SPRAAC & AAC Link Strategic Planning, Budget Development & Assessment
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Editor’s Note: Strategic Planning will be one of two areas reviewed during the upcoming Focused Visit (March 6-7, 2006). Significant strides have been made in the last two years toward linking strategic planning, budget development, and assessment. This article summarizes the College’s recent efforts to address accreditation requirements related to strategic planning. This brief summary is excerpted from the draft Focused Visit Report which can be reviewed in its entirety on the OIE web site (http://www.snc.edu/oie).

When the Higher Learning Commission visited in December, 2001, St. Norbert College lacked “a comprehensive and concrete strategic plan to guide decisions about future goals for the College.” The team noted that the 1996-2001 Strategic Action Plan “lacked specific steps, a roadmap or timetable.”

To address this deficiency, the College convened a Strategic Planning Conference in October, 2003. Involving representatives of all campus constituencies, this conference initiated a year-long process that resulted in development of a comprehensive foundational strategic plan. Program level strategic plans (including SWOT analyses) were due by the end of the Fall, 2003 semester. Division/unit level administrators used the program strategic plans to develop unit strategic plans which were submitted to the five divisional Vice Presidents. Each Vice President used the unit plans to construct a Divisional Strategic Plan, which in turn was used by the Strategic Planning Task Force (a college-wide task force) to construct a comprehensive strategic plan for the College. Prior to receiving the divisional plans, the Strategic Planning Task Force conducted its own institution level SWOT analysis as well as fact-finding interviews. A draft strategic plan was released in Spring, 2004 and community input was solicited during two community forums. A final draft was submitted to the Board of Trustees in May, 2004 and approved by them in September, 2004.

In anticipation of Strategic Plan approval, President Hynes constituted the Strategic Planning and Resource Allocation Advisory Committee (SPRAAC). This committee replaced the Strategic Planning Task Force (which had completed its work) and the President’s Information Council (which had previously provided community input regarding capital budget priorities). SPRAAC membership included faculty, staff and students from all five Vice Presidential areas. The Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness is a permanent member, ex officio. SPRAAC was charged with responsibility to “assess the progress of the College Strategic Action Plan, regularly update it, and use the priorities of the Plan as the basis on which the Committee recommends the allocation of resources to the Administrative Advisory Council (AAC).”

SPRAAC has met weekly since November, 2004. Their first task was to submit to the AAC priority recommendations regarding capital budget requests submitted College-wide during the 2004-05 fiscal year. Criteria used to determine priority included “relationship to the strategic plan”. Next, SPRAAC began the work of prioritizing the 17 goals and 87 actions steps contained in foundational Strategic Plan. The SPRAAC recommendations included giving highest priority to four goals (enrollment management, human resources [compensation plan], fundraising, and revenue generation) and fifteen action steps. The AAC endorsed the four goals recommended by SPRAAC and added a fifth goal (identity). During the Spring semester, SPRAAC identified Key Indicators of Progress (annual) for each of the fifteen action steps with highest priority. These

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Indicators (e.g., institutional data and new/existing reports) were used by the AAC for the first time during the summer to measure the progress of the prioritized action steps of the Strategic Plan. The AAC also provided SPRAAC with progress reports for 2004-05 for the remaining action steps in the Plan with lower priorities.

This year, SPRAAC will review and recommend priorities for College-wide capital budget requests for 2006-07. A subcommittee will update the institutional SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). Another critical task on SPRAAC’s agenda is to assess the outcomes of the most recent year of strategic planning efforts. This includes monitoring the progress toward completion of the 2005 priorities, as well as reviewing the placement and relevance of action steps currently in the College-wide plan. Questions to be raised include the following: Are some action steps better positioned in department or divisional sub-plans? Does each action step continue to align with the goals of the strategic plan? Are the action steps strategic in nature? Another subcommittee is working with AAC members to develop a strategic planning template to be used each year by subunits to update existing plans and propose new initiatives to SPRAAC. Currently, a wide variety of formats exist across the divisions of the College for submitting strategic plan proposals. The uniform format of the template will facilitate the efficient collection, analysis, and storage of this information. An annual updating of unit strategic plans is critical for maintaining the “rolling” aspect of the five-year institutional plan. These updates enable the College Strategic Plan to be a living guide, reflecting the dynamic nature of the academic environment and the inevitability of change.

Finally, SPRAAC is working in close cooperation with the AAC to connect the strategic plan more closely to the budget process. This topic was the main agenda item of the first joint meeting of the two groups on September 21, 2005. At this point, the five priority themes are evident in the budget. Furthermore, some Strategic Action Steps have been achieved through expenditure or reallocation of existing Division resources. Cost estimates for all of the action steps in the foundational Strategic Plan have been reviewed and used to refine the Strategic Plan. By the end of this academic year, the AAC and SPRAAC will have developed a more streamlined, manageable, and updated Strategic Plan which nonetheless remains true to the comprehensive foundational plan of 2004.

Assessment, strategic planning, and budgeting are more closely integrated than ever before. Capital budget priorities are driven by strategic plan priorities. Learning outcomes assessment at the program level informs program-level strategic planning and program review. Program review summaries and program-level strategic plans are used to update division strategic plans by members of the Administrative Advisory Committee. The Strategic Plan priority themes (Identity, Enrollment Management, Human Resources (Compensation Plan), Fundraising, Revenue Generation), recommended by SPRAAC and endorsed by AAC, are evident in the College budget.

Notable examples of budget decisions driven by assessment and strategic planning are already evident (e.g. continuation of compensation plan in spite of enrollment shortfalls, disestablishment of the International Economics Major, Computer Information Systems Major, and the Masters in Adaptive Education). Disestablishment of the CIS Major also eliminated a committee that had a small operating budget. Connections between assessment, strategic planning and budget development will continue to solidify as SPRAAC procedures are fully implemented and a full SWOT/Strategic Plan prioritization/budget development cycle is achieved.

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Quick Action Retains Students
by Dr. Jack Williamsen
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Question: What do you call a student who is missing class, struggling with loneliness, unhappy with her/his room mate, late with assignments, worrying about meager finances, or failing exams? Answer: someone at risk for leaving St. Norbert prematurely and--likely--unnecessarily.

Students facing any of the issues listed above (or other “downers”) have a harder time than their peers successfully achieving their academic and professional goals at St. Norbert. Of course, all students face challenges of varying kinds in their college careers, and most of them overcome them on the way to graduation.

But some students, first semester freshmen in particular, are more vulnerable than their peers to the impact of negative experiences, often dealing with them in ineffective ways until it is too late for a successful resolution. For this reason, many colleges and universities offer a variety of programs and services to help freshmen adjust to college life (SNC’s “First Year Experience” groups and our emphasis on freshman advisement are examples).

In addition to “preventive” programs intended to improve retention, last year the College began a service designed to offer timely help to struggling students before it is “too late.” Led by Jeff Ritter, Director of Academic Advisement, a group of professionals from residence life, counseling and health services, career services, business office, academic support services, and financial aid meet weekly for about a half-hour to identify individual students who appear to have serious problems adjusting to the demands of college life. The group decides who is in the best position to contact the student(s) so-identified in order to determine if assistance makes sense and then offer whatever resources the College has available.

Early intervention programs such as our “thirty minute group” are increasingly common as colleges and universities make efforts to improve student retention. It is too early to reasonably evaluate the effectiveness of our program, but the thirty minute group is sufficiently encouraged to continue its work through this academic year.

One key to success with early intervention services is identification of students who might need help. If you know a student who seems to be struggling, feel free to discuss your concerns with Jeff Ritter at extension 3234. If appropriate, Jeff can use the resources of the thirty minute group to help the student succeed at St. Norbert.

Assessment Resources
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FAX: 403-4096
Web site: www.snc.edu/oie/