

Strategic Planning for the Academic Department

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Applying business concepts to academia can be risky. Once you start talking about customers, products, and strategic planning, you can easily alienate faculty who like to view themselves as separate from the corporate world.

“But business concepts can have a place in managing a university or academic department, provided they are adapted to fit academic ideals,” says Osama M. Ettouney, chair of the manufacturing engineering department at Miami University in Ohio.

Using a model for strategic planning that integrates planning and student outcomes, Ettouney's department has created an atmosphere in which discussions about vision, mission, and assessment are common, and the results of these efforts are measurable.

The strategic plan evolved from a comprehensive assessment plan developed in the late 1980s and early '90s, in consultation with an industrial advisory board and other constituents.

The process follows a six-year cycle that coincides with internal and external (reaccreditation) review and is driven by the department's primary customers: students, parents, society, industry, employers, and professional societies.

MISSION AND VISION

While planning for an unknown future is difficult, certain elements of the strategic plan are relatively stable, such as the mission and vision. The mission is a statement that defines the department, "an abstract of our story," Ettouney says.

The vision is a list that states where the department will be in the future that is based on the mission and the needs of the primary customers, which are fairly constant.

"For example, if I say in the mission, 'We are a department of manufacturing engineering and we are about graduating high-quality students,' in the vision we say, 'In the year 2007, we're going to be known as the best manufacturing engineering program,'" Ettouney says.

KEEPING FACULTY ON TRACK

To bring about the vision, the department discusses the more changeable elements of the process—goals, objectives, and assessment methods—at a weekly meeting.

Although the department has a history of collegiality and of discussing mission, Ettouney realizes that this is not enough to bring about the improvement outlined in the strategic plan.

Each semester, Ettouney gives the faculty an agenda with proposed changes to an element of the plan. When they meet, they spend a couple of sessions brainstorming ideas on short- and long-term goals. Ettouney then sends the faculty a summary of ideas for their review, which they finalize the another meeting. "In this way, the faculty feel like they are part of the process," he says.

While having an agenda is an effective way of preparing faculty for the next step in the strategic planning process, unanticipated agenda items from the dean or provost can sidetrack the process.

When agenda items from administration arise, he circulates them via e-mail and conducts most of the discussion online to minimize the amount of time spent on it in face-to-face meetings.

He also builds enough flexibility into the agenda to allow for surprises. "We all are teachers here who are used to writing syllabi. You can't have your syllabus tightly structured. It's the same with the agenda. I leave some room for surprises."

ASSESSMENT METHODS

The key to the strategic plan is assessment, Ettouney says. The primary goal of assessment is to gather information that will be used to improve the academic program. The department uses the following assessment methods:

- Evaluation of process, course content, and design integration, which includes portfolio analysis and pre/post-learning of engineering design.
- Customer feedback from the industry and student advisory councils, and employer evaluation of student performance in professional practice.
- Surveys of graduates.
- Standards and benchmarks.

OUTCOMES

"The department's strategic plan has brought about noticeable improvements," Ettouney says.

"As soon as we started to talk about things like mission and vision and outcomes, we started to look closer at what we do in the classroom. So we brought this language into our day-to-day activity, and we all felt that we really improved as a group and individually in our teaching and dealing with students," Ettouney says.

The university is holding the department's strategic plan as a model for other departments to emulate. Rather than using the same process, Ettouney suggests other departments should create something that suits their needs and the culture within their disciplines. "I remember arguing with colleagues in history, English, and philosophy that they should be able to do the same thing. Although their disciplines are different, they should also be able to have a vision, mission, goals, outcomes, and assessment tools."