Academic Planning: Tools for Applying Strategic Priorities to New Program Development

Custom Research Brief • September 24, 2010

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:
Leadership at a member institution approached the Council with the following questions:

- How do institutions successfully use academic or strategic plans to guide new program development?
- How did institutions develop their initial academic or strategic plan? What stakeholders were involved in this process?
- How do institutions make the strategic plan an active part of decision-making?
- What tools are used to ensure that academic programs remain consistent with the institution’s strategic plan?

Project Sources:

- Education Advisory Board’s internal and online (www.educationadvisoryboard.com) research libraries
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (http://nces.ed.gov/)

Research Parameters:
Per the requesting member’s guidelines, the Council interviewed academic planning personnel at similar institutions and at institutions that had developed academic planning processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Enrollment (Total / Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Northeast Large City</td>
<td>11,200 / 5,800</td>
<td>Private Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Southeast Large Suburb</td>
<td>20,300 / 13,500</td>
<td>Public Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Northeast Large City</td>
<td>27,500 / 18,800</td>
<td>Private Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Northeast Large City</td>
<td>3,500 / 2,900</td>
<td>Private Master’s Colleges and Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Northeast Midsize City</td>
<td>19,600 / 13,700</td>
<td>Public Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Northeast Small City</td>
<td>14,700 / 11,700</td>
<td>Public Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University G</td>
<td>Southeast Small City</td>
<td>30,900 / 23,600</td>
<td>Public Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics
II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations:

- None of the institutions contacted for this brief use documents or guidelines from central administration to identify specific new academic programs. Instead, administrators signal broad, top-down strategic priorities with institutional planning documents, prioritized budgeting, and faculty hiring in subject areas of strategic importance.

- At most contact institutions, academic planning begins with individual faculty members developing program ideas and informally recruiting support. Institutions typically give faculty latitude to create bottom-up program proposals. Faculty sponsors are expected to garner peer support, demonstrate student demand, and verify alignment with institutional strategic priorities. Contacts note that the informal support-building requirements ensure that only programs likely to be approved enter the time-consuming process of formal program review.

- Once programs have reached a threshold of informal support, contact institutions typically require faculty to submit a formal proposal. In order to capture program plans in thorough detail while reducing duplication, a number of institutions have built their proposal templates based on approval forms required by state education commissions or accreditors.

- Contacts acknowledge a growing focus on practical and financial concerns when planning academic programs. In recent years, contact institutions have added enrollment predictions, market assessments, and return on investment calculations to the program proposal process. One institution has fully integrated the academic planning and university budget processes, emphasizing institutional financial priorities in new program development.

- Contact institutions rely on periodic (three- to five-years) program assessments by external review boards to ensure that programs remain aligned with institutional strategic priorities. In anticipation of program reviews, departments conduct extensive reviews of faculty productivity, student interest, student learning outcomes, and financial contribution. Because review board findings are passed on to the same administrators or committees as those involved in new program approval, contacts consider the assessment process a valuable feedback tool to refine approval criteria and improve resource forecasting models.
All of the institutions contacted for this brief employ a similar model for integrating strategic priorities into the new program development process. Though the length and structure of each stage differs across institutions, academic planning generally begins with the setting of broad institutional strategic priorities, then moves through a grassroots process for generating ideas for new programs, then receive informal and formal reviews before being approved and periodically reviewed. Each of these stages is examined in greater detail in the following sections of this report.

### Signaling Institutional Priorities

| Though none have academic plans per se, contact institutions all communicate institutional strategic goals to every department and college, and expect new academic programs to comport with these priorities. Channels for communicating institutional strategic vision include the strategic plan, hiring strategies, and the use of college deans. |

### Conceiving New Programs

| Contact institutions generally rely on faculty members and individual departments to generate ideas for new academic programs, stressing that faculty are best-suited for judging instructional capacity and identifying areas of opportunity and demand in particular fields. |

### Informal Discussion and Review

| Many contact institutions include a stage of planning during which faculty build informal support for their ideas and discuss plans with department heads, deans, and the university provost. This stage prompts faculty members to consider practical challenges and allows administrators to intervene when a prospective program is inconsistent with institutional strategic priorities, without the time-intensive requirements of formal proposals. |

### Proposal and Approval

| After securing sufficient support to move forward, faculty members must formally propose new academic programs. Most institutions have developed robust templates for these proposals, which require a range of academic, financial, and enrollment information. |

### Ongoing Review of Academic Programs

| Every contact institution conducts ongoing reviews of its academic programs, and contacts stress the role that strategic priorities play in this review. Although no institution reports frequently disbanding projects, this process allows for considerable course correction and does occasionally result in major changes. |
IV. SIGNALING INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES

Identifying Institutional Priorities

Contacts at a number of institutions view the strategic plan as a crucial tool making institutional goals explicit to the broader campus community. Although contacts stress the importance of including specific goals in a strategic plan, no institutions mention specific academic programs in their plans.

Instead, institutions identify goals that stretch across units of the institution, with the expectation that new academic programs will support these goals. For instance, when strategic plans identify energy-related fields as an area of interest, a number of departments, such as chemistry, physics, or engineering, could potentially develop program ideas. Some examples of the priorities identified in contact institutions’ strategic plans are listed below.

Sample Strategic Plan Goals:
- Expand number of doctoral students
- Increase globally-focused programs
- Increase interdisciplinary programming
- Expand bio-tech programs
- Expand energy programs
- Increase research expenditures

Sharing Strategic Priorities with Academic Decision-Makers

Once institutional priorities have been articulated, contacts stress the importance of encouraging stakeholders across campus to integrate strategic priorities into academic planning decisions. Contacts acknowledge that strategic plans are occasionally too general or poorly distributed to decision makers on campus, identifying several strategies for improving the tactical application of institutional priorities, outlined below.

Physical Distribution
Several contact institutions distribute physical copies of strategic plans to members of the community. Lists of key priorities are posted in shared workspaces or even distributed as small cards that can be stored in wallets for quick reference.

Deans
Contacts identify college deans as an important bridge between institution-wide priorities and faculty members. At University E, contacts note that new academic program ideas based in the strategic plan are on the agenda every time the provost meets with deans.

Administrative Engagement
At all of the institutions contacted, active support from the president and provost of each institution has been a crucial signal to the university community that the strategic plan will be a guiding force in academic planning decisions.

Sharing Strategic Information
University D and University F both share information on programs’ financial performance with faculty members, and University F has begun to offer a semester-long management course for department chairs. Contacts report that this sort of information sharing helps encourage faculty to think strategically about new program development.
Another tool for promoting strategic priorities, particularly when these priorities are focused on subject-matter areas, is the strategic hiring of new faculty members. Contacts at two institutions note that this is the de facto means of demonstrating the commitment of the institution to its strategic plan. Additionally, hiring faculty members in specific subject areas can “jump-start” the ground-level new program planning process by bolstering institutional capacity in key areas.

| University A | In the absence of a large endowment, University A has relied heavily on interdepartmental cooperation in new program development. Strategic hiring of faculty members has helped encourage this process; contacts note that when the university has announced the hiring of a new faculty member for one department in a strategic issue area (e.g., energy), it has prompted other departments to consider ways to utilize the new faculty member’s expertise in interdisciplinary work. |
| University G | At University G, the administration has begun use “cluster hiring” to expand the faculty in a more strategic manner. Instead of approving specific hiring requests from individual departments, the university will announce plans to hire between ten and twenty new faculty members in a field of strategic interest (e.g., computational science, infectious diseases), and encourage departments to compete for these new tenure lines by proposing relevant programming. Contacts report that this model has prompted departments to internalize strategic priorities as they seek new resources from the administration. |
V. Generating Ideas for New Programs

Faculty Freedom

Contacts across institutions stress the role faculty members play in planning new academic programs. Contacts note that faculty members are often better suited than administrators to identify potential areas of growth and to gauge departmental capacity for new programs. Although all contact institutions work to communicate strategic priorities to faculty members, none of the institutions identify specific academic programs for development. Instead, contact institutions leave the process of generating ideas largely in the hands of faculty members. At University B, faculty members and researchers are encouraged to consider where the university “should take its students.” At University G, the strategic plan identified categories of university activity which should be expanded (e.g., research, international study, interdisciplinary work) but asked faculty members to suggest high-demand subject areas for this work.

Deans: Prompting and Support

At a number of institutions, deans are also an integral part of generating new ideas for academic programs. Provosts at contact institutions will often rely on deans to show creativity and leadership in generating program ideas that serve the strategic interests of the administration. Though faculty members are still typically the original source of new program ideas, deans are often involved in identifying promising concepts and framing new programs in light of institutional strategic priorities.

As noted in the previous section, University E has made deans an important part of the academic planning process. Since the university is not attempting to increase its undergraduate student population, its focus in recent years has been on developing “signature programs”—subject areas which will attract a small number of students but in which Syracuse is poised to excel. Contacts note that deans are at the forefront of identifying these special opportunities and encouraging faculty members to develop program proposals in these areas.
VI. SELECTING PROMISING PROGRAMS: INFORMAL REVIEW

As ideas for new academic programs emerge, contact institutions employ a range of informal processes to filter out undesirable or unrealistic plans before the submission of formal proposals for new programs. Because the formal submission and review process can be time-intensive, contacts recommend use of informal review procedures to help ensure that only programs likely to be approved are officially submitted for review. Some of these informal filter tools are examined in greater detail below.

Dependence on Individual Champions

At University A and University E, faculty members who devise an academic program are responsible for securing initial support and generating interest for prospective programs.

Although deans and department chairs may play a crucial role in supporting programs, these institutions expect a threshold of informal support (e.g., faculty interest, donor support, etc.) before academic program ideas are formally considered. Contacts at both institutions praise this model as an effective initial measure of program viability.

Cost-Effective Growth at University A

University A, which has undergone significant expansion with limited budget resources, stresses the need for individual charismatic personalities to address practical obstacles to new program development. Because the university can only afford to occasionally expand the number of tenure-track faculty in specific, strategic disciplines, program champions are crucial for recruiting additional resources and leveraging existing faculty across departments. Contacts at University A credit this model with helping ensure responsible growth in recent years.

Responsibilities of Faculty Champions

- Recruit faculty from other departments
- Assemble class schedules and assign instructors
- Develop curriculum for Master’s programs
- Identify potential research avenues
- Promote program to deans and administrators
- Identify potential philanthropic or donor support

Justifying Specialty Programs at University E

University E does not intend to expand undergraduate enrollment, thus is focused on developing “signature programs” in specialized areas of excellence, such as music industry studies and arts journalism. In order to focus academic planning effort on signature programs, University E has established three key questions to guide new program developers:

1. **Does a new program fall within an area of current or traditional strength for the university?**
2. **Is there sufficient demand and interest in this program such that it has an opportunity to succeed?**
3. **Can the program connect to a “community of experts,” (e.g., regional industry, alumni experts, faculty members, etc.)?**

Before programs are formally reviewed, faculty members are expected to demonstrate informally to deans and other administrators that prospective academic programs meet these three criteria.
VI. SELECTING PROMISING PROGRAMS: INFORMAL REVIEW

Discussion with Administrators

Another informal means of screening prospective academic programs is a required discussion with academic administrators, such as the provost and relevant deans, before the official proposal process begins.

This initial discussion is a requirement at University B and University C, in both cases meant as an opportunity for administrators to consider whether prospective program align with the institution’s strategic priorities. Faculty members are expected to describe in broad terms what key challenges the program would be most likely to face (e.g., facility use, securing faculty, etc.). In cases where administrators raise strategic concerns, program ideas are abandoned or revised and subjected to further informal discussion.

Contacts at both institutions report satisfaction with this requirement, noting that it helps address key strategic concerns early in the process, and has also helped prompt faculty members to consider more carefully how to best align with the institution-wide strategic plan.

“We don’t want our faculty members to spend so much time working on the proposal, then have it arrive at the Provost’s desk and have him be surprised and say no.”
– Council Interview

Public Listing of New Program Ideas

At both University G and University E, faculty members’ ideas for new academic programs are posted on public lists, to encourage cooperation and help cultivate informal support for promising programs. Contacts note that this is particularly helpful given that a large number of new academic programs are interdisciplinary in nature. Public lists often produce unanticipated synergies, such as revealing that multiple faculty members are pursuing similar programs independently.

At both institutions, lists were first used with graduate programs, which span a smaller community. Contacts at both institutions describe plans to expand this practice into undergraduate academic planning as well. As a screen to eliminate unpopular program ideas, University G removes programs from the list after they have remained on it for three years without generating significant interest.
VII. FORMAL REVIEW OF ACADEMIC PROPOSALS

After informally screening programs, contact institutions typically employ a formal proposal process to more rigorously review program ideas for feasibility, business impact, and strategic alignment. This section examines the typical contents of proposal documents and the review processes at several institutions.

Formal Proposal Content Requirements

The table below lists some common components of the formal program proposal. Contact institutions typically expect proposals to provide a comprehensive description of the academic, financial, and strategic role a program will play at the institution. A number of institutions have recently added requirements that faculty members include enrollment predictions, job market data, and “return on investment” figures. Contacts acknowledge that these additions have become increasingly necessary in the context of tightening budget constraints and concern about sustainable growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Commonly Included in Formal Proposals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Curricular information</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Expected faculty needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Expected facilities needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Job market description for relevant fields</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Potential competitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Preexisting programs that will be affected negatively</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Enrollment predictions and return-on-investment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explanation of strategic plan alignment</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Alternative funding sources (if necessary)</td>
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When establishing proposal templates, several institutions rely on mandatory third-party documents as a foundation. University B, for instance, which is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), based its proposal template on SACS reaccreditation documents. Similarly, University D based its graduate program proposal template on the form used by the state for approving any new graduate program. Contacts ascribe this choice to the familiarity of these forms to faculty members and the desire to reduce faculty workload.

Notably, though proposal templates include space for faculty members to illustrate alignment with the strategic plan, contacts report that the formal proposal process is typically focused more on practical and financial concerns, as strategic issues are discussed in a more informal manner before the process commences.
# VII. Formal Review of Academic Proposals

## University B

University B, which begins its new program development process with an informal discussion of strategic alignment and potential challenges, has also established an extensive formal review, through which programs are considered by every level of academic oversight.

The university has established a Director of Program Review and Accreditation to ensure that program review proceeds smoothly. Contacts report that revisions and alterations in an academic program are more common in the early stages of the process, noting that by the time proposals have reached the provost they are less likely to be contentious or surprising for university stakeholders.

## A Unique Model: University F

University F differs substantially from other contact institutions; the entire academic planning process has been integrated with the university-wide budget process. The process begins with all university units—including those academic departments seeking to create new academic programming—assembling a budget request in the form of an “academic business plan.” The plan resembles proposals at other institutions, highlighting planned activities, pertinent market information, enrollment projections, and other strategic considerations.

Upon completion, business plans are submitted to the university provost, who reviews the requests and decides which programs should be funded or considered for future funding. Approved programs are forwarded to an operations group, which includes business affairs, academic affairs, and institutional research personnel.

The operations group prioritizes budget requests, using the university’s strategic plan as a guide. This prioritized list is then converted into the university budget, which is announced a full year in advance to allow departments to plan accordingly.

Contacts stress the importance of this system in ensuring the responsible use of resources, noting that the process effectively balances financial and academic priorities by including integrating provostial and budgetary approval into a single process.

### Approval Processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Unit Review</td>
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<td>College-Level Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provostial Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Governing Bodies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Board of Regents Approval</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

“*It’s been very important for us to require faculty to demonstrate that programs are more than just a good idea. We simply can’t afford to approve everything.*”

– Council Interview

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Once programs have been approved, institutions almost universally rely on periodic external review boards to ensure that programs remain consistent with institutional strategic priorities. These committees, which typically consist of distinguished faculty from other institutions, prominent alumni, or governing board members, conduct reviews of all academic programs every three to five years. In anticipation of this review, academic departments are expected to compile presentations on the contribution programs are making to the strategic plan, upcoming plans for new offerings or directions, and concerns about needed resources or emerging challenges.

Across institutions, contacts note that the value of the review board is often not in the review itself, but in the self-study an upcoming review occasions for the audited department. Review processes serve to encourage strategic thinking in faculty and reassure administrators of an ongoing strategic focus at the department level. Review boards can also make recommendations for course changes, and contacts stress that these recommendations are taken seriously by administrators and faculty alike.

Another crucial role for review boards is as a feedback mechanism for administrators. Review boards are often the most effective way for departments to raise concerns about insufficient resources to administrators. University B requires that all review board documentation, including the board’s final report, be submitted to all layers of the new program approval process (described on the previous page). Contacts describe this as a crucial “feedback loop” which allows administrators to learn more about the capacity and limitations of departmental faculty.
The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by the Advisory Board Company or its sources.

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