

Best Practices for University Strategic Planning

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Abstract

While corporate strategic planning makes use of a wide array of decision-making approaches that ensure an ongoing re-evaluation of objectives in light of changing competitive environments, lingering deficiencies occur in university strategic planning processes. This paper will attempt to highlight strategic planning challenges for universities, and will present a “best practices” template for universities to follow. It will also discuss the author’s experience with conducting school-wide strategic decision making for university faculty.

Keywords: University strategic planning, faculty strategic planning

1.0 The Problems of the Past

1.1 Ginsberg (2011) in his book *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* proposes that that strategic plans of most universities are irrelevant to action and a waste of time. We have observed over forty years of teaching strategic management and participating in such planning at a university that his claims are valid. A brief summary of his observations will serve to describe our recent university planning efforts involving faculty, and will provide a framework for best practices.

1.2 Ginsberg (2011) states that “the university planning process entails months of committee meetings, discussions, and deliberations, during which time the views of large segments of the faculty and staff are elicited.” According to Ginsberg (2011), “those involved in the process, even if only peripherally, tend to buy into the outcome and, more important, tend to develop a more positive perception of the administration’s ideas, priorities, and leadership.

1.3 Faculty input into strategic planning did not prioritize strategies based on budgets reflecting actual or projected financial resources. Ginsberg (2011) says that “ a strategic plan typically presents concrete objectives, a timetable for their realization, an outline of the tactics that will be employed, a precise alignment of staff responsibilities, and a budget.

1.4 There is a growing number of academic administrative levels to include vice-provosts, associate and assistant vice provosts in university organizational structures. Ginsberg (2011) says that “ the growth of planning is closely tied to the expansion of college and university administrations.”

1.5 We note that in forty years of both teaching and administrative duties as a faculty member at a private, regional liberal arts teaching university, that *plans* frequently are substituted for *planning*. Not surprisingly, many high-ranking university administrators claim that corporate or business strategic planning by definition is different than university planning. The reason it *is* different is because of the way universities execute the strategy planning process. It is not different.

2.0 Best Practices

2.1 Strategic planning, as taught in our business school’s capstone course, is defined as a continuous process whereby organizational missions, objectives, and goals are re-evaluated in light of changing relevant external environments and changing internal resources. Given an internal appraisal of resources, it is the scrutiny of the opportunities and threats of the environment that should determine strategic direction. This is the essence of SWOT and TOWS analysis, a powerful tool for internal/external strategy generation.

Yet, over the years we have seen practices that are more concerned with aspirations than with real strategy or the identification of a sustainable, competitive advantage. Some of these include:

1. Development of Mission Statements before comprehensive institutional audits is completed.

There are four basic questions in strategic management: Where have we been, where are we now, where do we want to go, and how are we going to get there. Common sense says that missions must reflect our capabilities now and in the future if they are going to have any chance of success.

2. Time spent in university-level “roundtables”, forums, or a hearing that allows anyone to voice their opinion concerning “strategic” concerns.

These discussions all too frequently reflect School or Departmental concerns and priorities instead of organizational-wide impacts. For example, faculty development is an issue of quality control as an investment in our resources. It is a “given”. That is, stop developing the faculty and your strategy is doomed from the start. The business analogy is to develop a terrific, innovative product/service strategy and then stop performing maintenance and improvement on your production system.

3. Too much time and effort spent on defining targeted quality of academic programs.

This again, is all about quality control. Universities have processes in place that evaluate teaching, research, and service. They have student advising centers and career guidance. Much time is spent in the schools and departments on curricula development and general education priorities. Faculty senates and councils govern university-wide faculty committees that oversee quality. A strategy is *not* “we should have quality and excellence in everything we do.” These are givens.

4. There is a preoccupation with parochial, narrow interests.

While individual faculty in the planning process does produce innovative thinking, unless they are integrated at a school level, they do not always possess a strategic, long-term vista of the university’s path towards the future.

5. “Strategies” and “Aspirations” are debated and developed divorced of budgetary realities.

Wish lists and new directions (actual strategies) all will be either prioritized or shelved due to budget pressures.

Yet, so much time and effort is invested in their development.

2.2 Our interest in improving university-wide strategic planning efforts originated in conducting during 2005 an invited SWOT/TOWS analysis for two Sections of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at its Headquarters in Washington, D.C. (Simko 2005) We conducted strategic planning group decision making seminars for the Customer Relations Management Section (CRMS) and the Software Systems Section (SSS). We also conducted the same planning seminar for the Fugitive Investigative Unit of the FBI at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, during the same year.

2.3 SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) links key issues of the organization’s internal strategic capabilities with its external environment. The aim is not simply to list the SWOT items, but to use their linkages to provide actual strategic direction. The goals are, in the TOWS matrix to:

1. Generate strategies that use strengths to seize upon opportunities (SO)
2. Generate strategies that use opportunities to overcome weaknesses (WO)
3. Generate strategies that use strengths to minimize threats (ST)
4. Generate strategies that overcome weaknesses to minimize threats (WT)

2.4 The SWOT/TOWS seminar was tested in over five years across twenty undergraduate and ten graduate (MBA) capstone strategic management sections we teach. The students generated a SWOT/TOWS analysis for our Business School from their unique perspective. For the past two years, we conducted the same seminar at retreats for the entire Business School faculty, and most recently conducted one for the faculty of the School of education. These retreats bolstered our Business School’s documentation of faculty-driven strategic planning.

2.5 The seminar for the faculty lasted three hours. Groups of five faculties from approximately thirty-five members were randomly assigned, and were sent to remote classrooms with a facilitator to brainstorm a list of consensus-driven five strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing their school. The Deans were deliberately not part of any group. After the first hour, all the groups reunited in the lecture hall to reduce their collective lists to the final twenty SWOTs. Into the third hour, the subgroups retreated once again into their classrooms to each generate one innovative, workable and strategic idea in each of the four TOWS sections as described above (SO,WO,ST,WT)

In light of the above discussion we have developed a prescription for university strategic planning.

1. Use the university's organizational structure to start small, and build the plan. Let departments generate program strategies that shout "distinction" and "innovation." Next, develop a portfolio of these strategies at the school level. Have the Deans present to an administrative body their best strategic set.
2. The administrative planning team studies the strategy portfolio in terms of budgets, physical plant, staffing, and development. Any revisions or clarification are sent back to the deans for another "filtering round".
3. A draft strategic plan is written, supported by budget projections, to the schools' deans and faculty.
4. Treat the strategic plan not as a set timetable production with a beginning, middle, and end, but as a living process that is updated every academic year for relevancy and outcomes.
5. Most importantly, get the faculty involved. Our experience with SWOT/TOWS is a success story of integrating classroom pedagogy with university strategic planning.

Small steps, building to an institutional strategy portfolio is key to successful strategic planning. Every academic department is expert in their fields, and should not be placed in a position to debate strategic priorities with their fellow colleagues from other schools. In the end, the President and his/her advisors, like a CEO and executive management, will make strategy decisions and steer the university along its future path.

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