

# Planning with the Five Criteria Equals Institutional Change

Dusty R. Johnston and Joan R. Stirling

## Purpose and Scope

This paper expounds upon the use of the Higher Learning Commission's Criteria for Accreditation, Core Components, and Examples of Evidence as a framework for the college's planning, budgeting, evaluation, and documentation process. This process lends itself well to the education of all employees about the five Criteria and involves all areas of the college in the improvement cycle. Faculty members and administrators who are interested in the planning cycle, increasing accreditation knowledge campus-wide, and ensuring that documentation takes place should attend the session.

## Need for Change: What Initiated the Process?

Strategic planning for the college prior to 2004–2005 was accomplished during a Board of Trustees retreat each year, and input was gained from the trustees and the administrative team in a brainstorming session. The strategic planning was brief, and the planning manual produced was approximately ten pages in length. A brief analysis was done at the end of each year, mainly highlighting successes.

In strategic planning for 2004–2005, greater input was sought, with planning initiated by a faculty brainstorming session led by administration prior to the board retreat. At the board retreat, the faculty plan was enhanced by additions from administration and board members. A more extensive analysis of the planning results was completed but still mainly focused on successes.

Yearly planning was accomplished in an unorganized and less than thorough manner throughout the college. Links to assessment and budgeting were weak and, though the five Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Criteria were released in 2003, only a few faculty members were vaguely familiar with them due to participation in a weekly online chat process that took place in 2005–2006.

## Opportunity for Change: What Motivated the Process?

With a desire to expand planning across the college and to increase its effectiveness, the new president of the College and the planning director attended sessions related to planning at the 2006 HLC Annual Meeting. Two sessions expounded on using the five Criteria for Accreditation for the planning process: *The HLC Five Criteria: A Template for Institutional Strategic Planning* (Kriewall, Anderson, and Kolander 2006) and *Using HLC Criteria for Institutional Strategic Planning* (Smith 2006). Both sessions ignited the desire to use the Criteria to create a new method of planning at the college, tying assessment to planning and planning to budgeting while simultaneously educating the entire college about the Criteria and documenting results for accreditation purposes.

## Organizing for Change: Establishing the Process

Upon returning to the college, the president and the director of planning and special projects presented the concept to the other six members of the Administrative Council and included the council in practice planning sessions in April and mid-July. The council then worked out the proposed process for a late planning session involving the entire college for the 2006–2007 academic year to take place in early fall of 2006. The initial process included determining who should participate, a Microsoft Word document containing the planning outline that was sent to all participants, simple instructions, and a deadline.

In adopting the Criteria for Accreditation as the basis for the Ozarka Planning Manual, certain assumptions were drawn:

- The current Criteria have evolved over the 113-year history of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association and represent an understanding of the qualities that should be inherent in an institution of higher learning.
- The current Criteria have been recently updated in a highly participatory process, and inherent in the Criteria, Core Components, and Examples of Evidence are carefully contemplated contributions from highly successful institutions, HLC staff, experienced peer reviewers, and other knowledgeable professionals.

- By aligning Ozarka planning with the Criteria for Accreditation, Ozarka will yield planning not only proposed by the best insight of its own personnel and community members, but, in addition, that will produce a manual including the foresight of all who contributed to the Criteria for Accreditation.

The following definitions and structure are used in the model:

**Primary goal.** There will be five primary goals that are identical with the five Criteria of Accreditation of the Higher Learning Commission.

**Priority initiative:** broad statements of intent tied to the Higher Learning Commission's Criteria and Core Components that lead to specific long-range results.

**Strategies:** action plans for accomplishment of priority initiatives.

**Actions:** specific steps taken to accomplish the results intended in the strategies.

**Evidence:** documents, reports, minutes, etc., that clearly indicate actions taken to ensure the success of the strategies.

1. All areas of the college generate action plans according to assessment of their departments. These plans are then listed under the appropriate strategy.
2. As individuals and departments align their planned actions with the strategies listed in the model, they also review the goals, initiatives, and strategies of the planning model to examine whether their areas lack planning that should be in place.

The process was tested by the Administrative Council during a retreat in June. Prior to the retreat, the five Criteria were typed into a Microsoft Word document with each Criterion labeled as a primary goal, each Core Component labeled as a priority initiative, and each Example of Evidence labeled as a strategy. Under each strategy was a place for input of actions, and these actions would make up the plan for the upcoming year. Prior to the retreat, the document was e-mailed to each Administrative Council member, who was asked to input planning for the 2006–2007 year into the document under the appropriate goal, priority initiative, and strategy. Though the directions were simple, it was important to follow the process in the order listed:

- Make a list of the things you want to accomplish during the coming year in your divisions/departments based on assessment and foresight.
- Read through the planning framework and incorporate your plan into the master plan that is attached (HLC Five Criteria outline) while at the same time checking the HLC outline for things that your divisions/departments should be doing for continued accreditation. If there are things not on your list but that you conclude Ozarka should be doing at the division/department level, incorporate those strategies into planning.
- If you cannot find an appropriate category for a planning action, add it at the end of the document and the planning department will either find an appropriate strategy or create a new one.

In the beginning, it was not known whether all planning could be categorized within the framework of the five Criteria, Core Components, and Examples of Evidence (primary goal, priority initiative, and strategy, respectively), but over time and with experience, every action proposed by employees did fit under a strategy. At the beginning of the fall semester, once the Administrative Council developed an understanding of the process, the task was extended to all employees.

The process was introduced in May at a President's College Update and was explained in depth with examples at the fall in-service to all employees (approximately ninety in number). In order to keep track of ownership of planning, each division/department was color-coded on the Word document—for example, the academic inputs were in blue-gray and Information Systems in orange. When initial use of a work-share document failed, all modified Word documents were sent to the Planning Department for merging. The resulting document was approximately sixty pages long and included contributions from all employees of the college, by department/division, from academics to grounds to administration. Since all faculty inputs were coded the same blue-gray color, it was necessary to label each input with a division or employee name.

An example from the planning document for Criterion Three (Primary Goal 3) follows:

3d4. The organization supports students, staff, and faculty in using technology effectively.

Actions

- a. The science department will introduce more scientific instrumentation to microbiology and A&P (autoclave).
- b. Seven faculty members will attend Title III sponsored Technology College.
- c. The Library staff will receive MyOzarka training.
- d. Information systems will develop user manuals to assist others in the event of absence of the IS Director including MyOzarka user and technical manuals, bookstore manual and a phone system manual over the next three years.

## Completing the Process: Planning Results Documentation and Assessment

At the end of the first cycle of planning, all employees were required to document the results of planning under each planning input. An example under Criterion Three (Primary Goal 3) follows:

3d4. The organization supports students, staff, and faculty in using technology effectively.

Actions

- a. The science department will introduce more scientific instrumentation to microbiology and A&P (autoclave).
  1. Done (BD)
  2. Completed (TM)
- b. Seven faculty members will attend Title III sponsored Technology College.
  1. Accomplished July 2006 (MM)
  2. Seven faculty members attended per Title III reporting (JS)
- c. The Library staff will receive MyOzarka training.
  1. Completed
- d. Information systems will develop user manuals to assist others in the event of absence of the IS Director including MyOzarka user and technical manuals, bookstore manual and a phone system manual over the next three years.
  1. Manual for interactive video completed; other manuals continue as goals

By the time planning results were being captured, a functional network-share had been developed, and departments/divisions were scheduled to work with the document over a three-week period to prevent access problems. The Planning Results Manual showed an approximate 90 percent accomplishment rate in 2006–2007 planning.

A final step in the first cycle of planning was to assess the process and how well our Planning Results Manual lent itself to helping substantiate accreditation. A committee of five volunteers was sought, with each volunteer to review the planning results of one of the five Criteria (Primary Goals) against the quality of evidence for that Criterion in three successful self-studies. A final report was produced by the committee with recommendations for improvement suggested for planning 2008–2009 (planning 2007–2008 had taken place prior to the completion of the 2006–2007 Planning Results Manual).

## Conclusions: Successes and Challenges

Now that a complete cycle for planning 2006–2007 has taken place, including assessment, planning, budgeting, planning results, and assessment of planning and assessment, planning and budgeting for 2007–2008 has occurred, and certain conclusions about the process can be made.

### Successes

- By aligning the planning process with the Higher Learning Commission five Criteria, the college is promoting the accomplishment of what the Commission and the college deem important.
- Through continuous interaction of the faculty and staff in planning with the five Criteria, a working knowledge of the Criteria is developed.

- A definitive cycle of assessment, planning, budgeting, and documentation is established in which all faculty and staff members participate.
- The cycle ensures that assessment precedes planning and planning precedes budgeting.
- Accomplishments of actions that are documented provide ongoing documented evidence that the Criteria for Accreditation are being met.

### Challenges

- Some faculty and staff members take longer to embrace changes necessitated by the process.
- Persistence in quality utilization of the planning process is dependent on faculty and staff members' taking time and energy to comprehend the Criteria for Accreditation.
- With focusing on the yearly planning cycle, it is important to include long-range strategic planning within the process.
- Though assessment and budgeting take place at the appropriate times, the first Planning Results Manual has not documented this fact, as pointed out by the Assessment of Planning Committee. It will take additional encouragement to have faculty and staff members include this information in their statements during the planning process.
- Though the process lends itself well to a small college of just under one hundred employees, it would have to be modified for larger colleges and universities through, perhaps, the production of multiple plans (such as one per college or division/department) for the sake of reducing complexity but still including everyone in the process.

### References

Kriewall, Timothy J., Robert Anderson, and John D. Kolander. 2006. The HLC five criteria: A template for institutional strategic planning. Paper presented at the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting, Chicago.

Smith, Terry B. 2006. Using HLC criteria for institutional strategic planning. Paper presented at the Higher Learning Commission Annual Meeting, Chicago.

---

*Dusty R. Johnston is President, and Joan R. Stirling is Director of Planning and Special Projects at Ozarka College in Melbourne, Arkansas.*