

STRATEGY AND ACCREDITATION

In the academic sphere, many strategic goals will be directed to specific committees or departments for follow-up and eventual action. Others will have a more general impact across many academic programs. As examples, one frequently finds that strategic plans include initiatives to implement international and multicultural studies, to expand interdisciplinary work, to encourage the uses of technology in teaching, to develop new pedagogies, to revise the general education program, to make advising a more effective process, and to create effective methods for the assessment of learning. These strategies cannot be reduced to the work of one or two faculty committees. Broad academic initiatives like these need to be related to the ongoing work of academic programs and departments. The connections are usually difficult to make, and academic administrators are often frustrated in trying to create them. The specialized focus of the department and the pressures of everyday responsibilities work against the time and energy required for new ventures. If the push for change comes from the top in the wrong form, resistance and resentment immediately rise to the surface.

In dealing with challenges of this kind, strategic leadership always looks for existing methods and processes to help accomplish its work. Cross-cutting

academic initiatives can, for example, be tied to program review, to self-study for reaffirmation of accreditation, and to the ongoing work of assessment. These suggestions will grate on many ears, since each of these processes are scorned by a hefty percentage of the faculty, and not without good reason. Much of accreditation has consisted of busy work necessary to comply with regulations, program reviews have been scripted and perfunctory, and assessment has never engaged the imagination or interest of the faculty. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for strategic change in each activity.

More recently the accrediting processes of both specialized and regional associations have allowed or required institutions to become more expansive in their self-studies and to focus on the quality of student learning. Jon Wergin (2003) documents the recent emergence of the strong emphasis on student learning in the seven regional accrediting bodies. In a parallel way, Ann Dodd (2004) analyzes the increasing focus in accreditation on the self-assessment of educational quality, curriculum development, and leadership. The emphasis is on encouraging institutions to relate their ongoing strategy processes to the tasks of a self-study. The approach makes eminent sense for several reasons. One is that it gives priority in accreditation reviews to issues that have strategic significance across the institution; another is that it focuses energy on a substantive set of responsibilities that must be fulfilled by the entire campus.

The 2002 guidelines of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges emphasize precisely these points. Each institution undergoing review is expected to develop a quality enhancement plan and to demonstrate that it is part of a continuous process of planning and evaluation. "Engaging the wider academic community, the quality enhancement plan is based upon a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the learning environment for supporting student achievement and accomplishing the mission of the institution... with special attention to student learning" (Commission on Colleges 2002, 5).

To fulfill these requirements, institutions obviously need to have an ongoing strategy program. Existing or contemplated strategic initiatives provide the content and the context necessary for charting the development of a quality enhancement plan. That plan may, as suggested, be one or more of the topics already on the institution's strategic agenda. If a topic is chosen that cuts across the curriculum and teaching and learning, it will have to be considered at the departmental level and translated into plans and actions that become part of the institution's formal responsibilities. The goals of each department are perforce connected to the larger educational and strategic objectives of the institution, which are ultimately approved by the governing board. The obligations of accreditation can be transformed into an opportunity for integrative decision making.

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

We have already seen that strategic indicators are an important part of institutional self-definition. Those same indicators often provide the basis for

measuring and monitoring an institution's achievement of its strategic goals, especially if they are easily subject to quantification, such as goals relating to admissions, enrollment, finances, and fund-raising. The implementation of goals is strengthened by effective forms of quality assessment that open lines of inquiry into the institution's performance.

Performance measured by strategic indicators offers a wealth of critical information. It prompts important inquiries about the meaning of the data and the achievement of strategic goals that specify the vision. Where have the goals been achieved or exceeded? Where have they fallen short? For what reasons? What actions are underway to reach the goals? What do we do to improve our performance? Are there unanticipated results? What do the data tell us about where we stand with the competition? Are the data a reliable indicator of the institution's achievements? What follow-up studies are required to probe important findings and glean new insights? Do the goals or the measures need to be revised?

In a similar way, each major administrative service and program should assess its own performance periodically through surveys and interviews and relate its evaluations to its own and the institution's strategic objectives. The ability to make continuous progress in reaching ever-higher levels of service and achievement depends on knowing how well the organization is performing its work in all spheres, which is one dimension of what it means to be a learning organization. Quality is of a piece. The effort to enhance quality across the campus contributes to a spirit of pride and achievement that builds on itself and creates momentum. Recent studies, including ones on projects at the University of Iowa and Rutgers, focus on the importance of a strategic orientation to measurement and goal setting (Coleman 2004; Lawrence and Cermak 2004).

The Assessment of Student Learning

Typically the assessment of academic and student learning goals will depend on evaluations that do not lend themselves easily to quantifiable results, or to trends that can be simply reduced to numbers. The desire to reduce students' intellectual development to a simple set of comparative metrics or the results of high-stake tests is a misconception that blocks coherent thought about the kinds of assessments that are possible. To look for simple answers, one would have to displace the larger and most important goals of liberal education—a passion for learning, critical judgment, moral purposefulness, civic responsibility, and a resilient imagination—because they are not directly quantifiable.

Student learning is best assessed with a variety of methods, many of which are useful, if not purely scientific. They can provide proxies and indicators of achievement that have meaning in the context of the inquiry and as a way to probe the issues in an institutional framework (cf. Bok 2006; Burke 2005; Ewell 2006). Institutions, for example, do and should gather data through interviews and questionnaires about student and alumni interpretations of their campus and academic experiences. A wealth of data is available in the results of teaching

evaluations, in the patterns of students' course selections and grades, in retention data, and in many other sources that are part of the everyday life of most institutions. Useful information is often collected about alumni achievements in the workplace and graduate school. The data can be mined for significance through various analytical and quantitative techniques (Kuh 2005). With the right disposition and processes, all this information can be used to build a culture of evidence about student learning.

Institutions may also choose to participate in important projects such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, which, as we have seen, seeks to determine the level of active student involvement in learning. It collects and analyzes data from thousands of students at hundreds of institutions and offers a variety of quantitative analyses and institutional comparisons of the various dimensions of student engagement in learning. Carefully interpreted, findings from these kinds of inquiries can assess broad strategic initiatives and goals with regard to important aspects of the quality of student learning, as opposed to subject matter recall (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al. 2005).

A variety of newer methods of assessment are especially appropriate in a strategic context as well. The growing practice of using student learning portfolios, often created electronically to function as an elaborate transcript of student experiences, achievements, and abilities, is promising for several reasons. They can be the basis for student, peer, and faculty assessment of a student's intellectual skills and competencies, as demonstrated through a wide range of experiences and accomplishments in and out of the classroom, or they can contribute decisively to student self-awareness and purposefulness in setting and achieving educational goals that reflect the institution's special strengths.

In terms of strategic issues, the gold standard for assessment is the ability to determine the value that a particular educational program adds to the student's intellectual development. Students come to college with such different levels of motivation, talent, and preparation that absolute measures of student achievement provide only a partial indication of the educational power of a given program or institution. Were we able to measure the degree of a student's progress, however, educators would have ways to improve their teaching and programs in response to assessments of learning. They might also find critical evidence in support of their claims about their distinctive achievements and ways of creating educational value. The ability that strategic assessment offers to create, reinforce, and promote authentic comparative advantages and core competencies should motivate the work of value-added assessment. The findings should reflect and authenticate the institutional narrative and become embedded in the ongoing work of strategy.

The National Survey of Student Engagement, as we have seen, offers a promising line of inquiry about the culture and the form of student learning. Another variable in the learning equation has to do with the cognitive skills students develop and points toward the assessment of differences in intellectual growth. Working in cooperation with the Council for Financial Aid to Education, the

Rand Corporation has developed a test to measure acquired intellectual capacities in communication and in critical, analytical, and integrative thinking, echoing the focus on cognitive skills we discussed in the preceding chapter. Called the College Learning Assessment, it gives students a real-life problem to analyze and resolve by drawing on different types of information and using various forms of reasoning. Instead of responding to multiple-choice questions, students write their analyses and proposed solution to the problem in a complex prose argument. The test can be administered at the early and more advanced stages of a student's career, so the patterns of value-added intellectual growth among students can be charted and compared. The results can also be correlated with other measures of student capability, such as test scores and college grades. The College Learning Assessment intends to measure cognitive capacities that most colleges and universities describe as one of the aims of liberal education (Erwin 2005; Ewell 2006; Rand Corporation / Council for Aid to Education 2004). Using predominantly multiple-choice questions, both the Educational Testing Service's Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress and ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency also offer tests that aim to measure academic skills, though the emphasis is not as clearly focused on real-life situations.

Embedded Assessment

If strategic leadership is to be successful, it matters whether or not specific academic and administrative goals are achieved. Yet the most significant accomplishment of strategic leadership is to embed a system of productive self-evaluation and strategic decision making into the institution, one that continuously translates into efforts to raise the bar of academic and organizational achievement (cf. Banta 2002; Bok 2006; Ewell 2006). Strategic assessment then becomes a distinctive activity of a learning organization by determining whether educational goals are being met, and by using the results of the process to move to the next level of achievement. Data on student learning must migrate from the institutional research office into the self-assessment of academic programs and individual faculty members. Although this is no small task, it can be gradually achieved by establishing a strategic context for disaggregating, considering, and using the data. The data can come to include the results of small-scale studies and experiments teachers themselves can perform to compare results on different types of assignments and classroom strategies. In *Our Students' Best Work*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2004) provides ten recommendations for creating campus cultures of accountability and assessment, emphasizing liberal education as a standard of excellence, the need for articulation of goals for learning in each department, the development of milestones of student achievement, and continuous assessment that includes external reviews and public transparency of student achievements.

Done effectively, assessment contributes to a culture of evidence that characterizes the work of strategic leadership. These issues ultimately go to the strategic

question of providing evidence for educational quality. Whatever else it does, a college or university first needs to have meaningful information about whether or not it is fulfilling its mission to foster students' intellectual growth and achievement. Then it needs to have mechanisms to give visibility to its findings and communicate them to programs, departments, and individuals. Finally, it must have strategic linkages to act on what it has learned about itself. As difficult and unpopular as assessment is among many faculty members, institutions do not have the option to avoid the issue, especially from the perspective of strategic leadership. Unless it knows what it intends its intellectual signature to be and can assess the impact that it has on students, it will not be able to create a focus for its aspirations to attain higher levels of educational quality. It may fall into the common strategic trap of wistfully claiming that all it needs are better students, rather than becoming passionate about ways it can make a greater difference in the education of the students it has.

STRATEGIC PROGRAM REVIEWS

We can illustrate some of the challenges and opportunities of institutionalizing a new strategic orientation to assessment by considering changes that have been made in the practice of academic program reviews. Especially in larger institutions, one of the primary forms of assessment involves the periodic review of each academic department and program, often with regard to its separate graduate and undergraduate offerings. Most program reviews, not unlike accreditation, consist of a departmental self-study and a campus visit by a panel of two or three faculty members from another institution. When used to greatest advantage, there is a clear process for the review, active participation by the university's academic leadership, and timely communication of the results back to the department (Mets 1997).

Not unexpectedly, the process and the results of program review are of uneven quality and usefulness. Most faculty members participate in the process with sentiments ranging from grudging acceptance to repugnance (Mets 1997; Wergin 2002). Yet if good information about the faculty, the students, and the program has been collected, and insightful consultants have been retained, the recommendations can be beneficial to the department's self-understanding and its plans for the future.

From the point of view of strategic self-assessment, the process represents an important opportunity at several levels, many of which have not always been characteristic of the practices of program reviews. First, it provides the occasion to connect the strategic vision of the institutional or unit-wide plan with the self-understanding and planning of each department. Additionally, it offers an ongoing process that can be oriented toward strategic thinking, goal setting, and continuing self-assessment, especially with regard to the quality of student learning, a topic that is not traditionally the focus of the process. The link to strategy is not an illusion. In a helpful study of program reviews across 130 campuses, Wergin

asked the provost of a research university with a model program how he would introduce it into another institution. He replied: "First I'd take a measure of the institution and its vision for the future. . . . I would try to find ways of articulating a higher degree of aspiration; if there weren't a strong appetite for this, then program review would be doomed to failure" (quoted in Wergin 2002, 245–46).

Although some processes show these characteristics, there should be no illusion that these proposed strategic shifts in the perspective and purpose of program review will be easy to accomplish (Mets 1997). The culture of academic autonomy that makes leadership so difficult is in fullest flower at the departmental level. It is not surprising that proposals for academic change that do not originate in the department, such as reform in general education, are often perceived as a threat to departmental autonomy.

Program Reviews and Student Learning

One should not expect or even desire to change program reviews radically, for they are properly a creature of the judgments of professionals in their fields. Yet one can seek to alter the process to make it fit more naturally into a process of strategic thinking and self-evaluation. This could mean that each program would be asked to focus on the quality of student learning (in addition to research, faculty productivity, and program content) with specific attention to the larger strategic goals of the university. Protocols and methods would be built into the process to achieve this orientation, giving space to the department to develop or modify assessment methods that it would find beneficial to improve its own work with students.

An important part of the self-study would be focused on questions that the program faculty would shape themselves and would find meaningful. Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy (2005) write of a fascinating project in academic quality assurance at the University of Missouri that can guide some of these questions and has inspired the following list: *What are the goals of learning in the department?* What do we want our students to learn and to be able to do? How do our goals reflect the distinctive mission and vision of the department and the institution? *What should be the design of the curriculum?* Is there a coherent logic for the relationship of courses in the program? How do the courses relate to the goals of learning? *What are the department's primary methods of teaching and learning?* How do our students learn? Are teaching and learning active or passive, individually or group oriented? How is technology used? What types of assignments, learning experiences, and levels of expectation predominate? *How do we know if students are reaching the department's and the university's goals for learning?* How do we assess learning? Who is responsible for the evaluation—the faculty member, the department, the school, or the university? What validates a student's choice of this program as a major? *How do we use the results of our evaluations to improve the quality of student learning?* Are the results actually being used effectively? What are our priorities in light of what we know about teaching, learning, and our program? What should change?

In an approach such as this, the department would go on to create a self-study that would provide external reviewers with samples of student work, such as papers, projects, and exams. Assessment data about student accomplishments and the results of exit interviews and alumni surveys would be provided. The visiting team would read much of this material in advance and spend considerable time on campus, interacting with students, perhaps hearing and seeing the results of student research. The effort to create a culture of evidence for student learning as a basis for program reviews would make the process more strategically effective and rewarding.

If the questions alone were to become a central concern of all program reviews, they would more clearly become strategic activities. The questions about other broad strategic goals of the university concerning graduate programs or research might be structured in similar ways. Whatever the focus, they would become vital links in the effort to connect the program's goals with the strategic objectives of the larger institution and would build the strategic self-assessment into the ongoing work of the department. In systematically using the program review process to respond more nimbly to change and the university's vision, departments would find themselves participating in the process and discipline of strategic leadership.