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## University Planning: Functional or Futile?

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Profit-oriented corporations have been in the business of planning for longer than have the universities, mainly because for many of them, it was a matter of survival. It is only in recent years, with declining student enrollments and shrinking research funding, that universities have felt the need for a more careful look at where they are going. When times are good and students are clamoring to get in, people at universities are too busy launching new courses, building new buildings and hiring new faculty to devote much attention to the longer term. When adversity appears imminent, people in both business and universities move toward more formalized methods of deciding their destiny.

Planning can be described on two dimensions. First, it can be said to be either "top-down" or "bottom-up." The former is found in highly authoritarian types of organizations in which the senior administrator and perhaps a few of his close associates map out the future of the organization. They have the authority to implement whatever plans are developed and they do it. "Bottom up" planning is more appropriate to a democratic type of management style. With it, the senior administrators set out the general overall objectives and people who are lower in the organization plan for their own units, these plans being consolidated as they are moved up the organization.

The other dimension by which planning can be described is formality, meaning the degree of formality of the planning process. It can be measured on a continuum, at one end of which is informal planning, with formal planning at the other end. Planning is informal if it is done without documentation at the various steps, if the goals and target dates are kept in someone's head and communicated to nobody else except perhaps a few close associates. At the formal end of the continuum, the planning process is clearly spelled out, goals and objectives are written down and there are documents which are known as constituting "the plan."

Organizations with an authoritarian management style tend to use top-down planning whereas those with a democratic management style plan from the bottom up. Informal planning is usually used when the organization is growing, with the degree of formality

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increasing as growth slows or disappears. Cost of planning mainly in terms of the time of valuable people is lowest for informal top-down planning and highest for formal bottom-up planning. Effectiveness of the planning effort is also a function of the two variables. The formal bottom-up style of planning has been shown to be highly effective in the sense that it gets commitment from the people who are in positions to implement the plans and make them come to fruition. The top-down, formal planning process is less effective, as is the bottom-up informal process, simply because of the lack of commitment on the part of people throughout the organization.

Regardless of which planning process the organization adopts there are three questions it is trying to answer by planning. They are:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How will we get there?

Several (perhaps most) Canadian universities have launched a planning process by doing the size-up, i.e., asking the question, “Where are we now?” Usually a long-range planning committee is struck which forms sub-committees and together they take a critical look at the institution. They write a report addressed to the President outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, and preface the whole thing with a statement giving reasons why the arts and humanities are the backbone of any university and should be supported even in the face of declining enrollments. They then usually include a long list of recommendations which are supposed to address the questions: “Where do we want to be in the future?” and “How will we get there?”

In essence, these universities are using top-down formal planning (albeit through a committee). This is a medium cost planning process with low effectiveness. It is medium cost because, while it does take the time and energy of a number of valuable (and usually expensive) senior scholars, their planning activities last for only about one year. It is low in effectiveness because although there is apparent participation by the proletariat (the faculty), the people who will have to implement the changes are not the ones who recommend them and thus there will be no commitment and not much action.

For example, often these planning reports contain a section on the importance of teaching and make a plea for improved classroom performance, especially at the undergraduate level. But it is when the Promotion and Tenure Committees are reviewing faculty that decisions are made which can have a major effect on teaching. If they reward teaching handsomely, teaching will improve; if they ignore it or relegate it to lower status than research, teaching will be seen as not what one does to get promoted. A President was once heard to remark, “Give me control over who becomes a full professor and I will control the university.” For planning committees to recommend that undergraduate teaching be improved (as they often seem to do) without being able to influence the decisions of the promotion and tenure committees is a waste of time and energy.

If the institution wishes to increase the effectiveness of its planning effort and is willing to pay the price in terms of time expended by valuable individuals, it can do so by moving toward a bottom-up formal planning process.

Here is how a bottom-up planning process might work at the extreme end of formality. *Step 1:* The governing body of the university (Board of Governors, Senate, Governing Council, or whatever) produces a statement of purpose or mission for the institution.

(This is not particularly useful but there are some people who are opposed to formal planning because it “encroaches on their academic freedom.” They will use almost any means to avoid doing it. One of their favorite ploys is to say “How can we plan when we don’t even know why the place exists?” An approved statement of purpose disarms these people and requires them to seek other reasons to avoid planning.)

*Step 2:* The governing body produces a long-term objective for the university. It should be sufficiently precise that it is meaningful to the decision makers who have to live with it but sufficiently vague that it does not threaten people.

*Step 3:* The governing body produces a time horizon (say five years) and a list of planning premises. The latter are assumptions about the environment (such as funding agencies) which they believe to be realistic and which are to be used by people who will prepare plans

*Step 4:* The President orders an assessment of the entire institution. He and his senior colleagues review this assessment and thereby determine strengths and weaknesses with particular reference to the long term objective stated by the governing body. (It is this assessment which is often done by a Planning Committee.)

*Step 5:* The Deans are issued the documents produced by Steps 1 to 4 and asked to prepare written plans for their budgetary units extending to the planning horizon. They are told that the plans are to contain specific targets to be met within the planning horizon and the measures of effectiveness to be used to determine whether or not the targets were met.

*Step 6:* Each Dean, in turn, asks his or her Department Chairmen to prepare plans containing targets and measures for their Departments. These are submitted to the Deans who meet with their Chairman individually to discuss the plans. Subsequently, each Dean prepares a plan incorporating the plans finally agreed to with the Chairmen. The content of these Department and Faculty plans is critical. In a highly formal planning environment, these plans will contain the three essential ingredients: targets, measures of effectiveness and dates of achievement. If Chairmen say in their plans, for example, that research output is to be increased, it will also be stated by how much, how the research output will be measured, and by when the increase will be achieved. Further, the targets will be achievable; if not, they will receive scant attention. Finally, the person preparing the plan (Dean or Chairman) will feel a sense of commitment to it. This is the most difficult step of all but is the one which moves the planning process most along the formality continuum.

*Step 7:* The Deans’ plans are received by the President or his designate (such as a Vice President) who meets with each Dean to discuss the plan in detail. It is at this point that the Deans receive an indication of the support they are likely to get for various proposals at the forthcoming budget meetings. The Deans’ plans are not made public beyond their own faculties; otherwise they will be less than frank when they are writing them.

*Step 8:* The President prepares a summary plan which outlines how he intends to meet the objectives set by the governing body and what resources he will require to do so.

*Step 9:* The governing body, if it approves the plan, prepares a plan of its own indicating how it is going to acquire the resources the President will require over the planning period.

*Step 10:* The annual budgeting process is launched as the first step toward the achievement of the goals set out in the plans.

These ten steps represent a planning cycle which can be repeated annually, beginning with a confirmation or revision of the statement of the overall objective and a list of planning premises.

A review of the planning documents of five Canadian universities revealed that four of them have been through Step 4, which is the assessment of the university; one university appears to have placed a tentative foot on Steps 5 and 6 by asking Deans and Chairmen to prepare plans, but they are not required to state targets, measures and dates. Whether any or all of these five will increase further the formality of their planning is probably more a function of the largesse of the Provincial Government than anything else. If the economic squeeze continues, planning will continue to become more formal. If good times return, universities will likely find themselves too busy hiring faculty and building buildings to plan formally.

For the formal planning process to be effective in producing the desired improvements there should be several ingredients. First, the targets should indeed be targets and not just pious hopes. The stronger the commitment to them, the greater will be the chance of achieving them. Second, there should be accountability. If resource allocation decisions are made without reference to the unit's performance compared to its plan, planning will be seen as just another bureaucratic intrusion. Finally, the time and attention devoted to planning by Deans and Chairmen will be a function of the time and attention devoted to it by the President and his close associates. Planning is not something which can be delegated. It is a major responsibility of academic administrators at all levels and cannot be assigned to a planning committee or a planning department. Their role is limited to the development and maintenance of the planning process. Planning can only be done by those who are to be held responsible for implementing the plans and that means the President, the Deans, and the Chairmen.

Is it worth it? Does the university which plans formally from the bottom up produce more Nobel Prize winners or Rhodes Scholars? Will that university give its students a better intellectual experience? The answer to these questions is not easy. Conventional wisdom says that planning is good for the organization but it does not say how much planning is the right amount nor what the benefits are to be derived from planning. About the most that can be said is that the university which has instituted a formal, bottom-up planning process will probably find it easier to make the difficult resource allocation decisions in a time of less than adequate resources. And they might even make decisions more wisely.

*Editor's Note: Readers who are interested in studying university planning statements first-hand might refer to some of these recent reports:*

- *Memorial University of Newfoundland, "Report of the Task Force on University Priorities."*
- *York University, "Report of the President's Commission on Goals and Objectives."*
- *McMaster University, "Report of the Joint Board of Governors/Senate Committee on Long Range Planning – A Plan for McMaster University."*
- *The University of Prince Edward Island, "Towards a University Community: Report of the University of Prince Edward Island Senate Committee on Objectives."*
- *University of Toronto, "Interim Report of the Planning and Priorities Subcommittee."*

## Centre for the Study of Postsecondary Education

In the summer of 1977, a new facilitating structure for adult and higher education was established by the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The Centre for the Study of Postsecondary Education, under the direction of A.G. Konrad the newly appointed Coordinator, now administers the graduate diploma in postsecondary education and will coordinate the development of new programs, research and service activities within the Faculty as they relate to postsecondary education.

The need for training at a level below the Baccalaureate is recognized, as in the case of practitioners who are technically competent but who have experienced little or no exposure to instructional procedures. Opportunities already exist for postsecondary concentration in Plan J of the B.Ed degree program. Other program alternatives are also being explored.

The graduate diploma will continue to serve persons interested in teaching or in assuming administrative roles in postsecondary education. Applicants for the diploma must have a first degree – though not necessarily in education – and, preferably, be familiar with some operational aspect of adult or higher education.

Advanced graduate study also can be pursued in cooperation with the departments in the Faculty of Education. A master's degree is considered appropriate certification for many roles in postsecondary education. Practitioners, such as adult educators, student personnel workers and faculty in community colleges, technical and vocational institutes, and intermediate level management staff in all types of postsecondary agencies could be enrolled at this level. Leaders in postsecondary education (scholars, researchers, and/or practitioners) are usually trained at the doctoral level.

The centre will place an emphasis on the importance of service activities other than formal programs of instruction. The present level of involvement of faculty members in activities that have a postsecondary thrust is extensive. They include: staff development projects in colleges and other institutions; consultation with business and industry on training needs; the design of programs for adult skill development in various community settings; service on government advisory boards related to occupational training; and attending, participating in, and planning conferences and workshops. The Centre proposes to increase involvements of the last type and currently has plans underway for four spring workshops designed for practitioners in adult and continuing education.

The Centre also plans to intensify systematic research activity into the postsecondary educational need of our rapidly industrializing society. This research could focus upon specific problem areas and also influence policy development in postsecondary education. The Centre will also facilitate the coordination of, and communication between, faculty members engaged in individual or collaborative research projects, and will provide a resource base for visiting scholars and other researchers.

The distinguishing feature of the Centre lies in its interdisciplinary nature. Policies to guide the activities of the Centre and its staff will be established through the offices of a Policy Committee. This committee includes representatives of the Faculty of Education, the Deans of the Faculties of Extension and Nursing, and the Director of the Community

#### Development Division.

During its developmental period, the Centre's personnel will be limited to a coordinator and a secretary. Major developmental activities, therefore, and sustained efforts in program development, research and service will depend largely on the cooperative involvement of the Centre's "Staff Associates." The Staff Associates will be appointed from a variety of sources, and will include in their number members of the Faculty of Education and other Faculties in the University, professionals in other postsecondary institutions or agencies within this province, and, possibly, visiting scholars from areas outside Alberta.

Staff Associates will form the core of professional persons engaged in the activities of the Centre. The current and continuing activities of the Centre will depend on the interest of professions to engage in adult and higher education. In fact, the involvement of Staff Associates is essential for the achievement of the Centre's goals. In every instance, these people will be appointed to engage in specific tasks for definite lengths of time.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Centre, therefore, will bring together persons who have experienced a variety of backgrounds and disciplines and who possess a variety of interests. It is expected that this will result in the creation of an exhilarating environment. New programs, novel research and service activities may well emerge from the unique opportunity to indulge in a collegial association within the Centre. The Centre may also provide the basis for meaningful contacts outside the University, especially in association with new client groups and resource agencies.

For more information regarding the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Postsecondary Education, its goals and objectives, please contact Dr. Konrad, Coordinator, Postsecondary Education Centre, 7-133G Education II, University of Alberta, Edmonton, T6G 2G5, or telephone 432-2217.