Establishing a Vision of Shared Governance through SWOT Analysis: Experiences of a New Department Head

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Abstract

SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis has proven effective in assisting institutions of higher education establish goal and objective prioritization. This ideal was put to the test by the new head of Engineering Technology (ET) at Kansas State University at Salina in the 2005 fall semester. The University’s Provost challenged the academic departments to institute a strategic plan that synchronized with nine University mission-related themes. This paper chronicles the department head’s experiences in his attempt to satisfy the directive.

Introduction

K-State at Salina. The College of Technology and Aviation, a consequence of a merger of the Kansas College of Technology with Kansas State University (K-State) under an enactment of the 1991 Kansas Legislature, has its own campus, located approximately 75 miles west of the main campus in Manhattan, Kansas. Students enjoy the benefits of a Big-12 University within the close-knit community of a small campus. Localized versions of all the standard student services and support programs representative of a functional institution of higher learning are located on-site, guaranteeing not only access, but also services geared toward specific needs of this particular college population. The K-State at Salina is comprised of three academic departments-Aviation, Arts Sciences and Business, and Engineering Technology—as well as library faculty, and the Division of Continuing Education. The Department of Engineering Technology provides students with a choice of enrolling in either an associate or baccalaureate degree program. The department offers associate of technology degrees in Construction Engineering Technology, Computer Systems Technology, Web Development Technology, Electronic and Computer Engineering Technology, and Mechanical Engineering Technology. Bachelor of Science degrees are offered in Computer Systems, Mechanical, and Electronic and Computer Engineering Technology. The Construction, Mechanical, and Electronic and Computer Engineering Technology programs are accredited by the Technology Accreditation Commission of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (TAC-ABET). Each program has a coordinator with a combined faculty of 17 FTE (full-time equivalent) and 2 part-time instructors.

Importance of shared governance in strategic planning. It is imperative to the success of any collaborative endeavor, whether in the public or private sector, that participants contribute to its realization and that plans are conceived and implemented in timely fashion.\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^2\) According to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), this sentiment is especially true in institutions of higher education. AFT affirms in a publication entitled Shared Governance in Colleges and
Universities: A Statement by the Higher Program Policy Council that shared governance is a means for guaranteeing college and university faculty a voice in decision-making. Moreover, ATF concludes that shared governance embodies a dogma consisting of the following principles:

- academic decision-making should be largely independent of short-term managerial and political considerations;
- faculty and professional staff are in the best position to shape and implement curriculum and research policy, to select academic colleagues and judge their work; and
- the perspective of all front-line personnel is invaluable in making sound decisions about allocating resources, setting goals, choosing top officers and guiding student life.

In support of this assertion, Phelan, et. al. argue in their article “Strategic Planning Tactics for Shared Governance” that effective planning has become paramount in higher education due to technological and political manifestations and their subsequent influences on internal and external dynamics. They argue that ill conceived plans typically are the direct result of an institution’s lack of response, or inattentiveness to, one or a combination of six environmental factors:

- A majority of institutions plan from year to year rather than for long term. Crisis management becomes the norm. No formal mechanism (i.e., a planning process) integrates departmental or institutional efforts.
- The external environment is evaluated infrequently, if at all. Therefore, the institution does not have the broad view necessary to make appropriate decisions. Leaders may be unaware of external factors posing threats or offering opportunities.
- The internal environment is seldom assessed. Thus, the institution is unable to identify its own strengths and weaknesses.
- The relationship between institutional resource allocation and goals is commonly ignored. Consequently, the institution is unable to respond to emerging needs.
- Institutions often evaluate their performances on revenues and expenditures, encouraging spending rather than working to achieve goals.
- Institutional mission statements are seldom used to guide the organization. Rather than providing a meaningful guide for the future, mission statements adorn college catalogs and presidential offices.

In essence, well-designed strategic planning is contingent upon inclusion of key personnel who have intimate awareness of factors influencing desired outcomes. More importantly at the departmental level, it should be transparent at every phase of the planning process that the university’s mission remains the inspiration behind all transactions.

Performance agreements. The Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) comprises a nine-member body which governs six state universities, and supervises and coordinates 19 community colleges, five technical colleges, six technical schools and a municipal university. The Board instigated accountability among institutions of higher education in Kansas by way of the Performance Agreement passage drafted under Senate Bill 647. Specifically, the agreements “incorporate the goals, priorities, policies and mission objectives identified in the institutional
improvement plans, and the performance measures which will be used to demonstrate compliance and progress.” This performance-based resolution linked new state funding beginning July 1, 2005 to evidence of completion to four of the six State mandated goals. Consequently, Kansas post-secondary institutions were to align their respective goals to the prescribed KBOR goals.

**Priority directive.** In 2004, Dr. Duane Nellis, K-State University Provost, prioritized nine strategic themes developed by the K-State community to guide the planning and development of the institution.[5] He subsequently correlated these themes to four of six KBOR system goals (see Appendix A). Dr. Nellis challenged the academic departments and divisions of K-State to establish priorities and set goals relative to these themes. Specifically, department heads were required to embark on activities that yielded three specific outcomes:

1. Identification of department areas of specialization.
2. Definition of a set of priorities for the department in order to realize these areas of specialization.
3. Development of a plan of action to implement the priorities over three years.

The ET faculty commenced on a plan during the fall 2005 semester that would lead to the attainment of the aforementioned outcomes. The plan comprised the following operational tasks:

1. Share K-State’s vision with ET faculty, students and staff.
2. Isolate the Department’s potential for, and area(s) of, excellence.
3. Modify existing departmental goals to align with University themes.
4. Develop a strategic plan for realization of departmental goals.

**Methodology**

**SWOT analysis.** Items 2-4 comprised a three-phase Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) exercise which necessitated external intervention due to the complexities associated with strategic planning. SWOT analysis is a basic, straightforward management tool that provides a scan of the internal and external environments of an institution.[6] Through this process a university may isolate its strengths (what it is doing right), determine weaknesses (problem areas in need of improvement), and segregate the opportunities (potential favorable conditions) from the threats (potential unfavorable conditions). Ultimately, findings are assessed and reviewed in light of the organization’s resources and mission statement to establish goal and objective prioritization.[7]

**Strategic planning outcomes.** The SWOT exercise proved very effective and successful. Faculty were able to coalesce as a unit and identified three priorities along with strategies for priority realization. The priorities included:

- **Priority #1:** Increase student recruitment/retention initiatives
- **Priority #2:** Sustain teaching and curriculum quality
- **Priority #3:** Strengthen industry partnerships

Subsequently, strategies and action items were developed for each priority. At this stage of strategic plan conceptualization, the degree of alliance between department goals and University themes was of keen interest. Appendix B displays an abridged depiction of the Department’s
“working plan” (precursor to the strategic plan). In parenthesis is/are the theme(s) that best aligned with a given strategy. Appearing in brackets adjacent to the theme(s) is the department operational strategy (DOS) insignia and accompanying institutional goal (IG) extension. The institutional goal(s) and key performance indicator(s) which convey the essence of the strategy comprise the extension values. Here is an explanation of the classification used in the working plan as found in Appendix B: Priority #1, strategy 1—(2, 6, 8) [DOS, IG1-2]. Interpretation: This strategy is linked to University themes 2, 6, and 8; it is a department operational strategy and is affiliated to institutional goal 1 (Increase collaboration with Kansas community colleges and enhance efficiency at K-State) to be tracked under key performance indicator 2 [5]. The working plan proved invaluable to the strategic plan’s evolution and completion.

Operational strategies are short-term and are department driven with specific outcomes at their core. Transformational strategies are broad, long-term and convey large-scale, far-reaching changes to an institution and are directly linked to predetermined institutional goals. Ideally, there should be a strong resemblance between the two. Therefore, specific attention was given to the intentional infusion of departmental with institutional goals. Strategic planning experts affirm that department and institution goals should be demarcated from the onset of plan development. Such delineation of responsibilities and accountabilities accentuates ownership at the department level. To that end, the plan’s core evolved around faculty and their bringing to fruition priority-rooted action items. In addition, factors such as desired outcomes, projected dates benchmarking success along with identification of funding sources became noteworthy strategic elements. Appendix C displays a truncated version of the ET Department’s strategic plan in final state.

Conclusion

The role of department head entails familiarity with the forces that dictate the direction and prominence of the institution. First and foremost, the head should appreciate that the department is a subset of a dynamic system; and, that the system’s productivity depends on its many appendages to establish congruous mission statements, strategic plans and visions that echo the needs of its diverse constituency base. It is the head’s responsibility to determine, establish and maintain lines of communication with these internal and external players. This means being proactive, having a shared vision with department colleagues and connecting that departmental vision to the visions of the college and university. In addition to generating unprecedented interest in shared governance, the described strategic planning process fostered remarkable faculty commitment to ensuring reciprocity of innovation throughout this endeavor. This was manifested in their continued presence throughout the process—from participating in SWOT exercises to seizing ownership of strategic plan action items. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, faculty were afforded the opportunity to experience the integral connections between on-going departmental efforts, the University mission and the education goals of the State of Kansas.
References


Biography

John E. De Leon

Dr. De Leon is currently Professor and Head of Engineering Technology at K-State at Salina. He worked 10 years in industry prior to joining academia where he served 11 years as a faculty member teaching in areas of computer aided design, quality control, industrial ecology and industrial safety. Additionally, he has published several manuscripts on subject matter related to these curricula.
Appendix A

Department of Engineering Technology Strategic Plan References:
Kansas Board of Regents Goals, Institutional Goals and University Themes

Regents’ Goals
1. Increase system efficiency/effectiveness/seamlessness
2. Improve learner outcome
3. Increase external resources
4. Increase targeted participation/access
5. Improve workforce development
6. Improve community/civic engagement

Institutional Goals
1. Increase collaboration with Kansas Community Colleges and Enhance Efficiency at K-State.
2. Improve student-learning outcomes that are part of the university’s program assessment for all undergraduate and graduate degree programs.
3. Continue the development of programs and approaches that will serve current at-risk and under-served populations (minorities and women).
4. Increase financial support from extramural sources.

University Themes
1. Support recruitment, retention, and professional development of high quality faculty.
2. Enhance the quality of graduate research programs.
3. Develop the library infrastructure.
4. Strengthen the learning and teaching environment.
5. Develop the information technology infrastructure.
6. Enhance a diverse and multicultural environment.
7. Enhance international emphases
8. Define the University’s role in mediated learning.
9. Contribute to the State’s economic development and environmental health.
Appendix B

Department Priorities by Strategy and Action Items:
Examples as Linked to KBOR and Institutional Goals

Priority #1: Increase student recruitment/retention initiatives
1. Develop articulation agreements with community colleges (2, 6, 8) [DOS, IG1-1, 2, 3; IG3-1, 2, 3]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Generate transfer planning guide framework/initialize CC contact
   c. Review of CC technical courses
2. Educate recruiters on department’s composition and education potential (2, 6) [DOS]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Establish dialogue with Director of Admissions

Priority #2: Sustain teaching and curriculum quality
1. Increase faculty participation in technical conferences and teaching workshops at the local, state,
   regional, and national levels (1, 2) [DOS]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Send conference and workshop information to department administrative assistant
   c. Add relevant conference and workshop dates to master calendar
2. Promote summer opportunities for faculty to engage in industrial experience (1, 2, 9) [DOS]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Determine the current availability of faculty internships

Priority #3: Strengthen industry partnerships
1. Identify key industrial partners having greatest potential of hiring our majors (2, 9) [DOS]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Develop a list of prospective industries
2. Increase advisory board participation (2, 9) [DOS]
   a. Assign personnel responsible for strategy completion
   b. Review current advisory board (AB) register
   c. Make necessary membership changes
Appendix C
Department of Engineering Technology Strategic Plan:
Format Example

Priority #1: Increase student recruitment/retention initiatives.

Strategy: Seek federal funding to (a) subsidize financial expectations of traditionally underrepresented student populations enrolled in ET programs and (b) provide seamless matriculation and assimilation of CC transfers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Plan/Items</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Target Date</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Funding Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure an NSF Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (S-STEM) grant</td>
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<td>• Formulate grant writing team</td>
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<td>• Decide on proposal concept</td>
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<td>• Submit letter of intent</td>
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<td>• Submit final proposal</td>
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