Roll Quality Roll

Strategic Quality Planning At the University of Alabama

By: John R. Dew

The University of Alabama (UA) has embarked on a journey to utilize the criteria of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award as a yardstick for continuous improvement. As one part of this effort, the university is raising the bar for its expectations of strategic quality plans to provide guidance for improvements within colleges, academic departments and staff organizations. The drive for quality improvement is led by Andrew Sorensen, president of the University, whose efforts are supported by a Quality Council and a Quality Advisory Board.

The Quality Council is chaired by Nancy Barrett, the provost of the University, and includes deans, faculty, students and staff. The Quality Advisory board consists of quality managers from several corporations that have won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, including Milliken, Boeing and Federal Express.

Building consensus

Leadership at UA came to recognize that the quality issue in higher education is about building a management system that drives continuous improvement of all processes, based on data from stakeholder groups. The development of strategic quality plans through a consensus process is one of the vital elements of the overall quality initiative.

Consensus plays a more important role in higher education than in almost any other organizational setting. Achieving consensus on strategy and decision making is highly valued in part because of the collegial nature of faculty and tradition of faculty governance. The higher education environment is designed to engender debates and discussion.

Managers in corporate and government settings may not appreciate how much a university culture differs on the issue of consensus. A university is one of the few institutions where leaders, such as the deans, are formally evaluated by their employees, the faculty.

A university is a rare institution where the faculty has a representative senate. This senate expresses the faculty's confidence in the university's leadership and expects its voice to be heard in a consensus building process. For these reasons, strategic quality planning in higher education is more democratic than it commonly is in business and within governmental agencies.

Consensus building tools, such as nominal group technique, are very important in the planning process.1 Every faculty member expects his or her voice to be heard when a

department is deciding its direction, so it is important that strategies are based on consensus, not majority rule or management fiat.

Mission

The mission of The University of Alabama is to add value to the people of the state through teaching, research and outreach. The basic components of this mission were established in 1831 and are inscribed in tone on the main entrances to the campus.

Over time, the university has developed several areas of special emphasis. One specialty consists of teaching, research and outreach for Alabama's rural communities. Many university programs address rural issues and prepare professionals for work in rural and small-town settings.

Activities that support economic growth in the state, particularly in the rapidly expanding automotive industry and in materials sciences, are another area of strategic emphasis for UA. The university also has a long history of excellence in distance education and provides academic programs that reach out across the state.

The challenge for each academic unit and administrative organization is to align itself with the mission. This has led to innovative research into issues such as health care, freshwater studies, education, social services and business that directly affect the quality of life in rural communities.

Mission alignment stimulates the colleges in collaborative efforts to meet engineering, business, quality and environmental management challenges for industry and has led the university to create the Southeastern Automotive College to better serve the research and advanced educational needs of automotive firms.

Stakeholders

The University of Alabama has already benefited from using the Baldrige Award criteria as a yardstick for self-measurement in the area of understanding stakeholders. The president and senior staff of the university identified 15 distinct stakeholder groups whose needs and interests must be addressed in various ways.

In some cases, such as campus safety, these various stakeholders' interests may overlap. In others, such as allocation of funding, the stakeholders' interests may be at odds with one another.

The 15 stakeholder groups are:

- Students (18 to 22 years of age) who come to the university for a residential educational setting.
- Adult students who come to the university for undergraduate and graduate education.

- Parents of the 18-to22-year-old students.
- Faculty.
- Staff.
- Employers who hire UA's graduates.
- Local businesses that serve the campus community.
- High schools and community colleges that encourage their students to attend the university.
- Elected and appointed officials of the State of Alabama.
- Foundations, agencies and corporations that fund research at the university and provide endowments and gifts.
- Alumni

'The White Paper'

In a 1997 address entitled "A Vision for The University of Alabama," President Andrew Sorensen proposed seven major emphasis areas as focal points for development and planning.

Following considerable campuswide discussion and further refinements of these ideas, in 1998, Provost Nancy Barrett offered The White Paper, which provided detailed actions that supported the seven major emphasis areas.

The seven action areas were:

- Strengthening undergraduate programs.
- Strengthening graduate programs.
- Increasing research support.
- Increasing international emphasis.
- Increasing diversity.
- Improving the technological infrastructure.
- Creating a sense of community while reaching out to serve others.

The White Paper articulated the overarching goals associated with each action area and identified a set of strategic objectives to be achieved. For example, in the area of strengthening undergraduate programs, the paper provided specific objectives, such as conducting a review and restructuring of the university core curriculum, reviewing the current honors program and increasing opportunities for undergraduate research and creative activity.

Faculty and staff teams have pursued these objectives by focusing on the development of interdisciplinary courses, obtaining foundation grants for new undergraduate research programs and forming an international honors program.

Teamwork has been the essential ingredient in achieving the strategic objectives. If an objective falls within the scope of a standing faculty committee, then the committee takes the lead in addressing that objective.

Many objectives required the creation of cross functional teams, bringing together faculty and staff from many colleges in order to develop new programs and processes. Since the early discussion stages of The White Paper, 16 new interdisciplinary centers and institutes have been established involving over 100 faculty researchers. This new teamwork also extends to involving students in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of academic programs and in process improvements activities.

Strength and Weakness Analysis

Developing a quality centered strategic plan often starts with some introspection and self-assessment by the planning team. Participants are asked to reflect on the organization's strengths and weaknesses and spend some time in honest reflection on the current health of the organization.

Participants also look outside of the organization to recognize issues that pose a threat to the organization's health and identify the opportunities that may exist. In some cases, it is useful for the planners to draw a timeline that shows where the organization has been and what it has accomplished over the last 20 years. This creates a level playing field for old timers and newcomers both to appreciate the changes that have already occurred, and it puts the need for continuous improvements into perspective.

- Citizens of Alabama, who support one-third of the university's budget through their taxes.
- Retirees of the university.
- Friends of the university who support cultural programs, athletic events, and medical and social services.
- An international community that utilizes UA's German and Japanese language schools for its families.

Having this many stakeholder groups heightens the need for a strategic quality planning process that encourages a consensus across the diverse dimensions of the campus community.

University level SQP

The strategic quality planning (SQP) process at UA is led by the provost, who is also vice president for academic affairs. The provost's role in guiding the process is to listen, consult, identify major themes and opportunities, and prepare a guideline for planning at the college level that will set high expectations for performance and continuous improvement.

Alabama's provost invested considerable time with the deans of the university's 11 colleges and with faculty groups to develop and update a document called The White Paper,2 which serves as a guiding document for strategy formulation.

This document identifies major themes that each college should address in its planning process, such as establishing collaborative centers for excellence in graduate studies, redesigning the undergraduate educational experience, upgrading administrative and educational technology, and emphasizing the improvement of internal services through continuous quality improvement.

Each college is expected to develop a quality centered strategic plan that addresses the specific interests of the college's stakeholders and the major themes of The White Paper. Colleges, academic departments and support groups utilize well-established processes for strategic quality planning.3

College level SQP

The College of Community Health Sciences provides a good example of strategic planning at the college level. The college has a special mission to prepare physicians to work in rural settings.

The dean of the college, William Curry, M.D., organized a planning process that included the chairs of all of the major departments within the college. In preparation, the team reviewed a wide range of performance indicators related to the college's students, faculty and the people in the community who utilize the college's clinic.

In the planning sessions, the team identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, paying special attention to the interests of the college's stakeholders. The team members employed a visioning process to build a consensus about what they would like to see the college become in the future. They then identified the major activities that would need to occur to make the vision a reality.

Through a nominal group technique, the department chairs agreed on four key areas that the college needs to address to create a desired future that will meet the needs of its diverse stakeholders. The planning team identified three standing committees that could address three of the major action areas and created a fourth, cross functional team to take on one initiative.

The planning session was followed closely by meeting with the dean and all faculty and staff to share the results of the planning session. Background information, along with planning process, was shared with the faculty in order to help everyone understand the evolution of the plan within the college.

One of the most important features of the strategic quality plan for this college is the dean's commitment to employing the major categories of the plan as a mantra within the college. All major meetings invest time in reviewing the progress on the key issues.

Other colleges have likewise embarked on strategic quality planning activities that center on the needs of diverse stakeholder groups and the broad improvements in core processes called in The White Paper.

Department level SQP

While it was important for all departments in the college to be represented when the College of Community Health Sciences formed its plan, it was essential that all members of the department's faculty participate in the planning process for the Department of Physics and Astronomy in the College of Arts and Sciences.

The department head, Stan Jones, saw a clear need for the faculty to develop a consensus about strategic issues. In the past, faculty would focus on discussion of research issues and funding, without much attention to the needs of a vital stakeholder group-the students.

Jones organized a planning process that included all of the physics and astronomy faculty members, by training and profession, are inclined to question and debate, so the discussion was lively. It was necessary to employ a nominal group technique to establish the areas where there was broad consensus about direction. The result was a set of actions that the department chair set in motion to improve the academic setting for undergraduate and graduate students.

SQP for support functions

Support organizations have also employed the SQP process to drive continuous improvement. Nicole Mitchell, director of The University of Alabama Press, saw a need to involve all members of the press in a SQP process in order to build consensus and commitment for change.

In a series of meetings, the staff reviewed its performance data, assessed what competitors were doing an reached a consensus about changes that would be necessary in order to better meet the needs of its stakeholders. This planning process led the staff to conduct and in-depth review of process flow diagrams in order to reduce cycle times.

Members of the press staff were willing to undertake this type of self-examination when they saw how important it could be to one of their key stakeholder groups, their authors. Other support organizations are becoming involved in similar use of SQP methods to drive continuous improvement.

Improving the process

As UA makes progress in the seven categories of the Baldrige criteria, the SQP process will be improved. The university has initiated a project to collect data from many of its key stakeholder groups, including students, faculty, staff, alumni and parents. Over time, these data will be used to identify more opportunities for continuous improvement and will feed the SQP process.

The university is also developing a balanced score-card to provide performance feedback that will fold into planning process. While most universities are rich in data, many have

not encountered the idea of a management system that is driven by data. Alabama has found benefits in establishing operational and strategic performance indicators that provide a structured approach to using data.

The provost has launched several initiatives aimed at improving core processes in undergraduate and graduate programs. Major projects are in place to integrate math and science concepts, along with a dynamic new foundations program for teaching engineering. Improvement of core processes involves an effective combination of the concepts of quality improvement and the rich tradition of action research in education.

Support organizations, such as enrollment, university recreation and student health services, are conducting quality improvement initiatives. SQP and continuous improvement initiatives are being supported by a training effort that provides faculty and staff with an understanding of quality improvement tools and methods, along with consensus and team building tools.

A workshop on how to lead participative meetings received favorable feedback from deans and department heads in academic units. Workshops on facilitation skills, consensus based decision making, team building and planning skills are now offered each semester to build the university's capacity for continuous improvement.

Better benchmarking

One of the results of the quality initiative at the university is a new understanding of the concept of benchmarking. In higher education, benchmarking has often come to mean determining how your university compares to others, with the emphasis on finding comfort in being similar to other schools. A new concept of benchmarking has been imported through study of the Baldrige criteria. Benchmarking now means finding the few schools with exceptional performance in a specific area and learning what they have done so it can be introduced on UA's campus.

The University of Alabama has an active process for studying both large and small universities. Pioneers in quality, such as Samford University and Belmont University have been gracious in sharing their experiences, as have faculty and staff from Pennsylvania State University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

New thoughts about quality

All of this activity has led to new questions to be explored in the quality literature. Universities consist of a complicated collaboration of stakeholders who utilize thousands of processes to achieve their missions.

Quality cannot be inspected into education through more testing, just as it cannot be inspected into a product in a manufacturing setting. Quality must be built into the process by listening to the stakeholders, collecting data and involving the stakeholders in the improvement of processes, one project at a time.

Universities are communities with very special cultures. The Baldrige criteria provide useful and practical questions that compel members of the campus community to ask significant questions and to seek new levels of excellence. Of course some of the questions might be a bit more lighthearted than other. In the campus community we might ask, what color is quality? At Alabama, where the quality tide is rising, the answer is crimson and white.

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Foot Notes

1. Donald C. Mosely, "Nominal Grouping as an Organizational Development Intervention Technique, "Training and Development Journal, March 1974.
2. For more information on continuous quality improvement at The University of Alabama, or to read The White Paper, access the University's Web site at www.ua.edu
3. John R. Dew, Quality Centered Strategic Planning (New York: Quality Resources Press, 1997). Quality Progress September 2000