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Strategic Planning and Decision-Making in Higher Education --

What Gets Attention and What Doesn't

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Why is it that the implementation of learning outcomes assessment in education is proceeding so grudgingly? Why, when assessment results are attained, are they so rarely integrated into the strategic planning process? These questions remain prominent in spite of over a decade of intensive effort on the part of educational accrediting agencies to facilitate outcomes assessment. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities has noted: “Seasoned observers have pointed out the irony of the academy, as an institution dedicated to discerning the truth through evidence, being so seemingly resistant to measuring quality through evidence. It is an irony that puzzles—and frustrates—a widening circle of stakeholders” (*Perspectives*, Spring 2006).

One widely held notion is that the major impediment is technical – finding the right measures, data collection and analysis methods, etc. However, the use of effective research methodologies in other fields involving evaluation, makes this notion questionable. It is all the more so when we recognize that many of the very methodologies used effectively in fields outside of higher education were developed by educators and are often effectively applied by educators in their own professional disciplines. To be sure, there are technical hurdles that remain, but the already existent general knowledge-base regarding research methods, along with the more recent availability of education-specific tools such as electronic portfolios, standardized testing services, survey services, and assessment management software makes the technical-deficit explanation of education’s slow and sporadic progress dubious.

The present paper addresses these puzzling questions and suggests that motivational rather than methodological factors present the primary challenge. The analysis is based on observations we have made at colleges and universities across the United States while working with faculty and administrators on assessment implementation strategies.

What Affects Personnel Matters

There is a relationship between the effect a decision is expected to have on an institution’s personnel and the amount of attention paid to the decision; and, of course, what people expect is based largely on what has been experienced in the past. Decisions

that have had clearly perceptible and relatively immediate effects on personnel typically receive much attention. Decisions that have had no effects, nebulous effects or substantially delayed effects on personnel typically receive considerably less attention. With this observation in mind, institutional decisions can be usefully classified into three broad categories: (1) decisions that are expected to impact employee job convenience, comfort or status; (2) decisions that are expected to impact institution, program or individual security or survival; and (3) decisions which are not expected to significantly impact the lives of personnel.

The consequences of decisions in the first category -- convenience, comfort or status issues -- tend to be relatively immediate and perceptible to personnel. Hence, such decisions tends to generate considerable interest and attention. Decisions involving office space, work schedules, room assignments or travel privileges are examples in this category. The consequences of decisions in the second category -- security, survival issues -- also tend to be relatively immediate and are poignantly perceptible to faculty and staff. Hence, decisions in this category tend to play an inordinately dominant role in institutional decision processes and planning. Decisions about budgets, fund-raising, accreditation, student admissions and retention, tenure and promotion are examples in this category.

Decisions related to program outcomes have typically had little effect on the lives of faculty and staff. Thus, consideration of program outcome quality as a factor in strategic planning tends to be neglected. While there is currently considerable time and attention devoted to assessment issues, observations suggest that the focus of attention is usually more about developing strategies for satisfying accrediting agencies than about improving learning outcomes.

The Logic of Strategic Planning

Logically speaking, learning outcomes are the criteria against which strategic plans should be evaluated, since effective student learning rests at the core of an educational institution's mission. Security, survival and employee convenience issues, though important, are logically subordinate – they are means to the end. What this means in practice is that *decisions about survival or convenience issues should always be considered in light of their impact on outcomes*. Strategic plans should be aimed at

producing the best student learning in the most cost-effective way, not the most cost-effective program in the most convenient way. This entails more than merely expressing concern for student learning; it means deliberate monitoring of program outcomes as adjustments in the delivery process are made. Strategic planning is concerned with formulating a plan of action designed to maximize program effectiveness. But strategic planning without knowledge of program outcomes is an exercise in futility.

Decisions regarding student retention and admissions, both motivated primarily by survival concerns, illustrate this point. Unilateral efforts to improve retention could, for example, lead to inadvertent grade inflation, as the faculty strives to minimize failures. Over time, these eroded standards could in turn result in a significant decline in learning-outcomes. Hence, without simultaneous attention to program outcomes, short-term improvements in retention might be attained at the expense of long-term program quality. Over time, the decline in program quality might come full circle and actually negatively impact admissions and perhaps retention.

Similarly, changes in admission strategies, also motivated primarily by survival concerns, could affect program outcomes either positively or negatively. As the composition of the student body changes as a result of changing admission strategies, program outcomes may also change unless the program is appropriately adjusted. If these outcome changes go undetected, necessary adjustments in the program aimed at preventing or correcting negative outcomes are likely to go unaddressed.

In fact, at many academic institutions today, personnel verbal behavior and institutional marketing literature promulgate a focus on student learning, while strategic planning and decisions tend to be dominated primarily by program security/survival issues. In other words, *while logic and the institutional mission mandate a focus on student learning, the contingencies of survival bearing on faculty and staff still favor a focus on process (input) variables*. There is still a relative economic advantage to focusing on inputs rather than outputs – impressive facilities and faculty credentials still sell better than nebulous outcomes. The prestige of both the institution and faculty is still based more on inputs than outputs, thus, there is a vested interest in maintaining an input focus. Evaluation of faculty for tenure and promotion is still focused more on teaching practices (inputs) than on the learning outcomes produced, thus providing an

incentive for remaining input focused. *Bluntly stated, the quality of the learning outcomes produced has had relatively little impact on the lives of program faculty and staff and therefore still receives relatively little serious attention in strategic planning.* Clearly, the contingencies of survival in higher education are rapidly changing (Commission on Higher Education, 2006), and some educators are becoming very concerned; but rank-and-file faculty and staff have for the most part not yet been affected by the quality of the learning outcomes they produce.

Strategic Planning and Mission

The process of strategic planning has its roots in the world of business. In that setting too, there is much focus on process (input) variables -- the structures, actions and resources needed. But unlike educational institutions, for-profit businesses also have a clear, well understood and well documented outcome that clearly bears on company and employee wellbeing: financial gain. The criterion against which the effectiveness of a strategic plan can be measured is tacitly understood by all and readily available for examination. Profit is the ultimate mission.

When strategic planning is applied in educational institutions, the process is often truncated by the absence of clearly defined and reliably documented outcomes. Goals are set, alternative action plans are discussed and a hypothesized best-course-of-action is selected; but effectiveness of the selected plan is seldom evaluated against educational outcomes as defined by the institutional mission. If the implemented strategic plan is evaluated at all, the criteria of success are likely to be process variables in the survival category, such as financial health, student enrollments and student retention, rather than the outcomes of student learning or community impact. If the business model of strategic planning is to make any sense in education, educators will first have to develop the capability to clearly define and systematically monitor educational outcomes and come to understand the intrinsic relationship between strategic plans and program outcomes. In business, financial health is a valid criterion of success; in education, it is not.

The current tendency to focus on institutional process rather than institutional mission is established at the highest level at most institutions. The success or failure of presidents at institutions of higher learning tends to be judged more in terms of the financial health of the institution, than the degree of success at mission attainment, which

is usually largely unknown. If this is so, it means that there is still more incentive for presidents to pursue highly visible process developments that attract attention and financial support than more subtle and gradual learning improvements.

Traditionally, the institution with a successful financial program could invest in impressive program inputs – equipment, buildings, prestigious faculty --- and offer these to the public as evidence of institutional quality. Impressive inputs were, and for the most part still are, widely accepted as evidence of an effective program. While public expectations and standards of evaluation are changing, the effects of these changes have not yet significantly affected the behavior of many educators with regard to strategic planning. Currently, at many institutions, learning outcomes assessment is done in a perfunctory manner in response to accreditation requirements and has little or no real effect on significant institutional decisions.

Accrediting agencies have put in place consequences associated with engaging in the process of outcomes assessment. But this is not tantamount to having consequences associated with the quality of the learning outcomes attained. The former requires only that faculty and staff go through the motions of doing outcomes assessment; the latter requires that faculty and staff actually pursue learning outcome improvements. This distinction is subtle but critical. As long as concern over accreditation continues to be the primary motivation behind outcomes assessment, outcome results will likely remain on the margins of faculty and staff attention. *When the actual quality of attained learning outcomes begins to impact the lives of program faculty and staff, outcomes assessment will take center stage and strategic planning will focus on student learning as the criterion of success.*

Growing Public Demand

We are currently experiencing a growing public demand for evidence about program outcome quality from educational institutions and a concomitant recognition that traditionally touted process indicators of quality are inadequate (Commission on Higher Education, 2006). Encouragingly, there is also a growing number of faculty and administrators who are beginning to recognize these changing conditions and the inadequacy of the status quo (Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006). This press for outcome evidence of program

effectiveness is likely to continue. As the public press for evidence of effectiveness continues and becomes more focused, the current practice of merely expressing concern for student learning while pursuing process development will become increasingly inadequate. Institutional survival will become increasingly dependent upon evidence of program effectiveness in terms of learning outcomes and community impact. In the past, there were few significant consequences associated with outcome quality, and educators responded accordingly. In the not too distant future, the consequences associated with outcome quality may well be profound.

Immediate Challenge

In this emerging environment, failing to consider learning outcomes as an important factor in the strategic planning process is likely to become increasingly costly for our institutions. Administrators that come to recognize this forthcoming shift in survival contingencies and are among the first to start integrating learning-outcomes into the strategic planning process will likely realize significant benefits from their initiative. *The immediate challenge is to find ways to make program outcome quality matter in the sense that the outcomes achieved have clear and immediate consequences for faculty and staff.* Consistent with good behavior management practice, consequences should be such that they reinforce outcome improvements and achievements, rather than punish deficiencies. Administrators will have to have the foresight to recognize that in the near future consumers will associate significant consequences with program outcomes, so immediate attention to outcomes is imperative. Faculty will have to come to recognize that pursuing outcome improvement now is ultimately in their best interest. Institutional resource allocation, faculty and staff evaluation, and public recognition of attained outcomes suggest themselves as possible opportunities for applying outcome-based incentives. Virtually all faculty and staff *say* they are passionately concerned about student learning outcomes; but until they are induced to systematically act on those alleged concerns, the connection between strategic planning and institutional mission will remain fictitious and the health of our institutions will be put in jeopardy.

References

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