

Standard Two: Planning and Evaluation

OVERVIEW

Northeastern University is a university that has great aspirations and a desire to move quickly to achieve them. Impatience with the status quo has been a feature of Northeastern for much of its existence, but the drumbeat of change has grown stronger since the last accreditation visit.

Planning and evaluation have been watchwords for Northeastern and explain why it has progressed so quickly on so many fronts simultaneously. Decision-making has been disciplined and data-driven. Goals have been established, priorities have been set, resources have been identified, implementation plans have been designed, and outcomes have been assessed and used to inform subsequent actions. Northeastern's success is demonstrated by its capacity and willingness to plan and evaluate.

Planning

DESCRIPTION

Since the last accreditation cycle, there have been two major, overarching planning efforts at Northeastern. The last accreditation report provided both the impetus and the foundation for the first and the arrival of a new president in 2006 provided the impetus for the second.

The Action and Assessment Plan (AAP) was a comprehensive plan that grew out of the 1998 accreditation report and forced the University to crystallize its thinking about the future of Northeastern. It laid out goals and measures, many of them quantitative, in five areas of emphasis: national, research, student-centered, practice-oriented, and urban. As the plan matured, the ambition to be ranked among the top universities in the nation added even more focus to the planning agenda.

In order to realize the goals of this plan several major initiatives were undertaken. Student selectivity and student success were essential components and were addressed in two initiatives: Northeastern completely changed its financial aid policy, for the first time providing consistent aid over the course of students' studies and letting students know at the beginning of their studies how much aid they would receive over the next five years. A major investment in residence halls was also necessary in order to provide for the more geographically distributed student body the University was seeking and attracting.

Enhancing the excellence of the faculty was essential to realizing several of the elements of the AAP. Studies were done to provide a data-informed look at optimal numbers for student enrollment and size of faculty on a college-by-college basis. Areas of hiring were also studied by the deans and other senior leadership of the university. Hiring initiatives were put in place to promote interdisciplinarity in research areas, enhance faculty quality, and increase the numbers of tenured and tenure-track faculty members.

To achieve coordinated increases in student quality, student success, and faculty quality required careful resource planning. A comprehensive, forward-looking budget incorporating the new initia-

tives had to be developed. A great deal of analysis went into the planning for and development of a model for a five-year budget that could support the vision.

The development of the budget clarified the decisions that followed from the core aims of the AAP. It was clear that retention had to become a very high priority for the university and that graduate and adult-education programs had to grow. It was also clear that several of the priorities to be addressed by the institutional master plan, required by the City of Boston and being developed at the same time, had to address student needs, such as the building of residence halls and provision for classroom space. These analyses were then fed back into the planning process. The multi-year budget model set the stage for year-by-year budget-setting exercises.

Two other major, University-wide initiatives were undertaken at this time to support the goals of the planning process. One was to change from a quarter calendar to a semester calendar, and the other was to launch a branding campaign.

The calendar transition required an enormous effort of planning and coordination, touching essentially every part of the University, over the years 2000-2003. More than a dozen committees of faculty members, students, and administrators studied everything from curricula to projected patterns of attendance to infrastructure and systems. These studies resulted in policy and procedure changes and implementation plans. The analyses in their turn also informed the development of the multi-year budget.

The launch of a comprehensive branding campaign was intended to make the “new” Northeastern understood by both the community external to Northeastern (including prospective students, funding agencies, the City of Boston, and others) and the internal community of faculty, staff, and students, as well as the alumni body. This campaign also repositioned the University in the marketplace.

In Fall of 2006 President Joseph E. Aoun arrived at Northeastern. The goals of the AAP had, in large measure, been accomplished so it seemed a propitious time to initiate a new planning effort, this time focused explicitly on the academic component of the University.

Under the co-chairmanship of the Provost and the Senior Vice President for Executive Affairs, committees of faculty members, administrators, and students engaged their colleagues around four topics — experiential learning; interdisciplinary and translational research; creative, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions; and urban and global dimensions — and wrote team reports which provided the basis for the Academic Plan that was drafted by the steering committee. The draft was shared with all University constituencies and input was solicited and used to strengthen the plan.

The final version of the Academic Plan is a relatively short, visionary document that lays out five strategic goals for the University: enhance student outcomes through experiential learning; address global and societal challenges through interdisciplinary and translational research; enrich intellectual life and creative expression; strengthen urban engagement; and embrace global opportunities.

In a process parallel to that of developing the Academic Plan, the mission statement of the University was rewritten. These two statements were augmented by the articulation of a vision

statement and a set of core values (see Standard One). In June 2007 the Board of Trustees endorsed the documents. Together they set the stage for Northeastern's planning for the future.

APPRAISAL

Northeastern has been very intentional and, across the board, very successful in its planning efforts. The University undertook a large number of far-reaching initiatives during the past decade and because of the planning, and subsequent coordination of efforts, each has had a favorable outcome.

The AAP kept the institution focused on shared goals. This plan underwent an annual review by a committee of faculty members and administrators and goals were re-set as past ones were achieved. The University was particularly successful in achieving its goals for student selectivity and student success. While much has been done under the "Urban" aspiration point of the AAP, Northeastern did not at this time develop a comprehensive urban strategy.

(<http://www.neu.edu/community/welcome.shtml>)

Budgetary support for the AAP was strong and appropriate. However, a need for investment in additional faculty became apparent relatively quickly. The priorities set at the time put the enhancement of student quality and student success at the top of the agenda. This led to rapidly growing student numbers due to increasing retention. In turn, this led to over-reliance on part-time and non-tenure track faculty members. Hiring initiatives were initiated in Fall 2004 to grow and develop the faculty (see Standard Five).

The semester conversion issue of greatest budgetary concern was that of patterns of attendance. Patterns were projected and monitored but took some time to stabilize.

The outcomes of the major planning initiatives have been successful. The faculty-hiring initiative has increased the quality and interdisciplinarity of the faculty. Semester conversion has increased the length of academic terms and cooperative education periods, as well as research time for faculty members. The institutional master plan has refashioned Northeastern as an attractive residential campus with buildings that have won architectural awards. The branding initiative imposed a healthy discipline on the University requiring that message points be developed and reiterated through all University materials.

The Academic Plan is new, but it is already clear that its five strategic goals resonate with individuals and units. These goals are informing current faculty scholarship, faculty hiring, and space planning.

PROJECTION

Northeastern is currently in the process of implementing the Academic Plan. Colleges have started developing implementation plans that will allow them to pursue their highest interests while contributing to the success of the University as a whole. As planning goes on there is an increasing amount of cross-college, as well as cross-disciplinary, interaction.

A new urban strategy is emerging in the Stony Brook Initiative at Northeastern University. This is an approach that is being developed to partner effectively with the surrounding neighborhoods on issues of youth and community development. (<http://www.northeastern.edu/stonybrook/>)

Northeastern is developing a new institutional master plan for the physical plant for the Fall of 2010. This will require bringing together groups of faculty members and administrators to discuss the future of Northeastern in terms of enrollment, student interests, research interests, and neighborhood concerns. These discussions will flow naturally from the discussions carried out in developing the Academic Plan. A challenge Northeastern now faces is that it has utilized most of its buildable sites on the main campus and will have to be creative in developing new space.

The University is in the process of implementing modules of SunGard's Higher Education Banner software to support the student and financial areas and to provide a data warehouse. Having these data in one system will aid in linking the planning and budgeting efforts.

Evaluation

DESCRIPTION

Northeastern has been quite disciplined in developing an institutional culture that seeks return on investment. The University evaluates the outcomes of its decisions and uses this knowledge to enhance or change its initiatives.

Internal and external evaluation of the relationship of cooperative education to the academic colleges during the curricular review undertaken at the time of semester conversion ultimately led to the decentralization of many of the activities of the Cooperative Education Division. Cooperative education coordinators were relocated directly into the departments with which they worked and their reporting structure is now through the academic units.

Because the branding campaign projected an updated image of Northeastern and because enhanced revenue streams were necessary to support the University in achieving its goals, Northeastern focused renewed attention on its alumni body. Consultants were hired to evaluate the alumni's current views of the University and their interest in becoming more connected.

In the Fall of 2006, after an internal evaluation of the advancement efforts of the University, it was determined that this function would benefit from being substantially decentralized into the colleges. This has put development officers in direct contact with the scholars and researchers whose work they describe to potential donors. Each college dean now has a development staff that works closely with him or her.

Northeastern is committed to assessing its workings and routinely relies on external expertise in the form of consultants and visiting groups. All the senior vice presidents' areas have benefited from external consultants. The areas that have been evaluated at the broadest levels include, in the academic area, cooperative education, the graduate programs, research in science and engineering, and the organization of research support; in the administration and finance area, information services and infrastructure; in Enrollment Management and Student Affairs (EMSA), health and counseling services; in advancement, alumni relations; and in executive affairs, strategic communications. In addition, the entire senior leadership team benefited from ongoing conversations with a panel of experts provided through the Learning Alliance for Higher Education. About halfway through the semester conversion process, a team of experts evaluated the process and outcomes to date and made recommendations for issues on which to focus.

Advisors have been engaged to evaluate and consult on specific projects: for example, a visit from the president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities was useful as the general education requirement was developed, a well-known authority on governance matters consulted with the Board of Trustees as they re-envisioned their role, and consultants have aided the University in strategic planning. Even the planning process associated with the AAP underwent an external review.

The Office of Institutional Research collects, organizes, analyzes, interprets, reports, and archives both institutionally generated and survey data (<http://www.northeastern.edu/oir/index.html>). EMSA does a great deal of data analysis and satisfaction surveying, much of it through its Office of Strategic Enrollment Research. The Office of Experiential Learning collects and analyzes data on many aspects of cooperative education and is beginning to gather information about other kinds of experiential learning. There are also numerous periodic evaluations carried out in specific areas, some University-wide, such as the campus climate survey, and some local, such as surveys of advisors.

APPRAISAL

Northeastern has a culture of evaluation and of using evaluation to enhance outcomes. A very good example is presented by the EMSA area. Over the past decade Northeastern has become a residential campus, so there have been many initiatives in student affairs and residence life to be analyzed. These units have used satisfaction surveys assiduously to focus their resources. The library and information services both rely on customer surveys to guide action plans and resource allocation.

Student retention has increased because the University has had a shared view of the importance of increased retention and has used it to drive resource allocation.

The area in which more effort must be made is the evaluation of undergraduate programs. With the implementation of the NU Core and the assessment of embedded learning objectives, there is every reason to expect assessment to grow in prominence.

PROJECTION

Evaluation focused on return on investment will continue to be central to Northeastern. Internal and external evaluations have aided units across the University in understanding their returns on investment, and Northeastern will continue to rely on them to aid in decision-making about resource allocation.

As Northeastern discusses moving to a decentralized model of academic management, the need to understand the performance and connectedness of programs and their financial performance is clear.

Assessment of academic programs will grow out of the work being done as the NU Core is implemented and the Center for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CIETL) establishes itself as a resource. A new database of graduate program indicators will be used on a real-time basis to monitor graduate programs.

As Northeastern clarifies its definition of what constitutes a substantial, authentic, cooperative education-equivalent experience, it will develop ways to gather and analyze data on experiential learning that augment data on cooperative education.

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Northeastern University has strongly embraced a culture of planning and evaluation. Decisions have been made on the basis of data, not perception. The Action and Assessment Plan was a structured plan that incorporated metrics for success against which results were tested. The new Academic Plan is more conceptual, in keeping with Northeastern's vision of its future. With the current healthy discipline of planning and evaluation engrained throughout the institution, there was less need to be prescriptive in this plan. As the University implements the new Academic Plan, units will frame specific goals and metrics appropriate to their own areas of initiative.