

ENSURING THE VIABILITY OF ROMANIA'S INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

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Abstract. *Institutions of higher education are no longer immune to external forces affecting its operations. Plagued by rising costs, intense competition from private, public, vocational, and online institutions, declining support from the state, and a view that education is a commodity much like any product, universities are turning to strategic planning to anticipate and ward off these threats to grow and survive. In the European Union, the issue of strategic planning has been slow in development as part of planning and policy making for institutions of higher education. This has been due, in part, to the particular nuances that prevail in the EU as oppose to the US, such as the expanse of institutions across borders and the emphasis on state control. Moreover, as a collective body, the EU has focused on initiating policies that support standardization across its educational landscape to remain competitive on a world stage. The Bologna Declaration was initiated to bring about greater compatibility of degrees and diplomas and to eliminate impediments to mobility between countries, increase employability of its workforce and increase competitiveness in a globalized educational market. For Romania, strategic planning has been ineffectual given the strong hand of the state and the limited management experience among administrators (Nicolae & Vitelar, 2013). As a part of the EU, Romania has been involved in some training in strategic planning; however, emerging from a communist regime, has hampered its ability to integrate this tool successfully to realize each institution's full potential and position it for its future success and survival. According to Voorhees (2008) strategic plans fail more often than they succeed in its implementation because of the failure to connect the dreams and aspirations that arise in strategic planning with specific actions. Moreover, failure of a plan results from leadership's inability to follow a shared governance model in developing the strategic plan that brings the organization onboard in fulfilling the goals and strategies outlined in the plan. Hence, this paper describes strategic planning and outlines the process for successful integration and implementation.*

Keywords: *strategic planning; higher education; European higher education area; institutional planning; Romania higher education; Bologna declaration.*

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are no longer immune to external forces affecting its operations. Plagued by rising costs, intense competition from private, public, vocational, and online institutions, declining support from the state, and a view that education is a commodity much like any product, universities are turning to strategic planning to anticipate and ward off these threats to grow and survive. According to Voorhees (2008, p.77), strategic planning is “idea management where ideas are developed, categorized, processed and implemented”. Based on an assessment of the institution’s strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats prevalent outside, a strategic plan focuses on leveraging the institution’s strengths in capturing opportunities to optimize the educational experience for students.

Hence, this paper describes strategic planning and outlines the process for successful integration and implementation. According to Voorhees (2008, p.5), strategic plans fail more often than they succeed in its implementation because of the failure to connect the dreams and aspirations that arise in strategic planning with specific actions. Moreover, failure results from leadership’s inability to follow a shared governance model in developing the strategic plan that brings the organization onboard in fulfilling the goals and strategies outlined in the plan. In view of Donoff and Rosser (2016), transparent strategic planning process reduces uncertainty and resistance to change in an ever-evolving educational landscape. Although strategic planning is essential to realizing a university’s potential and warding off external threats, it is how the process is conducted that drives the institution in the successful implementation and its survival.

Since the 1970’s strategic planning was introduced in the US as a tool to guide universities to dodge threats and grow amidst reduced public support both by the state and federal governments. According to Dooris, Kelley and Trainer (2002), strategic planning in the 80’s was considered a rational tool for the orderly advancement of the institution. In the 1990’s, accrediting bodies mandated that universities, as well as colleges, be guided by the strategic planning process in the assurance of learning (Dooris et al., 2002).

The issue of strategic planning has its critics and supporters as the academy moves toward a more business-centered model in the delivery of knowledge. According to Dooris et al. (2002), some question whether it’s vital to the success of an institution or the latest fad. Universities and colleges are wrestling with their identity as academic enterprises rather than institutions of higher learning. But with declining public support, growing competition, and rising costs, universities are forced to focus on those entities that bring positive cash flow to a stricken university budget rather than creating citizens of the world. According to Choban, Choban and Choban (2008, p.1) “Strategic plans should be aimed at producing the best student learning experience in the most cost-effective way, not the most cost-effective program in the most convenient way”. However, increased accountability from external stakeholders such as the state and national governments are driving the need for strategic planning for institutions of higher education observe Welsh, Nunez, and Petrosko (2006). While university administrators are supportive of strategic planning, the faculty is sensitive to the growing business culture that prevails in the academy (Elwood & Leyden, 2000; Welsh et al., 2006).

The process of strategic planning

According to Austin (2000), the strategic plan is a long-range plan for an institution that provides the foundation for budgeting, human resources, and enrollment management. As well, it is a living document that is constantly revisited as goals and objectives are modified and measured as the organization's environment changes. The four components of a strategic plan include the vision and mission that contribute to the identity of an institution, followed by the goals and objectives. The vision is the desired future condition of the institution while the mission is the institution's purpose for existing. In formulating the vision it is essential that university leaders see their roles as catalysts rather than owners of it (Elwood & Leyden, 2000). The mission clearly spells out what is important and what is not; it identifies markets served and the general direction of the institution. Goals are how the institution will accomplish its vision and mission while objectives are specific measurable actions to accomplish the goals. Failure results when ideas and aspirations brought forth are not linked to specific actions and outcomes (Voorhees, 2008).

Massen and Potman (1990) outlined three strategic models for planning that included the Linear Strategy Model, the Adaptive Strategy Model, and Interpretive Strategy Model. All strategy models are similar except in their assumptions of the relationship between the organization and its environment. In the Linear Model, it is assumed that the organization is insulated from the environment and that the environment is predictable. In the Adaptive Model, the organization strives to match its capabilities with the opportunities and risks in the environment. Here, the primary assumption is that an open relationship exists between the organization and its environment and is responsive to it. In the Interpretive Model, Massen and Potman (1990) suggest that strategy is developed through desired relationships with the environment and organizational stakeholders with an emphasis on motivating these stakeholders.

Strategic planning occurs at the institution, college, and departmental levels and incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data for the desired end result. Components include an environmental scan, competitive analysis, enrollment forecasting and scenario building, instructional viability analysis and an analysis of the labor market (Voorhees, 2008). The strategic planning process reflects the past, present, and future of an institution as it views and establishes its mission and vision for the university. The actual process of strategic planning starts with data drew from multiple sources such as competitors, interviews with key stakeholders such as the community, and focus groups with students, faculty and university administrators. Competitor analysis is beneficial to institutions as the basis for starting new programs, modifying existing ones or eliminating redundant ones. Competitor analysis looks at institutions in the geographical area as well as those that are considered peer institutions (Voorhees, 2008). It is imperative that the institution identify titles of competitor programs and content to make an accurate assessment of their offerings.

Enrollment building scenarios are quantitative and are beneficial to strategic planning in anticipating the future course of an institution. Using current enrollment figures coupled with population growth estimates from the state, institutions can build several enrollment scenarios targeting specific segments such as 18-24 year-olds, adult learners or international students.

For strategic planning to be successful it must involve the faculty and staff. Elwood and Leyden (2000) note that faculty has been reluctant to support strategic planning due to a culture inherent in the academy that prides itself on autonomy and academic freedom. Moreover, the faculty has not seen the need to change or to view students as customers rather than receivers of knowledge (Elwood & Leyden, 2000). In the interim, the relationship between higher education and society has been what society needs rather what is the role of the university in society (Elwood & Leyden, 2000). The researchers point out those institutions must take this culture into account when conducting strategic planning and involve faculty. Such planning without their input will result in a lack of implementation since they are at its core of the institution's mission. Hence, involving faculty and staff in strategy sessions is essential and creates two-way dialogue in driving changes to the institution in a changing environment. Additionally, Elwood and Leyden (2000) state that universities must establish linkages with external constituencies and entities since changes affecting them are external.

In formulating a sound strategic plan, Jasinski (2004) highlighted the best practices of universities that have received the Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award. The Baldrige Award recognizes companies, educational institutions and health care providers for excellence in performance throughout the world. In strategic planning, the first key to success is having a clear path to developing the plan with processes outlined and key participants identified. Successful strategic planning is an ongoing process of periodic reviews and adjustments to the mission, vision, values and specific phases for plan development (Jasinski, 2004). Additionally, universities need to have a systematic process for collecting data internal to the organization and external to the environment so that an accurate assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to the organization can be made.

Once this assessment is conducted the organization outlines four to six goals from the input to address the major challenges to the institution. Consideration should be given to long and short term goals, depending on the needs of the organization as well as the needs of students. Next, the institution outlines a timeline for deploying the plan with consideration to budget allocation and regular process checks. Benchmarks are used to report on the progress of action plans and compare them to projected outcomes and competitor performance. In evaluating goals and objectives, Jasinski (2004) states that human resource issues, technology, and academic plans need to be clearly identified since they involve faculty and staff recruitment and retention, technological systems upgrades and academic programs, and student success. Lastly, Jasinski (2004) points out that open, simple and frequent communication must be the foundation of implementing an institution's strategic plan as it serves to inform, provide structure and intention to it.

Strategic planning in higher educational institutions in the European Union

In the European Union, the issue of strategic planning has been slow in development as part of planning and policy making for institutions of higher education. This has been due, in part to the particular nuances that prevail in the EU as oppose to the US such as the expanse of institutions across borders and the emphasis on state control. Moreover, as a collective body, the EU has focused on initiating policies that standardize its educational landscape to remain competitive on a world stage. The

Bologna Declaration was initiated to bring about the greater compatibility of degrees and diplomas and to eliminate impediments to mobility between countries, increase the employability of its workforce and increase competitiveness in a globalized educational market. The Bologna Process established the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that encompasses over 4,000 institutions, almost 20 million students, and approximately 2 million staff and set forth directives to transform European higher education into a three-cycle system of Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees. Moreover, it set in motion quality assurance metrics to measure educational performance in programs across the EHEA (Seitz & Nicolae, 2014).

However, the emphasis on strategic planning has only recently gained importance as institutions grapple with declining state support, increased global competition, and increasing enrollment from a mobile student population. However, a major issue is the limited knowledge of market-driven factors among management to set apart institutions from their competition and grow. Moreover, higher education institutions in Europe are among the oldest with complex hierarchical structures. Machado and Taylor (2010) point out three models used in higher education institutions in Europe that include: 1) the Humboldtian Model where professors and students operate freely in their studies and teaching; 2) the Anglo-Saxon Model where there is little state involvement and autonomy among professors and students; and 3) the Napoleonic Model where governance is centralized.

In the last 30 years, Europe's landscape of higher education institutions has expanded to include vocational and technology institutes, online open institutions, in addition to traditional universities. This crowded arena of educational providers has exerted more demand on dwindling state budgets, along with growing demands from external stakeholders for knowledge and wealth creation. With the social relevance of higher education coming into question upholding significance and being strategically positioned to capitalize on opportunities makes strategic planning ever more critical (Taylor, Machado & Peterson 2008). Similarly to the US, the stability experienced in previous decades are no longer and are driving higher education institutions to create and maintain a competitive advantage while demands for accountability surge. According to Machado and Taylor (2010, p.50), strategic planning separates good institutions from the excellent ones for several reasons: 1) it improves performance in meeting the mission statement; 2) it improves the academic standing of its programs; 3) it increases accomplishments with the same or fewer resources; 4) it clarifies the future direction of the institution; 5) it helps meet the obligations associated with accreditation; 6) it addresses threats and other problems as well as identifies opportunities of importance to the institution; and 7) it brings the university community together toward the accomplishment of a goal.

Throughout Europe most higher education institutions see the value of strategic planning; however, implementation is at different stages with Italy at the initial stages and Denmark advanced in institutional planning (Machado & Taylor, 2010). Furthermore, most European institutions see the US involvement abroad in strategic planning in higher education in a distrustful manner since American universities lack an understanding of the extent of diversity between countries in Europe (Machado & Taylor, 2010).

Strategic planning in Romania's higher education system

For Romania, strategic planning has been ineffectual given the strong hand of the state and the limited management experience among administrators (Nicolae & Vitelar, 2013). However, Romania's central planning of higher education is not unique as many members implement policies mandated by the state. As a recent inductee to the European Union, Romania is standardizing its policies and procedures according to the Bologna Process without recognizing each university's strengths and ability to govern themselves (Seitz & Nicolae, 2014). In essence, universities are given all the responsibility, but not the authority or the budget to operate independently (Seitz, Mihai & Mettias, 2014). Reisz (2006) notes that Romania in 1996 allowed institutions to be autonomous in their academic function; however, they continue to oscillate between centralism and autonomy in governing themselves as the legacy of socialism continues. Seitz et al. (2014) advocate that the Ministry of Education must allow institutions to define their strategic mission within the confines of the law to be competitive in a growing educational marketplace. Issues such as hiring, faculty recruitment, curriculum development, and resource allocation should be localized to compete and prosper (Seitz et al., 2014). Moreover, accrediting bodies in the EHEA support and recommend strategic planning in a broad - based inclusive decision-making environment that has been lacking in Romania's institutions of higher education (Nadler, Miller & Modica, 2010). In this model, university administrators would collaborate with key stakeholders to develop the institution's overall priorities and "define what kind of school it is, whom they are responsible to, and whom to hire, while working towards approval by appropriate bodies within the institution" (Berg, Csikszentmihaly & Nakamura, 2003, p.46). These key stakeholders include faculty and staff and without their support, no strategic plan is successful in its development or implementation.

As a part of the EU, Romania has been involved in some training in strategic planning; however, emerging from a communist regime has hampered its ability to integrate this tool successfully to realize each institution's full potential and position them for their future success and survival. In their study of university administrators, Nicolae and Vitelar (2013) found that there is a need for meaningful change in the governance of Romania's institutions of higher education built on a foundation of formal training in a wide variety of areas including strategic management, leadership, and strategic planning.

Strategic planning: a university example

Effective leadership is essential in strategic planning since it is often the University president or rector that initiates the process. However, to be successful in its implementation, the university community, including faculty, staff and students must be involved in its development. What follows is an example of a southwestern university in the United States that recently went through this process and is now implementing its newly developed strategic plan.

Starting in 2014 California State University San Bernardino embarked on developing their strategic plan for 2015 - 2020. This initiative was set forth by the president of the University that mandated that the process is organic and transparent. The president,

with help from his cabinet, identified individuals that would lead this university endeavor and two individuals were selected to serve as co-chairs: one was the Vice-President for Information Technology, while the other was the Chair of an academic program. A Strategic Planning Advisory Committee (SPAC) was formed that included members drawn from faculty, staff, deans, students, the Office of Institutional Research, the Office of Assessment and Research in the College of Education, the Institute for Applied Research, and an external consultant. This committee was tasked with reviewing and clarifying the University's mission, vision, and values that led to a focused list of five strategic goals. These five strategic goals went beyond departments, colleges and administrative units and focused on student success, faculty and staff success, resource sustainability and expansion, community engagement and partnerships and lastly identity. SPAC met a minimum of twice a month and held several town hall meetings during this period when the goals were being developed to solicit feedback from the university community. A website was developed for the specific purpose of reporting on the progress of SPAC as well as soliciting feedback from the university and local community.

Once the five strategic goals were identified Working Groups (WG) were formed for each of the goals that included co-chairs and approximately seven members drawn from faculty, staff and students from across the university. The WGs met every week to develop the objectives for each goal. For each objective, the emphasis was to create measurable ones that could be evaluated annually during the five-year period of the plan. For each objective, developed strategies were identified that would help achieve them. Open forums and additional town hall meetings were held with the University community and the local community for feedback during the process that occurred from January through May. Also during this time SPAC met with the Faculty Senate on a continuous basis to report on their progress. The technology was incorporated every step of the way to share the information and solicit feedback from University members when they were unable to attend the town hall meetings or open forums. SPAC collected feedback resulting in more than 2,500 points of data from direct contact or responses on the website during several iterations of the plan.

As mentioned the five goals that were developed by the SPAC were student success, faculty and staff success, resource sustainability and expansion, community engagement and partnerships and lastly identity. The student success goal focused on learning experiences that promote student success such as incorporating high impact practices, maintaining high academic standards and reducing the overall D, F, withdrawal and incomplete rates and meeting and exceeding graduation and retention rates. Objectives surrounding this goal also examined graduate education across the University with strategies to conduct a needs assessment among graduate students and programs.

Goal two focused on faculty and staff success goal and centered on creating an environment where excellence in teaching and research thrived. Some of the objectives to support this goal included the development of a Center of Excellence for research and increasing tenure-track density faculty. Strategies focused on increasing funding to support faculty recruitment and to reduce the overall student-faculty ratio. Additionally, staff success involved increasing training opportunities for staff through development of a professional development and training plan within the duration of the five-year period.

The third goal focused on resource sustainability and expansion with an emphasis on stewarding resources for sustainability, yet acquiring new sources of funding. Objectives focused on securing national public and/or private partnerships, developing an infrastructure to enable the University launch entrepreneurial activities, and increasing philanthropic productivity. Strategies to obtain these objectives included engaging in a collaborative process to identify priorities and areas of expertise and excellence that would attract public-private partners, cultivating a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation as an incubator of business and social enterprise, developing collaborations between academic leadership, faculty and administration to ensure an environment for entrepreneurial activities, and increasing non-resident enrollment.

Goal four focused on community engagement and partnerships at the local, regional, state, national and global levels to enhance social economic and cultural well-being. Objectives focused on identifying strategic opportunities for aligning community needs with university resources for mutual benefit, increasing the number of strategic community-university engagement activities, increasing service learning activities in the curriculum and publicizing the university's commitment to community engagement. Strategies to reach these objectives included reviewing policies to eliminate barriers to community engagement, developing support systems for faculty and staff to engage in community initiatives and research, increasing university funding to stimulate new curricular service learning activities, and ensuring all recruitment advertisements for faculty, staff and administrators reflected this commitment to community engagement.

Goal five centered on the university's identity with objectives focused on developing an identity for the university and highlighting its distinctive qualities, creating a vibrant and memorable student life experience to increase student engagement, increasing prospective students' perceptions of the university as the university of choice, increasing positive perceptions of the university with internal and external audiences, and increasing alumni engagement. Strategies to achieve these objectives included developing several major events that celebrate alumni accomplishments; developing more career networking opportunities; developing a student-to-prospective-student campaign to promote the university as a first-choice option; identifying and branding university traditions and signature events; creating gathering spaces to encourage student engagement; and developing an integrated marketing communications plan to reinforce its identity with internal and external audiences.

In developing the objectives and strategies it was imperative that they were measurable so target percentages and frequencies were included as a basis for quantifying accomplishments when the plan was evaluated annually. After the strategic plan was finalized and vetted with the university community funds were allocated to support implementation. Once the budget has developed the plan and the budget were shared with the university community for their feedback.

Conclusion

Strategic planning is essential given reduced government support and an ever changing environment not only in the US but in the European Union as well. Universities and colleges can no longer survive as an “Ivory Tower” and must implement strategic plans that leverage their strengths and capitalizes on external opportunities while warding off threats. This paper provided an overview of strategic planning and the steps involved to develop a plan for a university’s future. To illustrate the process, an overview was provided of how a southwestern university in the United States has recently implemented the strategic planning process. It is critical that the process is initiated by the president or rector and involves the university community to gain “buy-in” of the plan. Moreover, goals, objectives, and strategies expressed in the plan must be measurable so that it can be evaluated throughout the period of duration. Finally, once the plan is in place, the budget to implement it must be allocated so as to bring the strategic plan to fruition for the betterment of the university and its students.

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