

The Process and Lessons Learned of Creating an Interdisciplinary Department Strategic Plan Designed by Faculty and Staff

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings from a case study of a strategic planning process undertaken in a department of a pharmacy college in a large Midwestern university. There were at least three factors that made this situation unique. First, the department is located over 150 miles away from the other departments in the college. Second, the department is relatively new (10 years old). Finally, the department has a mix of both basic science, social and administrative pharmacy, and practice faculty. The entire strategic planning process took nearly a year to complete and included department faculty (20+), staff members (13) and a strategic planning consultant. While the process was deemed successful, key lessons learned included the need for the development of guiding principles for the process, the need to set limitations on the scope of the plan, the creation of clear timelines with definite end dates, and the need to appreciate and respect the diversity of department faculty.

Keywords: *Strategic planning; Regional campus; Pharmacy; Interdisciplinary; Interprofessional*

Introduction

Strategic planning. The words can elicit responses ranging from groans to excitement -- depending upon the organization's past history with the strategic planning process. At its best, the strategic planning process provides an organization with direction and motivates its employees to accomplish new goals. At worst, it sits on a shelf, collecting dust until the next strategic planning process begins.

Educational institutions are well aware of the hazards of not engaging in strategic planning. Without achievable goals, the viability of an institution can be at risk. Lack of a clear vision and/or mission and direction can lead to decreased engagement and performance by faculty and staff, high turnover, and a decrease in the size of or quality of the student application pool. Key stakeholders (faculty, staff, and administration in this case) must be involved and buy into the strategic plan. In fact, Emil and Cress (2014) note that faculty engagement is a direct response to goal congruence with the institution thus making consistency between faculty goals and organizational goals critical. And when change is involved, faculty stakeholders are an essential element of a successful change process (Obanion, 2014).

This paper describes a strategic planning process conducted with a medium-sized department in a college of a large Midwestern university. The department participating in the strategic planning process is physically located 150 miles from the main campus housing four additional collegiate departments and central administration.

Strategic Planning

According to Bain, a worldwide management consulting firm, strategic planning is a "comprehensive process for determining business should become and how it can best achieve that goal" (Bain, 2010). The process itself provides organizations with an opportunity

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to reaffirm or redefine their mission and vision, and then set goals that are consistent with this mission and vision. The basic parts of a strategic plan include the organizational mission (what we do), the vision (what we want to be), the goals (our desired future outcomes) and strategies (how we get there).

In addition to the above-mentioned elements, successful strategic plans also consider the values of the organization and consider the organizational culture (Arbab., *et al.* 2014). Successful strategic plans include goals that are reachable. These goals then become guides (along with the mission and vision) for allocations of resources such as time, money, and talent.

The strategic plan becomes the document that guides change. Therefore, the organization's ability to adapt to change must also be considered. In fact, Arbab., *et al.* (2014) argue that the three most important factors for success with change initiatives include: culture and values, business processes, and people and engagement.

Importance for Department

The Department in this article was established 150 miles away from its Home Base College. The College has a "One College, Two Campuses" model and provides the Pharm. D professional degree curriculum via interactive technology across campuses. Prior to the expansion, the College was composed of four departments: Medicinal Chemistry, Pharmaceutics, Pharmaceutical Care & Health Systems, and Experimental and Clinical Pharmacology, which supported both the professional program and graduate programs. Because of the need to fully support all aspects of the professional program, the department includes approximately twenty-one diverse faculty members from the six pharmaceutical science disciplines, as defined by the College, including basic biomedical sciences, pharmaceutics, medicinal chemistry, pharmacology, clinical science, and social and administrative science. The department is supported by approximately ten staff members.

In 2013, the department hired a new Department Head who agreed it was time for the decade-old department to develop a new departmental mission/vision, and create a strategic plan to serve as a collective roadmap for departmental success. Developing a departmental strategic plan was deemed critical for the department to collectively make forward progress, and to retain current faculty and recruit future faculty. The planning process was viewed as an opportunity to engage department faculty and staff in determining our course, and guide budgetary considerations. This paper describes one example of a diverse department's process for developing a strategic plan.

Strategic Plan Development Process

Overview of the Department

There are several important and unique cultural characteristics of this particular department that impacted the strategic planning process. The consideration of cultural differences was critical to developing a process that would work well for this group. First, this department is just over ten years old. While "young" in organizational terms, the location and distance from the other campus influenced quick development of a distinct departmental culture. Due to the remote location of the department, faculty and staff developed a sense of "family" that coalesced around a "must do" attitude born from the necessity to build effective teaching, research, and service capacity *de novo*. The collegiate strategy behind the development of the department was built on a "One College, Two Campuses" motto, fully embraced by the department. Combined, these factors facilitated development of a strong and cohesive culture created early in the life of this organization.

As time progressed, integration with the other campus and departments has occurred and the "One College: Two Campuses" represents even more of a reality than it did a few years ago. Since the strategic planning process includes clarity of mission and vision, care needed to be taken to ensure that elements of "new" culture were also considered.

Issues related to business processes also were considered in the strategic planning process. Again, the location of the department in association with the other parts of the college impacts strategic processes. While all faculty report to the "local" department head, some

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staff have dual reporting relationships with supervisors on the other campus. Likewise, several business processes (budgeting, human resources) are centralized at the main campus location. These factors make for some unique considerations regarding the strategic planning process and to a certain extent limit initiatives related to business procedures.

Finally, people and engagement were considered as the strategic planning process began. During this planning, the college was in the middle of curriculum revision in which department faculty, in particular, experienced a disproportionate share of the responsibility compared to their colleagues in other departments. Accordingly, the issue of workload and burnout was mentioned several times during strategic planning meetings. This issue was moved to the “parking lot” area for consideration in the near future. However, it did impact the strategic planning process because initiatives needed to be manageable, or alternatively, needed to possess the capacity to re-energize faculty and staff without overwhelming them with new ideas for things to do.

Another feature of this department that was important for the planning process is that there are more non-tenure/tenure-track faculty than tenure/tenure track faculty in this department. As has been noted in the literature, non-tenure/tenure track faculty members may feel less connected to the institution (Gerhard and Burn, 2014). This factor could influence engagement in a strategic planning process. On one hand, contract faculty may feel a vested interest in the process due to a relative lack of security knowing that the outcome of accomplishing goals might have a direct impact on employment status. On the other hand, contract faculty may feel less engaged due to a perception that a reciprocal relationship does not exist between them and the department. It is likely that contract faculty with both opinions were involved in at least the initial phases of the strategic planning process.

The Strategic Planning Retreat

The department head engaged an external consultant to assist with developing a strategic planning process for the department. Because faculty and staff buy in is critical to successful implementation of a strategic plan, the goal was to develop a planning process that engaged broad input from all faculty and staff. The process began with a mandatory kick-off retreat to which all faculty and staff were invited. Prior to the retreat, the department head selected individual faculty to prepare to speak about “the state of” teaching, practice, service, and research within the department. Prior to the retreat, the department embarked on an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). The purpose of this SWOT analysis was four fold: to build on nascent existing and nascent scholarly strength; to have purposeful faculty hires; to identify what the department is known for; to develop a strategy going forward.

Prior to the discussion, faculty members were sent the following considerations for each portion of the analysis (Table 1).

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
What are we known for?	Where do we lack resources?	What are our nascent strengths with regard to scholarship?	What are our main obstacles?
	What needs improvement?	Do we have unique niches to grow?	Do we worry about our competitors?
		Are there opportunities for collaboration with Health Systems?	Do Health Care/ Health System changes threaten us?

Table 1: Questions for Faculty Consideration Prior to Strategic Plan Discussion.

Faculty members were instructed to consider each question and include their answers on a shared document. The answers provided from faculty were shared and discussed during the initial retreat. These data, words from faculty responses to SWOT, were displayed in a “word cloud”. The more frequently a word was used, the larger it appeared in the word cloud (Figures 1-4). The following includes the most common answers to questions in each category:

selected were chosen to set a collaborative, fun mood and to break free of existing departmental paradigms. The retreat officially began at 9 a.m. Morning topics included an exercise to facilitate mission/vision and covered the topic areas of service, teaching, research, and practice. Afternoon sessions consisted of introductory dialogue regarding a strategic goal-setting process, allocation of resources, and ways to create and sustain a culture of collaboration. The major outcome of the retreat was a draft of the departmental mission. Additionally a team was identified to continue the strategic planning process, which will be further discussed in the paper.

The retreat concluded at 3 p.m. Retreat participants included nineteen faculty, nine staff, one staff from the other campus, and one external consultant facilitator. At the conclusion of the retreat, the head requested volunteers for a strategic planning committee charged with creating an ongoing process to develop the strategic plan. The committee consisted of a staff person, and five faculty members from various disciplines (clinical practice, basic science, social and administrative pharmacy). Simultaneous to the strategic planning committee work, the department continued to focus on refining the department mission that encompassed the diversity of the department. The draft mission from the retreat was shared electronically with all faculty and staff for refinement. The mission was revisited at two department meetings (11/18/2013 and 1/16/2014) with rich discussion and refinement. The efforts of the entire department resulted in a mission that is inclusive to the group and allows the unique qualities and characteristics of the department to stand out. The mission: "We are dedicated to continuously improving interdisciplinary pharmaceutical care education, research, practice and service focused on the health and well-being of underserved, rural, and indigenous communities." It was approved 1/16/2014. This mission became the foundation for the overall strategic plan.

The next step was to develop and operationalize our strategic planning process. The strategic planning committee reformatted the consultant's summary of the retreat to create a Google document with four main sections: teaching, practice, research, service. All faculty and staff were given access to the document and four weekly one-hour working sessions over lunch were scheduled.

During the weekly working sessions, faculty and staff clustered into the four groups to write the vision, goals, and sub goals in the plan. Each week department members were asked to switch to new groups to offer new perspectives, while committee leads would remain in the original group for continuity. Those who were unable to attend working sessions were able to contribute electronically at any time.

Following the four working sessions, the planning committee reconvened for two one-hour sessions to review all of the departmental input. The strategic planning committee collated responses from each of the focus areas, and then passed the draft plan to the department head and associate head who met with the external consultant to identify departmental goals and strategies to create a more refined draft strategic plan. This plan was introduced during a department meeting. Faculty and staff were then provided access to a working document of the draft strategic plan to provide feedback and comment on the plan. Faculty and staff were given one month to review and comment before reconvening at the following department meeting to review again and work on strategic initiatives. A vote to approve the strategic plan passed unanimously on August 24, 2014, with the intent to include goals and sub goals regarding employee engagement and satisfaction to be developed by the department head and associate head.

Strategic Plan Implementation Process

The implementation philosophy was to package a mixture of administrative-driven initiatives and faculty and staff-driven initiatives into defined periods of time. Successful implementation of new initiatives in an academic setting requires buy-in from faculty and staff and the development of initiatives reflecting individual passion. Using this approach we adopted a model, where individuals, bringing personal passion to the initiative, proposed faculty and staff-driven initiatives. The Departmental leadership reserved the privilege to implement a select number of administrative initiatives. This mixed approach allowed the leadership to implement their vision for the Department while encouraging departmental faculty and staff to individually bring the Strategic Plan to life. This approach of affording faculty and staff the responsibility, as well as the authority, to individually conceive and develop collective initiatives, provides the autonomy to think creatively. The collective adoption of the strategic plan further provides the assurance that linked organic initiatives will be favorably received by the Department and lowers the activation energy for implementation of the strategic plan.

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The process was kicked-off through a special two hour Departmental meeting where consensus was reached regarding the process for proposing initiatives, implementing initiatives, and time-line for implementation. The Department determined the importance of identifying Champions for four sections of the plan comprising Teaching, Research, Practice, and Service. Champions for these areas emerged and were ratified unanimously by the Department faculty and staff. The Champions accepted responsibility for tracking progress of initiative implementation and for reporting regularly back to the Department through Departmental meetings. The Champions were also assigned to lead the reviews of each area at the Departmental retreats. Leadership then presented their first slate of initiatives, with initiatives proposed within each of the four areas. Consistent with a shared model of leadership, the Department Head and Associate Department Head each selected leadership initiatives. These initiatives were presented to the Department followed immediately by an invitation to the faculty and staff to begin proposing and developing additional initiatives consistent with the strategic plan. A process was developed for attaining informed consent for new initiatives from the departmental leadership, faculty and staff through the monthly department meeting mechanism. Central to this process was the expectation that all initiatives adopted into the Strategic Plan are assigned to specific faculty or staff thus avoiding the proliferation of ideas divorced from implementation. All other unassigned initiatives were assigned to a “parking lot” and were not included in the working Strategic Plan until individuals or teams took responsibility for carrying them out. Finally, all work was carried out collaboratively using an interactive Google document electronically accessible to all Departmental faculty and staff thus allowing everyone to contribute to the Strategic Plan and critique initiatives proposed by others.

The Strategic Plan document (<http://z.umn.edu/pppsstratplan>) is prefaced by Collegiate and Departmental Vision and Mission statements. The purpose of this preface is to remind the stakeholders that all subsequently listed Departmental strategic goals and Initiatives are grounded in these statements. Following the preface, the Plan is divided into four major categorical sections: Teaching, Practice, Research, and Service. A vision statement was developed for each section with a listing of each strategic goal and all associated sub goals following. In the internal Departmental version, strategic initiatives are also listed under individual sub goals. This internal document is provided to Departmental Faculty and Staff in electronic form as Google document, thus allowing individuals to update the document in real time reflecting development of new or completion old initiatives.

Although the strategic plan targeted implementation across a three-year window of time, it was recognized that full implementation would have to occur in a phased fashion. This recognition reflected the reality of faculty and staff work load balance. Initial prioritization was given to initiatives that required immediate implementation including initiatives associated with building internal and external relationships with the department, infrastructure needs, nurturing a culture of scholarship through support of interdisciplinary seminar, journal club and grant writing activities, and development of streamlined, purposeful administrative policies and procedures. These initiatives supported strategic goals in all four major areas of the strategic plan including Teaching, Research and Scholarship, Practice, and Service. The time frame for implementing the initial initiatives encompassed a six-month window from May-October 2014.

At the end of this initial phase a Departmental retreat, similar in structure and timing to the initial retreat, was held for faculty and staff to review progress, celebrate successes, and plan the next stages of implementation. Initiatives prioritized out of the retreat will provide Departmental leadership ideas, and the necessary lead-time, to seek funding for specific initiatives, through the collegiate compact process beginning in January of the calendar year. A mini-retreat will be held again in April of the following year to review mid-year progress on implementing strategic initiatives. The process will be repeated on an annual basis for the remaining years encompassed by the strategic plan. The Department embraced the strategic plan as a living document where new goals, sub-goals, and initiatives are expected to be created on an ongoing basis. This process reflects changes in faculty and staff over time and allows institutional flexibility in response to internal and external changes and opportunities. The full Department will consider changes to the Strategic Plan during Departmental meetings and during the semi-annual Departmental retreats.

At the Strategic Planning retreat the Department considered the impact of focused goals and sub-goals on academic freedom. The guiding principles adopted included affirming both the importance of academic freedom as a guiding principle leading our research and teaching endeavors and the strategic consequences of focused versus disparate departmental strategies. Our adopted consensus was that focusing efforts and resources on identified areas of existing excellence and also on new opportunities, identified through the SWOT analysis, provides the best opportunity for growing Departmental strength and reputation. Faculty may still pursue initiatives not aligned with the strategic plan. However, Departmental resources will be directed towards initiatives best aligned with the strategic plan. This approach retains academic freedom while allowing the Department to collectively decide how to best allocate scarce resources. Importantly, considering the Strategic Plan as a living document allows independent initiatives not originally included in the adopted plan, to be included at a later time after vetting through the longitudinal processes culminating in semi-annual retreats where changes in the Strategic Plan are continually considered.

Assessment of the Process: Faculty/Staff Engagement Survey

In mid-June 2014 an anonymous survey was sent out to all faculty and staff in the department to gather perspectives on engagement with the strategic plan and planning process (Appendix A). The survey was conducted through Qualtrics and the link was sent to faculty and staff by e-mail with one reminder email. This survey was approved as exempt by the University’s Institutional Review Board.

The survey response rate was 64.7% (8/13 staff and 14/21 faculty members).

Familiarity with PPPS mission statement and strategic plan

100% of respondents were somewhat or very much familiar with the PPPS mission statement and felt that it aligned with the strategic plan (Q4). 95% somewhat or very much familiar with the PPPS strategic plan.

When participants were asked about the factors that affected the ability to engage in the strategic planning process, comments varied between the value of the initiative and the other work conflicts (e.g. scheduling time) that affected their involvement (Table 2).

Conflicts with other meetings or time constraints have made it a challenge to squeeze this in, too.
The coordinated efforts have been great!
Would have liked to attend more...but was unavailable.
It is hard to get everyone together on a consistent basis and I do feel a bit out of the loop after missing one of the events.
I am passionate about contributing to this and want to be in attendance... we have a good group and I’m excited to collaborate with everyone and come up with an optimal plan.
[There is a] perceived belief that this work will actually stimulate positive results, and the fact that it’s been a very long process, and we all have a lot to do.
As a staff member, I felt like most discussions and initiatives have centered on faculty-specific areas (research, teaching, clinical).It’s been very difficult to feel as though I’m contributing to this process when the bulk of the mission and strategy really has nothing to do with my daily work in the college. I appreciate the opportunity to be involved, however I feel my contributions are lacking because most things simply do not apply...

Table 2: Selected comments regarding faculty/staff engagement in strategic planning process.

Alignment of Current Work, Individual Objectives and Direction

Eighty-eight per cent of respondents somewhat or very much agreed their current work aligned with the strategic plan. 100% somewhat or very much agreed the strategic plan provided enough direction to take initiative on actions that are consistent with the plan. 89% are somewhat or very much able to develop their next year’s objectives to connect with the strategic plan.

The strategic planning process in an academic department can be and probably should be faculty-centric. However, the support and assistance from academic staff is critical to the successful completion of the strategic initiatives and so it is important that academic staff members feel ownership and have ownership in the strategic plan.

Steps were taken to ensure that academic staff had adequate involvement in the strategic planning process. First, staff members were included in the strategic planning retreats. Second, they were encouraged to add their names to initiatives that were relevant to their work or that interested them. Third, the consultant met with two staff representatives as the initiatives were being identified to assure that they felt engaged with the process and comfortable giving their input. Finally, the consultant followed up with staff at the end of the process to ensure that no issues had been left unaddressed.

Engaging a consultant in the strategic planning process can be helpful for a variety of reasons. A consultant can facilitate communication, develop a custom-designed process appropriate for the organization, encourage creative thinking, negotiate conflicts, force difficult decision-making, challenge traditional thinking and ways of operating, and oversee the entire process.

For this particular department, the consultant facilitated the initial and follow-up retreats and generally assisted the department leadership in managing the process. She also gave recommendations for adjustments as needed. Finally, she provided one of the conduits between the department and college leadership.

Lessons Learned

The strategic planning process proved to be more than “just another academic exercise.” In fact, identifying our mission, vision, and strategic plan was vital in guiding our personnel planning. Most faculty/staff were engaged. Providing multiple venues and platforms for participation made it relatively easy for those who wanted to be involved to contribute to the process.

The process resulted in a strategic plan that was rather lengthy. This result may be a symptom of our diversity. The strategic plan was pared down based on individual commitments to move initiatives forward. The departmental mission/vision and strategic plan priorities for the year should be posted in a visible way within the department. We need realistic prioritization, and to make sure the plan is in the forefront of faculty awareness. We need to perhaps prioritize four initiatives to accomplish each year (one for each mission of research, teaching, practice, and service).

The process resulted in many questions. Who does the work of the strategic plan/strategic initiatives? If faculty/staff work is not aligned with the strategic plan, do they belong in the department? If they do belong, why would their work not be aligned directly with the strategic plan? Where is the accountability for executing the strategic plan? We need to incorporate this explicitly into the performance review process.

It is important to revisit the strategic plan frequently so it stays in the forefront of our minds, to make sure everyone is consistent and moving in the same direction, and consistent in what we’re trying to achieve. Priorities should be documented and communicated in clear and transparent ways. How do we keep the strategic plan alive? To maintain momentum and forward progress, it is important to revisit the strategic plan regularly. This is not something we have figured out how to do well yet. One way would be to revisit it at each month’s department meeting.

Writing this paper helped us document what was done and consider improvements for future iterations. Ideas for “Strategic Plan version 2.0” include a plan for revisiting and updating the plan regularly, and also making it more visible for new and current faculty and staff. Version 2.0 will allow for new faculty and staff hires to immediately immerse in the process and help design it moving forward. The strategic plan should be easily accessible and required reading for new hires. The plan could also be part of faculty and staff orientations and annual review meetings with the department head. Version 2.0 could also include a way of tracking participation and accountability of the overall initiatives and tactics that have occurred.

Determining the level of detail to include in the strategic plan in advance would be important. The plan can be drilled down and have a clear “end date” at a point to then regroup and revisit the process. This can be accomplished by determining accountability in the process and to what point.

A strategy to continuously revisit the strategic plan could include annual planning meetings and quarterly touch-base reviews. This process keeps the initiatives close at hand and also allows for tracking and accountability of outcomes.

The consistency of a consultant working with the department from the beginning through the completion of the first year of initiatives is valuable to provide expertise to keep the process on track and allows for an accountability check-in.

It is essential that future strategic plan processes respect the diversity of the department and the strengths that individuals bring to the table. Since each faculty and staff have a defined area of expertise, there truly is an opportunity to embrace the various interests and passions toward particular initiatives. Individuals get to embrace specific areas of interest while having the responsibility of the entire package of the college outcomes.

Please answer the following ten survey questions. The goal of the survey is to learn if faculty/staff have engaged with the department mission and strategic plan. The survey should not take more than 5 minutes to complete. Results to the survey are anonymous. Thank you!

1) I am: Faculty, Staff (select one)

2) How familiar are you with the PPPS mission statement?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much)

3) How familiar are you with the PPPS strategic plan?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much)

4) How well does the PPPS mission statement align with the strategic plan?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much, I don't know)

comments:

5) How involved were you with the strategic planning process (retreat, attending meetings, reviewing plan documents, providing input, etc.)?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much)

6) What factors affected (negatively or positively) your ability to engage in the strategic planning process?

7) Does the strategic plan provide you with enough direction to take initiative on actions that are consistent with the plan?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much, I don't know)

comments:

8) How well does your current work align with the strategic plan?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much, I don't know)

comments:

9) How able are you to develop your next year's objectives to connect with the strategic plan?

(1 - not at all, 2 - somewhat, 3 - very much, I don't know)

comments:

10) Anything else you'd like to add about the strategic plan (including future ideas, improvements, etc.)

Appendix A: Survey sent to PPPS Faculty and Staff June 2014

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10. Strategic plan

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