MONOGRAPH

HOW TO ENGAGE FACULTY IN ACADEMIC PROGRAM PRIORITIZATION

—

By
Robert C. Dickeson
President Emeritus
University of Northern Colorado

ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

AUTHOR

ROBERT C. DICKESON

President Emeritus

University of Northern Colorado

Robert C. Dickeson provides counsel from multiple leadership perspectives: chair of the governor's cabinets in two states, university president, business CEO, and foundation executive. Dickeson served as the director of the department of administration and chair of the cabinet of Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt; and chief of staff, executive director of the office of state planning and budget, and chair of the cabinet of Colorado Gov. Roy Romer. He served in administrative posts at three universities and was president of the University of Northern Colorado from 1981-91. He served as president and CEO of Noel-Levitz Centers Inc., division president of USA Enterprises Inc., and senior vice president of USA Group Inc., heading the USA Group Foundation. From 2000 to 2005, he was co-founder and senior vice president of Lumina Foundation for Education.

While at Lumina Foundation, he led the national initiative on college costs, based on his monograph, *Collision Course: Rising College Costs Threaten America's Future and Require Shared Solutions* (Lumina Foundation, 2004). His book, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999, 2010) was based on his extensive consulting experiences including serving several hundred two- and four-year colleges (private and public) and corporations ranging from hospitals to bank holding companies. During 2006, he served as senior policy adviser to the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

FOREWORD

A 2013 Academic Impressions survey of over 100 academic and administrative leaders revealed that by far the number-one anticipated challenge to effective program prioritization was resistance to change and lack of faculty buy-in. Digging deeper, we learned that most institutions are either engaging faculty very late in the prioritization process, or engaging them in only limited ways.

Yet, when faculty are fully engaged and committed to the process, there will be greater ownership (and therefore more successful implementation) of the decisions reached; it is also more likely that the decisions reached will be most supportive of the institution's academic mission and strategic objectives.

To help institutions achieve this, we turned to Robert C. Dickeson, who literally wrote the book on program prioritization (see *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services*, Jossey-Bass, 2nd ed., 2010).

In this monograph, Dickeson offers a practical and thorough review of the problem, helping institutional leaders and prioritization task forces understand the sources of faculty resistance, and equipping them with a **checklist of 28 steps and tools** to engage faculty meaningfully in the prioritization process, in ways that build trust across your institution and ensure that your prioritization will be both rigorous and effective.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. THE BENEFITS OF OPTIMUM FACULTY PARTICIPATION

To be successful, academic program prioritization in higher education requires optimum faculty participation. There are several reasons for this assertion:

■   Academic programs have been created and operated by faculty over the years and there is a concomitant expectation that faculty should also be involved in program assessment, review and prioritization.

■   Mature faculty who are properly engaged, informed and motivated are fully capable of recommending program rankings that align with institutional, rather than individual, interests.

■   The eventual program decisions that result from the prioritization process are more likely to attain a sense of legitimacy if faculty are engaged in recommending such decisions.

■   People tend to support that which they help to create; therefore, faculty participation and involvement should result in a greater sense of buy-in and ownership. This phenomenon is especially important if institutional reforms are to endure.

That said, there certainly are examples of program prioritization where institutional administrators have mandated a top-down approach that did not invite faculty participation. There is no inherent requirement that faculty participate. But it's been my experience that such processes lack the significant benefits obtainable by faculty involvement.

II. ANTICIPATED FACULTY RESISTANCE

Academic program prioritization has been around for a long time, as campuses for decades have wrestled with the issues of program demand, quality, and productivity. In 1999 I wrote a book which outlined a prescribed process for undertaking prioritization.[1] By 2010, when an updated version of the book appeared, the timeliness of its subject matter was more critical, as colleges and universities faced severe financial shortfalls and external demands for accountability.

In early 2011, I reported on feedback obtained from 550 higher education officials from approximately 300 institutions in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico.[2] Respondents varied in terms of their experience with program prioritization: some were exploring the desirability of conducting a program prioritization process; others were mid-process and had questions about important next steps; and still others had completed the process and were contemplating undertaking a repeat of prioritization. These respondents offered feedback on six items: the driving force behind prioritization, expectations, criteria, data, challenges, and other concerns.

---

1 Dickeson, R.C. *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers. 1999. Revised and Updated, 2010.

2 Dickeson, R. C. "Report: What Higher-Ed Leaders Are Saying About Program Prioritization." Academic Impressions, 2011. http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/report-what-higher-ed-leaders-are-saying-about-program-prioritization

Respondents anticipated that three types of challenges would emerge on their campuses as they approached the subject of prioritization: resistance by the faculty, campus dynamics, and implementation issues. With respect to the resistance issue, five anticipated issues emerged:

- Buy-in by the faculty

- Fear of job loss

- Tenure issues

- Unions

- Program resistance: "How can you be a university without XYZ program?"

Similarly, in her 2012 research into factors that impede adaptive change in higher-ed institutions that undertook academic program prioritization, Anne Milkovich found that faculty resistance was a key component of "institutional resistance."[3] When resistance manifested in the organization, Milkovich found, the leadership often backed down, resulting in a lack of good results in spite of institutional strategic intent. Thus, success with prioritization often depended on the strength of leadership in the culture.

In the same vein, Academic Impressions surveyed over 100 academic and administrative leaders in 2013 to learn about their commitment to program prioritization and the challenges they were encountering or anticipated encountering. Most leaders surveyed indicated that the most significant barriers they saw to successful program prioritization were lack of faculty "buy-in" and a lack of courageous leadership.[4]

─────────────

3 Milkovich, A. *Patterns of Academic Program Prioritization Among Institutions of Higher Education*. Unpublished research report, Montana State University, 2012.

4 Mrig, Amit. "Meeting the Challenge of Program Prioritization." Academic Impressions, 2013. http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/meeting-challenge-program-prioritization-full-report