Integrating Higher Education Planning and Assessment: A Practical Guide

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Foreword
By
George Keller

There is no shortage of books about planning, nor of guides to its practice at colleges and universities. But this terse book is uncommon.

For one, it has a lucid prose style and glides along on greased paragraphs. The writers are also exceptionally clear about what they regard as central, and what colleges need to pay attention to above all. The text is full of wise suggestions and mercifully silent about novel gimmicks. The chapters exude the authors’ years of experience and the sound judgment they have gained.

Yet, given the recent and swelling demands for better accountability for results of the nation’s huge investment in higher education, this book neatly fuses educational planning with assessment of the plan’s success or shortcomings. Assessment is a precarious field, an adolescent enterprise, still plagued with nebulous recommendations and demands. This book sheds as much light on assessment as seems possible, and offers useful ideas and tools for everyone in higher education or in policymaking.

Advice and wisdom are usually not offered together. In this book the two cavort.
Various types of planning take place at most colleges and universities—academic planning, enrollment planning, human resources planning, budget planning, facilities planning, campus master planning, and so on. The concern in the early 21st century ought not to be whether planning is occurring in higher education, but how effective that planning is. All too often, planning is compartmentalized into categories such as those just delineated, without focus on the quality or the interconnection and integration of planning. Whether developing a master plan for campus design for the next twenty years, planning for the implementation of a new academic discipline within the next five years, or planning how to address an unanticipated shortfall in revenues that have, in fact, been already spent, certain consistent threads run through good planning processes and practices.

In this volume, we focus on the generic structure of planning and argue that planning falls into three basic categories: academic planning, human/fiscal resources planning, and physical resources planning. *It is our position that academic planning is the engine that drives all other types of planning at an institution.* Our task is to illustrate this concept, and we do so through a series of examples from institutions across the United States.

We also underscore that planning is more than setting goals and objectives. *Good planning must include sustained analysis and assessment of progress toward goals and objectives.* Good planning must also include a component directed at communication. Diverse audiences exist within virtually any planning activity, and it is important to communicate directly and effectively with each of those constituencies.

As noted previously, this volume is about the appropriate uses and integration of planning and assessment throughout the fabric of an institution. It should not be viewed as, nor is it intended to be a definitive text on, any specific type of planning and/or assessment. Readers who are searching for how-to guides in areas such as academic planning, student learning outcomes assessment, and campus master planning should consult the many other excellent sources available on these subjects. This volume will be much more helpful to those who are seeking ways to better understand and integrate the planning and assessment activities that go on in many places and at different organizational levels of an institution of higher education.
A number of different audiences may find the information in this volume helpful. Presidents and chief academic officers may use the ideas in this book when thinking about and managing planning and assessment processes. Faculty, staff, and others charged with implementing planning and assessment processes (at institutional or unit levels) may find concepts, examples, and suggested resources particularly useful.

In addition, those who are charged with institutional accreditation responsibilities should find that development of linked planning and assessment processes provides a meaningful way to demonstrate to external reviewers that the institution is really doing what it says that it is.

It is important that we acknowledge and explain briefly our decision to offer extensive examples from the University of Delaware. Two of the authors have guided the planning process at this institution for more than a decade. This intimate familiarity with the nuances of how planning and assessment have developed on this campus allows for the presentation of a case study that is rich in detail. In effect, we are able to provide an insider’s view of planning and assessment at an institution where these functions have been highly valued over a significant period. It would not be possible to provide the same level of detail if examples were limited to an outsider’s description of the planning and assessment processes at other institutions. In addition to significant case material from the University of Delaware, we refer to multiple examples of best practices at other two- and four-year institutions.

It is also important to note that the examples presented in this volume are from institutions located in the United States. However, we believe that the concepts presented are useful to institutions wherever they are located.

We also caution that this volume is not intended as a treatise on the theoretical underpinnings of good planning. Our central focus is on the provision of useful advice and guidance. However, we do offer a significant amount of contextual information and an extensive bibliography for those interested in more theoretical approaches.

This book is about effective planning in colleges and universities. It is intended as a practical volume that explains why planning is important and describes the various types of planning and the integration of planning into the fabric of institutional processes, the various audiences within and external to the institution that play important roles in planning, and the expected outcomes from good planning. It is not a cookbook, with replicable recipes for planning processes. Rather, it is a tool kit with basic planning concepts that can be adapted to the specific needs of the diverse spectrum of institutions that constitute American higher education in the early 21st century. We believe that you’ll find it valuable.
We take it for granted that the exponential growth in American higher education since the end of World War II is the product of careful academic and institutional planning. At the close of the war, the GI Bill flooded campuses with a tidal wave of ex-soldiers seeking baccalaureate degrees and bringing with them federal funds that signaled a new prosperity for colleges and universities, particularly in the public sector. Later, the 1960s saw massive infusions of federal funds on college campuses, and the 1970s witnessed the arrival on campuses of the baby boomers, with unprecedented pools of tuition dollars.

When enrollments declined in the 1980s as the baby boomers graduated, colleges and universities were fiscally stressed. That stress was compounded by economic downturns in the early and late 1980s. When the economy began to recover in the mid-1990s, colleges and universities discovered that they were no longer unquestioned favorites when it came to governmental funding or private and foundation giving, having been replaced by K–12 education, health care, and public safety. As tuitions escalated, parents and legislators questioned the value of the return on tuition investment, asking what students really learned.

Although not new to the higher education community, the call for accountability has gained strength in recent years, particularly as it concerns student learning outcomes and the efficient use of human and fiscal resources. The escalating emphasis on accountability is related, in part, to perceptions that colleges and universities do not plan carefully or assess their effectiveness. Indeed, the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, which comprises representatives from the major regional accrediting bodies throughout the United States, anticipates that a major component of legislation to renew the Higher Education Act currently under consideration in Congress will be a call for greater public accountability with respect to student learning, transparency in reporting and disclosure, assurance of the quality of distance learning, and assurance of the ability to appropriately transfer credit.

Institutions clearly must plan, and understand the extent to which those plans are successful, if they are to remain vital, vibrant, and viable. The importance of planning and assessment to institutional vitality is underscored by the emphasis on these criteria for regional accreditation throughout the United States. The approaches to and emphasis on planning and assessment are not uniform among the regional accrediting...
agencies, but it is important to note the similarities. Examples taken from the current accreditation standards or criteria of the regional agencies illustrate these similarities.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education has four accreditation standards that are directly related to planning and assessment:

**Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal**

An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and to maintain institutional quality.

**Standard 3: Institutional Resources**

The human, financial, technical, physical facilities, and other resources necessary to achieve an institution’s mission and goals are available and accessible. In the context of the institution’s mission, the effective and efficient uses of the institution’s resources are analyzed as part of ongoing outcomes assessment…

**Standard 7: Institutional Assessment**

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards…

**Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning**

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.  

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, includes the following requirements for institutional accreditation:

**Standard Two**

Planning and Evaluation.

The institution undertakes planning and evaluation appropriate to its needs to accomplish and improve the achievement of its mission and purposes. It identifies its planning and evaluation priorities and pursues them effectively.2

The Higher Learning Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation include two that are specifically relevant to the topics addressed in this volume:

**Criterion Two: Preparing for the Future.**

The organization’s allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to

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fulfill its mission, improve the quality of its education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.

Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching.
The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.³

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities includes among its standards for accreditation the following:

Standard 1.B—Planning and Effectiveness.
The institution engages in ongoing planning to achieve its mission and goals. It also evaluates how well, and in what ways, it is accomplishing its mission and goals and uses the results for broadbased, continuous planning and evaluation. Through its planning process, the institution asks questions, seeks answers, analyzes itself, and revises its goals, policies, procedures, and resource allocation.

Standard 2.B—Educational Program Planning and Assessment.
Educational program planning is based on regular and continuous assessment of programs in light of the needs of the disciplines, the fields or occupations for which programs prepare students, and other constituencies of the institution.⁴

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools includes the following among its comprehensive standards:

3.3 Institutional Effectiveness.
3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.⁵

Two of the accreditation standards of the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) are particularly relevant to this discussion:

Standard 2
Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions.
The institution achieves its institutional purposes and attains its educational objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, scholarship and creative activity, and support for student learning. It demonstrates that these core functions are performed effectively and that they support one another in the institution’s efforts to attain educational effectiveness.

Standard 4
Creating an Organization Committed to Learning and Improvement.
The institution conducts sustained, evidence-based, and participatory discussions about how effectively it is accomplishing its purposes and achieving its educational objectives. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness. The results of institutional inquiry, research, and data collection are used to establish priorities at different levels of the institution, and to revise institutional purposes, structures, and approaches to teaching, learning, and scholarly work.  

Finally, the **Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the WASC** includes the following among its standards for accreditation:

**Standard I: Institutional Mission and Effectiveness.**
The institution demonstrates strong commitment to a mission that emphasizes achievement of student learning and to communicating the mission internally and externally. The institution uses analyses of quantitative and qualitative data and analysis in an ongoing and systematic cycle of evaluation, integrated planning, implementation, and re-evaluation to verify and improve the effectiveness by which the mission is accomplished.

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