

How Universities Can Improve Quality, Collaborate on Research and Increase Cooperation with Local Businesses

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Abstract

In the spring semester of 2007 sixteen visiting scholars, most of them from the Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia conducted a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) exercise at The George Washington University. Through the PSP exercise we demonstrated the group facilitation methods called the Technology of Participation and developed plans to guide the improvement of their home universities. The results suggest several actions to work on in the coming years: improve interuniversity contacts, find new sources of financing, promote faculty self-development, increase faculty oversight of the university administration, improve university infrastructure, and strengthen academic publishing.

Key words: global network of universities, participation, strategic planning, group facilitation, transition economies.

Introduction

Universities in these countries have been existence for decades and sometimes hundreds of years. Sometimes they have good facilities, experienced faculty, and a tradition of excellence in education. Sometimes they have experienced political disruptions. In recent years the internet and the increased number of exchange programs have led to increased interaction within the global network of universities. The transition period that started in the post-communist economies in the early 1990s is now passing through academia. There are ongoing changes in the system of higher education in these countries. These changes are motivated in part by the transition toward a market economy, which requires changes in employee skills and in education. Some of the trends causing change in higher education in all countries were explained in an earlier paper. (Prytula, *et al.*, 2004)

Several visiting scholars from Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Belarus, Ukraine, Central Asia and China took part in this planning exercise: Linda Ihsani and Eralda Methasani Cani from Albania, Katerina Tosevska and Tanja Milosevska from Macedonia, Arben Dermaku from Kosovo, Anka Gardasevic from Montenegro, Sergey Kirpich from Belarus, Oleksiy Gorovyy from Ukraine, Armenuhi Khachatryan and Gor Khachatryan from Armenia, Tinatin Tchintcharauli from Georgia, Bakhodir Akhmedov from Uzbekistan, Aida Sagintayeva from Kazakhstan, Makhinur Mamatova from Kyrgyzstan, Ramazon Nazariyev from Tajikistan and ChunWu Lai and Zheng Zhang from China.

Method

To understand the changes our universities are facing and to increase our ability to help our universities make the needed changes, we conducted a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) activity from February to May 2007.

Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) is part of the Technology of Participation, a set of group facilitation methods developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (Umpleby, *et al.*, 2003). These methods can be used with any group of people who share a common interest. A facilitated problem-solving or planning activity involves people in identifying problems as they see them and in devising solutions that they believe will work (Umpleby, 1994).

We had five group discussions on the following topics:

1. "The Focus Question," the point of reference for all subsequent discussions.
 2. "Practical Vision," a picture of the desired future in five to ten years.
 3. "Underlying Contradictions," the obstacles preventing realization of the vision.
 4. "Strategic Directions," strategies for removing the obstacles to achieving the vision.
 5. "Implementation Timeline," the schedule of actions needed to carry out the strategies.
- (See Figure 1)

Each step of the PSP process uses the "Consensus Workshop" method. This method involves five steps:

1. Context -- The facilitator provides background on the method and task.
2. Brainstorm -- The participants write their ideas on cards.
3. Cluster -- The facilitator and participants group the cards according to similar ideas.
4. Name -- The key idea in each cluster is identified.
5. Resolve -- The facilitator asks if the ideas generated are complete and represent a good description. (See Figure 2)

The Participatory Strategic Planning exercise began with an introductory conversation among the participants. The goal of our first session was to define a Focus Question to provide direction to the planning process. The focus question that emerged from our conversation was: **How can we improve the quality of our universities, their research programs and their connections with local businesses?** The second session was a discussion of how our universities and countries are changing. The institutions in each country are in different stages of development. The results are summarized in Table 1. The third session was dedicated to defining a vision (see Table 2) and to finding the contradictions or obstacles impeding progress toward the vision. (See Table 3.) The fourth session was devoted to defining strategies to remove the obstacles to achieving the vision. (See Table 4.) and to creating an "implementation timeline." (See Table 5.) We defined four semesters in the years 2007 and 2008. During the first semester the participants were still in the U.S. In the last three semesters they would be at their home universities. So in the first semester the participants would do research and prepare. In the next three semesters they would implement the plans at their home universities.

Conclusions

The benefits of group facilitation methods, as noted by Rosabeth Moss Kanter are:

1. The specific plans themselves – strategies, solutions, action plans;

2. Greater commitment – ability to implement decisions and strategies;
3. More innovation – a larger portfolio of ideas;
4. A common framework for decision making, communication, planning, and problem solving;
5. Encouragement of initiative and responsibility. (Spencer, 1989)

Participatory Strategic Planning experiences can help universities improve their performance in teaching and research and become more involved with nearby organizations—businesses, government agencies and non-government organizations. These methods can be particularly helpful for universities in transitional societies, since they emphasize participation and data-driven decision-making. Consequently, they stimulate local initiative and improve accountability.

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Table 1. Practical Vision

<p><i>Focus question:</i> How can we improve the quality of our universities, their research programs and their connections with local businesses?</p> <p><i>Practical Vision question:</i> What do we want to see in place in five years?</p> <p>May, 2007</p>								
1. High quality of education and teaching	2. International contacts and exchange	3. Diverse, involved students	4. More transparent governance of universities	5. More support for research	6. Diversified finances	7. Modern facilities	8. Up-to-date technology	9. Recent materials in libraries
Internationally accredited academic programs	Exchanges of students and faculty	Increased mobility of students among campuses	Faculty serving on administrative committees	More research institutes in universities	An office to create an endowment	More facilities for more students	Free internet service	Recent books in the library
High quality of teaching	More international contacts for students and faculty	Increased international diversity of students	Student representatives on university committees	Improved research skills among faculty	Higher tuition, and scholarships for poor students	More science labs	Fast internet service	An interlibrary loan program with nearby universities
International professors on campus	Increased mobility of faculty among universities	Service learning programs for students	More autonomy for universities in decision-making	Business support of faculty research	More grants for research	Up-to-date equipment for science labs	University licenses for software	Acess to bibliographic databares
More teaching faculty		More student organizations (by and for students)	A fixed overhead percentage for grants to the university	A research management office			Mediateka – technology for instruction	
International diversity of faculty				Consulting activities by faculty members				

Table 2. Underlying Contradictions

<p><i>Focus question:</i> How can we improve the quality of our universities, their research programs and their connections with local businesses?</p> <p><i>Underlying Contradictions question:</i> What obstacles or contradictions are preventing us from achieving our vision?</p> <p>May, 2007</p>					
1. Inexperienced faculty	2. Overly centralized administration	3. Political restrictions	4. Underdeveloped financial resources	5. Inadequate facilities	6. Lack of attention to student services
Psychological issues (difficulty of adjusting to new social and academic system)	Lack of use of process improvement methods	Political restrictions on academic mobility	Insufficient financial support for faculty (salaries, travel, equipment)	Insufficient teaching facilities – labs, offices, classroom buildings	Lack of job placement services
Lack of entrepreneurial spirit	Non-innovative approach to technology	Political restrictions on curriculum changes	Lack of an endowment	Low level of development of instructional technologies	
Insufficient critical thinking	Constraining university laws and rules	Government restrictions on degrees and curricula	Limited funds available to make improvements due to low tuition		
Narrow minded thinking	Centralized policies of government	People in government are not progressive and open-minded			
Lack of academic mobility	Centralized university decision-making				
Insufficient exchange programs	Centralized administration of research				
Lack of appropriate (teaching) skills, knowledge	Lack of transparency				
Lack of new approaches, methods	Inappropriate management of finances				
Old or obsolete teaching materials	Insufficient strategic planning				
No student evaluations of faculty					

Table 3. Strategic Directions

<p><i>Focus question:</i> How can we improve the quality of our universities, their research programs and their connections with local businesses?</p> <p><i>Strategic Directions question:</i> What innovative practical actions will deal with the contradictions and move us toward our vision?</p> <p>May, 2007</p>						
1. Expand professional development programs	2. Develop university interactions with society	3. Develop international cooperation	4. Increase faculty governance	5. Increase university autonomy	6. Diversify financial resources	7. Develop information technology
Invest in faculty specialization	Establish new forms of community service	Encourage foreign languages among faculty and students	Use process improvement methods throughout the university	Independence for curriculum development	Increase external finance	Develop library resources
Exchange ideas about grant opportunities with foreign faculty	Encourage service learning to build contacts with local organizations	Facilitate visas	Increase faculty oversight of administrative decisions	Give faculty more academic freedom	Establish an endowment program (fund raising from alumni)	Obtain technology to serve the university
Train faculty in research methods	Use service learning as a teaching method	Sign multi-lateral agreements with universities in other countries	Provide more competition among faculty members	Decentralize the system	Increase tuition (use some money for scholarships for poor students)	Use IT to improve efficiency and effectiveness
Conduct seminars, workshops and conferences	Attract the government's attention to increase funding for education	Develop international cooperation	Make curricula more flexible		Assign more state budget money to education	Teach faculty to use the Internet to find and distribute research results (SSRN.com)
Organize faculty development programs / training	Start impacting more seriously on the society	Involve faculty in cooperative research with foreign professors via email	Experiment with new teaching / learning approaches			Encourage faculty to join Internet discussion groups
Study appointment, promotion and tenure procedures in western universities Send administrators and senior faculty to visit foreign universities to find ideas to try	Do research on how to make knowledge useful to society					Use IT to improve administration, teaching and research

Table 4. Implementation Timeline

<p><i>Focus question: How can we improve the quality of our universities, their research programs and their connections with local businesses?</i></p> <p><i>Implementation Timeline question: What will we do the first year?</i></p> <p>May, 2007</p>				
Strategic Directions	Spring 2007	Summer 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008
1. Expand Professional Development Programs	Study professional development programs at US universities	Do fundraising	Train faculty on proposal writing	Arrange cross visits of teachers and administrators to university partners in other countries
			Enhance the curricula	
2. Develop University interactions with Society	Find out about Service Learning in the US	Talk to people at home universities about Service Learning	Do first Service Learning experiments	Share results of Service Learning experiments
3. Develop International Cooperation	Gather information on exchange programs	Adopt international agreements	Establish networks for faculty and students	Monitor progress of networks
		Inform and motivate faculty to become involved in International exchange programs	Help faculty submit applications for exchange programs	Arrange meetings of alumni of exchange programs
4. Increase Faculty Governance		Conduct workshops for university administrators and faculty	Expand the number of elective courses	Introduce faculty to decision making
			Develop faculty competitiveness	
5. Increase University Autonomy		Speak to administrators about organizing a board of trustees from the business sector, government, alumni and the community	Invite international experts to join the university administration	Use the Plan - Do - Check – Act process improvement method
6. Diversify Financial Resources		Prepare and arrange an awareness campaign to get more money into education	Prepare the university's new budget draft for the next year	Organize a conference to increase financial support to the University
		Arrange an International financial seminar	Advocate / Defend the draft budget	
		Prepare a financial report		
7. Develop Information Technology	Learn about use of IT on US campuses	Identify the IT needs of the University	Design a comprehensive IT project for the university	Implement the solution across the University
		Begin working with the IT Department (suggest its empowerment if needed)	Decide the best implementation plan	Create an IT-active culture in faculty and alumni