IEC Subcommittee Report

Theme 2: Transformative Student Experience

Section 1: Aggregate Summary Statement

The Theme 2 Committee is examining strategic plans across all academic units at WSU. The work is still in progress, as some units were delinquent in providing strategic plans to the committee. To date, 10 plans have been completely reviewed, six (6) are in progress, and six (6) have recently been received.

Despite this, some clear issues already emerge. A primary issue is wide variability in the extent to which the plan aligns with the university's strategic plan. In general, more recently-created plans are better aligned than older plans, suggesting that units whose strategic plans are sufficiently mature likely need to be directed to revise their plans, though there are also some newer plans that are occasionally at variance with the university plan. It should be said, though, that it is unclear to what extent poorly-aligned plans are the result of unit goals not being in sync with university goals, versus the unit plan simply not being well-written. This suggests a need for a university-level workshop on how to develop a strategic plan.

A consistent problem across all plans is lack of specificity, in terms of what will be accomplished, who will accomplish it, and how the unit will track progress toward accomplishment. Most address broad, macro-level goals, with little attention given to entities within the unit (department within colleges, areas within administrative units, etc.). Metrics are also a consistent problem. While some units identified specific, easily-collected measures as the data to be applied to a goal, more identified measures that are vague, with some seeming impossible to accurately measure, and it was not uncommon for units to have no specified metrics.

This measurement vagueness leaves a number of holes in the assessment of unit performance relative to their strategic plan. Most notably, the extent to which progress has been made on sub-goal 2.d, "Align student recruitment, admissions, and retention system-wide to enhance access, inclusiveness, and student success," is difficult to determine, in part because units generally gave this little attention in their strategic plans, in part because no strategic plan was available from Enrollment Management. As well, colleges typically indicated "Expand international dual degree programs in graduate education" as a component of their sub-goal 2.c, but rarely elaborated on the particulars, making it hard to measure progress. Many units did not specify which data on student learning they would use to reflect their progress on sub-goal 2.a. More generally, at least some programs seem to have just listed all possible Potential Initiatives and Tactics without giving thought to how readily particular items applied to their unit. This again speaks to the need for well-written strategic plans.

At a larger level, the lack of measurement specificity makes it hard to determine to what extent the strategic plan has had a financial impact on the unit. This is important, because a number of the initiatives proposed by units would seem to require substantial investment. There are some notable exceptions to this problem—for example, Libraries includes "expansion of study space" as an aspect of sub-goal 2.a, and specifically notes that such would be quite expensive. But more common is the approach used by CAS, which proposes a number of initiatives for sub-goal 2.a, and then simply states

that the initiatives "require [a] funding policy that will require additional resources or priority reallocation of existing funds."

There are some definite consistencies that emerged across the plans. Most units cite facility improvement (research labs, teaching spaces, etc.) as a primary goal, and some offer investment plans to accomplish this. Academic units consistently focus on increasing the availability of "high impact" experiences for students, recruitment and support of underrepresented and transfer students, development of co-curricular activities (e.g., clubs), and professional development for instructional personnel, though again, the metrics to be used to assess progress toward these goals are usually unspecified.

There were no plans that emerged as a model for other units to follow. In general, more recently-written plans followed the university plan more closely than did older plans. Certain plans were strong on certain aspects. For example, WSU-Vancouver did an excellent job of articulating and aligning their student success goals with those of the university, and CAHNRS was also quite good on this. We again emphasize that the best plan of attack may be to conduct some university-level workshops on how to compose a strategic plan, and how to bring unit-level plans into alignment with university goals. As noted at the outset, it is unclear to what extent the problems we have noted result from true discrepancy between the unit and the university, and to what extent they are a side effect of inexperience with preparing a strategic plan.

Section 2: Suggested Metrics

Work is needed here by both the units and the university. As discussed in the previous section, most units simply failed to provide metrics for their initiatives, or proposed metrics that are too broad and ill-focused to be useful. At the same time, there are other initiatives that we want to encourage (e.g., professional development) that are inherently difficult to measure. For these, it would be good for the university to provide guidance on assessment.

It may be helpful to encourage units to organize their proposals by cost of implementation (low, medium, high). This would allow for more efficient determination of progress, and of likelihood of progress over a particular time period. We would not, for example, want to criticize a unit because they had not resolved their infrastructure issues in a 24-month period, but we would want to raise concerns if the unit had made no measurable progress on increasing co-curricular opportunities over that same period.

Section 3: Activity Report

The subcommittee suggests that the IEC develop sessions to promote awareness and communication about the strategic plan.

For administrators, we suggest a workshop on preparation of a strategic plan, similar to the grant-writing workshops offered by the Vice-President for Research.

For faculty, we suggest a joint effort with the Faculty Senate to review with the faculty the need for unit-level strategic plans; their role in the reaccreditation review; and their everyday value to the unit. Perhaps more importantly, the effort needs to attack the mindset that there is no need to assess unit performance, or that unit performance cannot be objectively assessed.

For all individuals, we suggest interventions that make the strategic plan, and assessment of unit performance, a respected endeavor that is seen as a normal part of our work. Some of the vagueness of these plans is undoubtedly driven by faculty skepticism that anything will change as a result of assessment data, and some is driven by perceived lack of support from administrators for faculty who want to work with assessment data.