Academic Plans at Public Institutions:  
An Analysis of Organization, Content and Formatting

Custom Research Brief  •  June 2009

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & PARAMETERS

Project Challenge:

A member institution approached the Council for information about Academic Plans. Specifically the institution was interested in:

- How do other universities structure their academic plans?
- What are the similarities in content across academic plans?

Research Parameters:

- The research brief contains a surface level analysis of organizational techniques and content of the academic plans of several selective public research institutions and does not provide an exhaustive look at the language or information included in these documents.

- The analysis focuses on plans produced by the academic affairs division rather than on the academic strategy sections of institutional plans.

- As academic plans are not revised on a yearly basis, the plans highlighted in this brief were drafted between the year 2000 and the present.

Sources:

- Academic Plans were acquired from the university websites.
II. EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Key Observations:

Content varied across the plans; however, a few common themes emerged:

• **A mission statement and/or vision** for the institution was often included. This is an effective strategy for giving the reader insight into the broader institutional goals. Where included, missions and/or visions were either the first main section or added as an appendix.

• **Summarizing the current state** of the institution provides context for the academic plan. Providing information about both present and recent initiatives is a good starting point for understanding the goals of the academic plan and envisioning the action steps required to fulfill the new objectives.

• **Five major trends** emerged in the academic plans. These include plans to increase diversity and cross-cultural initiatives, foster an interdisciplinary approach to education, increase research and creativity, promote graduate programs, and improve the quality of faculty and instruction.

Despite the myriad ways to organize and format the Academic Plan, there were several techniques that enhanced the readability of the document:

• **Table of Contents** gives the reader a clear picture of the information covered in the plan. The single plan that did not include a table of contents was difficult to navigate

• **Clear section headers and sub-headers** allows the reader to quickly find relevant information and highlights the key points of the text. A variety of methods were used to set aside and label sections including offsetting header titles, using bold or italicized font, and creating simple graphic headers.

• **Text boxes, tables, and images** break up the text and can be an effective way to highlight a key point.

• **Bullets and numbering** help the reader navigate the text and group sections of text together. All the plans that were analyzed employed some combination of bullets and numbering to guide the reader through the document. Plans that were consistent in the use of these tools were easier to follow.
III. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Common Sections across Profiled Academic Plans:

While each institution approached the information included in the academic plan from a unique perspective, there are commonalities across the documents in terms of how they are organized into sections and the content that is covered therein.

The following table provides an overview of the broad sections present across all profiled academic plans:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beyond these high-level categories, there are few similarities in the information each academic plan contains or how this information is organized. Some universities elect to discuss the guiding principles for the planning process, explain the goals of the plan, or outline the external factors that will affect the campus environment.
Common Themes across Profiled Academic Plans:

There are several common themes across the strategies laid out in the individual academic plans. Below is a brief overview of five key areas on which many of the profiled universities choose to focus:

1. **Diversity and cross-cultural initiatives.** Actions to address diversity include admissions outreach, recruitment procedures for faculty, and the creation of special faculty and staff orientation programs for underrepresented groups.

2. **Interdisciplinary approach.** The development of new programs and the sponsorship of collaborative research are the main strategies observed to promote an interdisciplinary approach.

3. **Research and creativity.** Supporting faculty in collaboration with one another and creating research centers around common topics are the primary ways universities plan on fostering research and creativity.

4. **Graduate programs.** Most plans that address graduate education speak of improving access to graduate degrees as well as encouraging students to begin planning for graduate education while still in undergraduate programs.

5. **Improving the quality of faculty and instruction.** Steps to enriching the quality of instruction include creating outcomes assessments, developing a clear promotion, tenure and review process, and maintain competitive salaries and non-monetary incentives.

Several other themes were not addressed by all institutions’ academic plans but were present in many of them. These areas include growth (or limiting growth); resourcefulness and financial security; and facilities and infrastructure.

1. **Growth.** Institutions strive to strike a balance between achieving a scale that allows for distinctive programs and interdisciplinary collaboration and maintaining quality when looking at the decision to grow. Especially at research institutions, a certain size is required to justify offering unique programs. However, physical capacity may limit size and growth can challenge the quality of interaction across campus.

2. **Resourcefulness.** The slashing of funding for state budgets leaves public institutions in a difficult position. Some institutions express a responsibility to maintain affordable tuition rates and the need to increase quality with fewer resources. To do this institutions are outlining strategies for cutting costs with minimal impact on the academic experience.

3. **Infrastructure.** In order to meet goals of improving quality institutions realize a need to update infrastructure. This effort includes investment in laboratories, libraries, technology and studios. This commitment is often paired with a focus on research or improving interdisciplinary studies.
V. Formatting Techniques

Formatting:

A variety of formatting techniques were observed across the academic plans. Formatting is used to divide sections, highlight key points, and provide visual breaks in the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Format</th>
<th>Section Divisions</th>
<th>Highlighting Key Points</th>
<th>Breaking up Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>Section begins at top of page</td>
<td>Bulleted Lists</td>
<td>Side Text Box: used to draw out a specific point or process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices to catalogue related information</td>
<td>All-Caps to Denote new Section</td>
<td>Numbered Points</td>
<td>Campus Images: combined with caption to call out specific academic state or goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brief section summaries below header to call out main points</td>
<td>Numbered Points</td>
<td>Summary Table: highlights the main strategies in graphic form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offset Section Headers</td>
<td>Bolded Text</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Key Points Phrased as a Question</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expanded Outline Format</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Italicized Text</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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