

University strategic planning – A professor’s view from below

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In the last 20 years, “strategic planning” has become common not just in American business but also in American universities. It offers a coherent – and structured -- approach to considering the allocation of resources within the university and to evaluating in which directions the university should grow.

It can appropriately be used at the level of a school or college (‘fakultet’) or department (‘kafedr’) as well as at the university level.

As a planning process, university strategic planning is more like governmental indicative planning, like that practiced in France or Norway, than like Soviet-style central planning with its direct allocation of resources. University strategic planning is a goal-setting process. And it seeks to be open and inclusive, to build consensual support of university professors, teachers, and staff around the goals.

Often the process is structured around what it commonly called “SWOT analysis”: canvassing the Strengths of, Weaknesses of, Opportunities for, and Threats to the university, faculty, or department. That, in theory, involves all the stakeholders in providing input into what is fundamentally a rational process of collecting, evaluating, and prioritizing ideas about what we could and should achieve together.

Why do professors and other teachers often resist strategic planning?

Why, then, is university staff so often resistant to the process? Why does the University administration promote it and professors resist?

There are several reasons for this.

First, as my father used to say, “the devil is in the details.” While we all may agree on the usefulness of strategic planning in the abstract, in the concrete situation there is also a fear that there will be losers as well as winners. While the losers are likely to be few and far between in reality in American universities (reallocations usually take place with funds coming from faculty retirement), the fear of losing may be widespread.

A great deal of this ‘fear of losing’ stems from uncertainty – about the process, about the time involved, and, above all, about the aims of the administration

Second, there is the truth that Woodrow Wilson – professor of political science and president of Princeton University before he went into politics -- summed up succinctly: “Why,” he would ask rhetorically, “is academic politics so very, very bitter? Because the stakes are so very, very small.” The trouble is, for many American professors and teachers, those stakes are the only ones that exist. They see themselves as competing as individuals competing for very limited resources, not as parts of teams that can increase the resources available.

Third, there is the reality that strategic planning, done successfully, requires an explicit, accepted common process, some training, and a considerable amount of work to build consensus inside the unit. It isn't a quick fix, and it is not a panacea. It's a new way to do business, and that requires a change of professorial culture. In the strategic planning process there is less need for speeches and more need for brainstorming, less need for scoring points and more need for offering ideas, less need for majority votes and more need for consensus.

Without some change of culture, without some willingness to try brainstorming and a more consensual process, neither the process of strategic planning nor the outcomes will win much professorial support.

I'm sure that other reasons could be cited: too many professors are prima donnas, team work is not valued in universities, too few teachers have a commitment to the success of the institution vs. their individual success, and some are simply difficult personalities are all additional reasons that come easily to mind. Still, the three reasons discussed above account for four-fifths of teachers' resistance to strategic planning in my personal experience.

How can professorial resistance be lessened?

The answer should probably be obvious from the discussion above.

First, it's very important to avoid creating a conflictual process that some professors will invariably find threatening.

- Be explicit about goals. If the intent is to reallocate 2% of the University's existing resources, say so. If most or all of the resources to be reallocated are coming from retirements and other turnover of faculty members, say so.
- The rumor mill is always worse than reality. It is virtually impossible to keep secrets in a university. It's just a big village, and everyone gossips at the well. The administration is always better off providing full and accurate information.
- Accurate and timely information to those who fear they may be affected dramatically reduces conflict around strategic planning. You can avoid an

immense amount of uncertainty, ‘fear of losing,’ and the conflict that arises from them.

- It would be helpful if university teachers generally understood the University’s budget situation and its sources and uses of funds. “Open book management” helps build a sense of “we are all in the same boat” and of teamwork. Too few of my colleagues have much understanding of university finances – or how we impact them with our daily work.

Second, it makes a lot of sense to turn the planning process from a zero-sum game (where someone loses for everyone who gains) into a positive sum game (where more gain than lose) or, better yet, into a Pareto Optimum (where some gain but none lose). Admittedly this is difficult in real life, but there are at least two aspects of Russian university life that permit broad, positive sum outcomes: admitting more paying students (which is part of the life-blood of Russian state universities today) and obtaining outside grants and contracts (where Voronezh State University already enjoys substantial success).

Universities are not and should never be a genuine part of the capitalistic market economy: they have an entirely different and non-commercial mission. Still, they need to raise funds for buildings, libraries, equipment and – crucially – improving teachers’ salaries.

Third, to be successful, strategic planning requires the buy-in of the ‘stakeholders’ (university administration, professors, other teachers, staff, etc). They need to understand and agree to the process, learn the techniques involved (brainstorming, prioritization, and consensus decision making, not factional organization and majority tyranny). They need to accept the fact that the outcome will be substantially consensual.

That obviously has implications for the University administration as well: it needs to accept the fact – indeed, welcome the fact – that an open strategic planning process will yield different results than a purely administrative decision-making process.

Strategic planning requires time, some cultural change, perhaps some training, and probably some facilitation.

However, it is typically worth the cost.

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These are personal comments from my experience for 27 years as a faculty member at Kent State University and 16 years as director of the Ohio Employee Ownership Center (OEOC), a university-based business outreach, technical assistance and training program. My first exposure to strategic planning came from the businesses the OEOC worked with, and we quickly adopted the practice for our own organization; we do some variant of it annually, and it has generally been successful. In the last 10 years, Kent State University under President Carol Cartwright has sought faculty input into university planning – with considerable success, in my opinion; this had been a purely administrative process. On the other

hand, my department's experience with strategic planning has been very mixed, largely because of an initial lack of buy-in by faculty members, a failure to agree upon the ground rules for the process, a lack of facilitation, and substantial factional organization. We've gotten better over time, however.

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