportunities for customers and clients.

Key Area II: Program growth and development focused on initiatives that tied directly to university priorities.

- Expanded Purdue-originated distance learning courses to enhance the graduation rate of campus students, a key metric for the university.
- Implemented an initiative to encourage new graduate-level professional degree programs to help the university increase the level of participation in graduate study (another key university metric) and to help colleges reach new constituencies and create new revenue streams.
- Implemented an initiative to promote new programs, primarily conferences, related to the research mission to support the university's goal of "discovery with impact."

Key Area III: Technology Enhancement focused on areas that affect the customer or client experience.

- Implemented an ID card reader that allows program participants to record their attendance at an event by swiping an ID.
- Provided selected clients with look-up access to PEC registration system so they can see real-time registration counts and other data from the PEC system, any place at any time.
- Installed digital signs to make marketing and program logistical information more accessible and attractive to students and conference attendees.
- Developed a Blackboard/registration system interface that allows noncredit, online customers to enroll, pay, and participate in a learning activity in one transaction.

Key Area IV: Creative marketing became a priority because we had an image issue that we resolved to address with marketing enhancements and rebranding.

- Implemented digital signage to provide up-to-date information to customers in a state-of-the-art medium.
- Experimented with social media (Facebook and Twitter) to communicate more effectively with students.
- Contracted with a third-party service provider to develop, market, and help administer new online degree programs.
- Rebranded the department with a name change—from Continuing Education and Conferences to Purdue Extended Campus to reflect a broader outreach mission.

Key Area V: Human, physical, and financial resource development was recognized as preconditions to being able to implement impactful change.

- Updated PEC facilities (distance learning center, testing center, training area, and meeting rooms) into professional and functional workspaces.
- Offered more professional development opportunities (e.g., more webinars for staff development and better customer service).
- Secured significant new funding for distance learning aimed at current students and increasing new student enrollments.
- Replaced most consortium distance learning courses with Purdue-originated courses, saving the university hundreds of thousands of dollars.

ASSESSING: MEASURING IMPACT WITH METRICS

In both PEC plans, metrics played an integral role as a measurement of progress and accomplishment. In both plans about 40 metrics were reported on a regular basis. In the past year, PEC's information technology staff has developed dashboard reports on key metrics so that they are available on demand. In addition to the regular metrics, some metrics were developed on an *ad hoc* basis to address specific needs that arose. While it is generally true that metrics improve in proportion to attention paid to them, larger forces affect them as well. For example, PEC's conference business had been gradually recovering from the meltdown following 9/11, growing

from 584 programs in 2003-04 to 713 programs in 2007-08. However, the economic downturn of 2008 reduced programs to the pre-2003-04 level of 562. Likewise, the metric on staff professional-development activities has proven to be more reflective of university initiatives such as the implementation of the Banner system and the amount of funding that could be set aside in an environment of budget cuts rather than of PEC's desire to develop its employees.

Regular metrics

Below is a sampling of the metrics that PEC reports annually to the university along with some results.

- PEC's customer satisfaction rating: incremental improvement from 4.4 to 4.7 on a five-point scale.
- Allocation of university general funds as a reflection of increasing its service to the campus population for such endeavors as distance learning courses: growth from \$1,132,785 in 2003-04 to \$1,742,610 in 2007-08, a 54 percent increase; by 2011-12 it will have increased to \$2,337,169.
- Online registrations: 3,356 in 2004-2005 to 15,243 by 2009-2010.
- Student access to distance learning: 1,925 enrollments in Purdue-originated courses and 2,651 enrollments in courses offered through the Indiana College Network (ICN) in 2003-2004; 4,006 enrolled in Purdue-originated courses and 5,087 in ICN courses by 2008-09.
- Amounts transferred from PEC to the university's colleges and departments: increase from \$9,151,001 in 2004-05 to \$11,020,972 in 2008-09, a 20.4 percent growth; \$11,817,375 in 2009-10.

Evolving metrics

In their annual strategic planning retreat, PEC administrators reviewed all the strategic initiatives to determine those that had not yet been started, those that had been started but not completed, and those that either had proven unfeasible or were no longer a priority. In other cases metrics were altered to meet changing needs.

- In the wake of the economic downturn, PEC had seen a drop-off in conference business and concluded that one way to increase business was to promote less costly, regionally based, single-day conferences, and such programs became

an internal metric. To build this business, PEC developed promotions and established a special bundled rate. As the economy revived and conference business returned to normalcy, PEC administration decided that single-day programs were no longer a metric necessary to track (though the package rate continued).

- To measure the department's vitality and its ability to adapt to changing conditions, the number of new programs was established as an appropriate metric. However, defining what constituted a new program proved to be a more difficult task than anyone had imagined. For example, did a program that had been here previously and then returned qualify as new? Did new regional locations of existing programs count? Did spin-off programs from existing programs count? After several attempts at resolving such issues, it was found that reporting was very inconsistent, so it was resolved that the new-program metric would not produce sufficiently reliable data to report on.
- In the first plan, PEC was interested primarily in expanding participation in distance learning. As enrollments grew, the expense of participation in ICN consortium courses became a serious concern (Purdue paid consortium partners for its students' participation), and increasing the proportion of enrollments in Purdue-originated, generally funded courses became the focus of the distance learning metric of the second plan.

Special metrics

PEC occasionally devised special metrics to address particular needs. Some examples follow.

- To demonstrate the financial impact of increasing Purdue's capacity to offer its own courses rather than paying for its students to participate in consortium courses, PEC estimated savings of \$741,000 in 2010-11 after one year of aggressively increasing capacity in existing courses and focusing new-course development on high-demand consortium courses.
- To help distance learning grow, PEC wanted to counter faculty concerns that students who chose to enroll in distance learning courses were not as academically strong as those in traditional courses and were looking for an easier way through challenging

courses. PEC conducted a demographic study of cohorts in the same classes on-campus and online. Among many findings, the study showed that students in online courses had a slightly higher grade point average than those in the on-campus cohort.

- To demonstrate the impact of distance learning on graduation rates, PEC showed that students in distance learning courses were four times more likely to graduate in the following semester than their colleagues in identical on-campus courses (40.3 percent vs. 10 percent).

LESSONS LEARNED

The distance between vision statements and strategic plans to the operational is often great, and in some instances the efforts of individuals and committees end up filed away in department archives. Fortunately, this was not the case at Purdue. From the start, strategic plans had to be implemented, units had measurable goals, and individuals were held accountable.

From the 2003-2008 plan PEC learned that:

- Metrics were invaluable in providing a concrete sense of direction, and the items that were measured generally tended to improve.
- Explicitly aligning PEC's departmental strategic plan with the university's plan was critical in demonstrating that PEC was "on the same page" as the university administration and helped PEC's funding requests to succeed.
- Defining specific tasks to accomplish each strategic objective, and assigning responsibility for those tasks to particular administrators made accomplishing overall goals more manageable.
- Meeting annually to reassess the plan, dropping activities that no longer seemed feasible or relevant, and adding new ones that did, keeps the plan vital and relevant to changing circumstances.

In the second plan (2009-2013), PEC has carried forward with the lessons of the first plan and has added new learning to them.

- The development of the second plan demonstrated the value of involving stakeholders to provide a fresh perspective on the organization and increased the level of buy in.
- Likewise, involvement of employees as stakeholders and providers of input also proved valuable with respect to perspective and consensus.

- Employees also proved highly effective in shaping the plan, and their efforts made it truly a departmental plan.
- Having a faculty consultant helped to keep the process on track and focused, and a graduate assistant supporting the process assured that tasks were accomplished.

From both planning experiences, PEC learned that a focus on impact—customer-focused, measurable, and aligned with the university’s priorities—helped the department create value for the university and our customers. If PEC’s plan is ultimately successful in producing desired measurable impacts, it will be because it has made organizational commitments to:

- transparency in creating an open environment that relies upon input from customers, stakeholders, and staff;
- accountability of individual staff members to accomplish tasks that contribute to strategic goals, and for the staff itself to define appropriate goals for the department; and
- assessment through regular and special metrics not only of PEC’s success in achieving goals, but also of the value of the goals themselves under evolving conditions through ongoing evaluation by PEC and university administrators.

As PEC launched its second plan in the spring and summer of 2008, the parameters of the global economic crisis were only beginning to emerge, and no one knew the impact it would have on the university over the next several years. Likewise, no one could foresee the scope of the role that distance learning might play in the university’s decadal funding plan. Purdue Extended Campus has come to recognize that any strategic plan is always a work in progress and that the robustness of a plan rests, in part, in its ability to demonstrate—through transparency, accountability, and assessment—where the plan must evolve.

PEC’s current strategic plan, “Engaging Customers—Delivering Solutions,” can be viewed at www.pec.purdue.edu. 