

The Impact of the UUPP on Strategic Planning at Georgia State University

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Abstract

This article discusses the impact of the Urban Universities Portfolio Project on strategic planning at Georgia State University, comparing planning processes conducted in 1995 and 2000. The 2000 process used the GSU portfolio as a data resource and campus-wide communications medium, enabling more informed, wider campus participation in shaping the plan. The portfolio also supported transitions to a semester calendar, new admissions practices, and revised approaches to program review and assessment of student learning outcomes.

Participating in the Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP) from 1998–2001 gave Georgia State University an opportunity to redesign its strategic planning processes and enhance related processes by exploiting the potential of Web-based technologies. This article considers the impact of the UUPP on planning by comparing the development of Georgia State's Strategic Plan 1995, created before most campuses had significant access to the World Wide Web, with the development of Strategic Plan 2000, which relied quite substantially on the Web as a data resource and campus-wide communications medium. We have found that incorporating the Web into planning is an evolutionary process. For example, our Action Plan 2002, an annual update to the strategic plan, uses more dynamic links to data than previous action plans.

Georgia State University

Located in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia State University was founded in 1913 as the Georgia Institute of Technology's Evening School of Commerce. Later, it was the Atlanta Division of the University of Georgia before becoming an independent college. Georgia State is one of 34 institutions in the University System of Georgia and in Fall 1995 was designated as one of four research universities in the System. It has evolved into a major public research university, with Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Health and Human Sciences, and Law, and a School of Policy Studies.

As part of this evolution, a major change in the composition of the undergraduate student body has been underway at Georgia State over the past seven years. This transformation has been driven by changing University System of Georgia entrance requirements, which are highest at the four research universities. In 1995, the university

admitted approximately 1,200 first-time freshmen. All students commuted to the campus, 40 percent of the freshmen were in learning support, and the average SAT score was 1,000 for regularly admitted students (those students who were not placed in learning support). Georgia State had no residence halls and only a small number of HOPE scholarships, which pay tuition and fees for students with a high school average of at least B and who maintain a B average in college.

By contrast, in Fall 2001, when the new entrance requirements were fully implemented, Georgia State enrolled 2,170 first-time freshmen, with an average SAT score of 1060. Eighty percent of this freshman cohort earned HOPE scholarships, 40 percent lived in residence halls, and only a handful were on learning support. Over 25,700 students were enrolled at the university in Fall 2001. Approximately 59 percent of all Fall 2001 students attended full-time. Georgia State University continues to enroll more new transfer students than freshmen, and approximately 30 percent of the student body is enrolled in graduate and professional programs.

The university seeks to offer a welcoming academic environment to all students; the diversity of the student body remains one of our most distinctive features. Not only have we continued to recruit a highly ethnically diverse group of students, while significantly increasing our admission requirements, we are also ranked as one of the top ten universities nationally for the number of black students who graduate. *Black Issues in Higher Education* lists Georgia State as ninth nationally overall and second nationally for non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities (June 2001).

In Fall 2001, over 1,400 faculty members were employed in full- and part-time positions. Georgia State has prospered under shared faculty and administrative governance in the past ten years. The University Senate includes both faculty and administrators and its committees and meetings are well-attended and address substantive issues.

Strategic Plan 1995

Development of Strategic Plan 1995 Without the Web

When I arrived at Georgia State in July 1994 as newly appointed provost, one of my first tasks was to help the university develop a focused five-year strategic plan to serve as a template for the institution's ongoing development. The university had been transforming itself in the early 1990s to place greater emphasis on research and on involvement with the community as complements to a strong teaching mission. To manage this transformation, we needed to be more deliberate about investing new funds, selecting areas to trim in order to free current funds for higher priorities, and recruiting the kinds of students we wanted to attract. Thus, the strategic planning process included an environmental scan of current budgetary and demographic influences and consideration of the context for the university's efforts over the next five years.

Three groups were convened for the process: an academic group of 22 faculty members; a collegial group of 22 chairpersons, directors, and associate deans; and an

administrative group of six deans, Director of the Pullen Library, Director of the Division of Learning Support Programs, and two associate provosts. Each group included representation from each of the six colleges, the University Library, and the Division of Learning Support Programs. All of the groups were asked these five questions:

- What are the distinctive characteristics of the university?
- What are the strengths of the university?
- Who or what are the constituents of the university?
- What programs are needed to serve our priority constituents?
- What are the priorities among those programs?

The questions were posed one at a time to each of the groups. Responses to each question were shared with all groups before the next question was addressed. From the responses that were elicited at meetings I facilitated, a series of draft documents was developed and circulated through the university community for comment. Distribution included the President's Executive Staff, the Administrative Council, the vice presidents and their divisions, the academic colleges, schools, departments, and the Staff Council.

At this time, not all faculty members had their own computers. It was not until mid-1996 that we had a policy and practice of providing computer workstations for all tenure-track faculty members. Consequently, the draft documents developed during Fall 1994 were circulated through campus mail in paper form. As the plan made its way through approval by the Strategic Planning Subcommittee, the Senate Planning and Development Committee, and the Executive Committee of the Senate, refinements were made at each stage, with each successive draft developed and distributed on paper. Following hearings at a meeting in early February 1995, the University Senate adopted Strategic Plan 1995 on March 2, 1995. The plan can be viewed at www.gsu.edu/~wwwsen/strategic_plan/strategicplan3-2-95.html.

The plan identified the twin themes of "Excellence" and "Distinctiveness" as its organizing concepts and the bases for achieving our overarching goal: to propel Georgia State University to a front-rank position among the nation's premier state-supported universities located in an urban setting. "Excellence" involved building on the strong undergraduate degree programs and graduate research and professional programs currently in place, identifying areas of exceptional quality and potential, and expanding and improving faculty, facilities, and support services in these targeted areas. Particular areas of emphasis included interdisciplinary programs, inter-institutional collaborations, and intercultural and international efforts. "Distinctiveness" was to be accomplished by strategically deploying resources in areas of programmatic strength and by taking maximum advantage of the urban setting to focus attention and resources on issues confronting contemporary life. In the area of Distinctiveness, collaborative projects in biotechnology, policy initiatives, and pre-kindergarten through college education were highlighted, along with specific contributions to cultural and community life.

The final section of Strategic Plan 1995 discussed steps to be taken to ensure the success of the Excellence and Distinctiveness initiatives. It noted that a combination of additional resources and reallocated resources would be necessary for the University to move forward to higher levels of achievement of its mission. A key step in the process of implementing the Strategic Plan was to develop an Action Plan that included goals, priorities, and estimates of the costs of these goals and priorities.

Annual Action Plan Updates

Following adoption of the strategic plan, the University Senate charged its Planning and Development Committee with developing an Action Plan. In this 1996 Action Plan, for the purpose of conceptual clarity, the many individual items found within the 1995 Strategic Plan under “Excellence” and “Distinctiveness” were grouped into four thematic categories:

- Strengthening academic programs
- Promoting standards for excellence
- Improving the University infrastructure
- Developing systematic approaches to administrative decision-making.

Each of these categories included three sections: work underway, additional thrusts for 1996, and areas of budgetary priority. A key thrust in the category of “Improving the University Infrastructure” was as follows:

Creation of a relational database system will provide the necessary basis on which to build a Data Warehouse for administrative decision-making and reporting. In particular, this will provide support for academic program review and for student recruitment, retention, and graduation initiatives.

The subsequent 1997 Action Plan included two components: a spreadsheet that provided a status report on 31 activities or strands from the 1996 Action Plan and a descriptive document similar in format to the 1996 Action Plan. The spreadsheet included information on the strategic allocation of resources in 1996; areas within the strategic plan to be given budgetary priority for the next cycle, organized around the four thematic categories; accomplishments in each area of focus; data available or needed for appropriate monitoring of achievements; the committee or person responsible for monitoring progress; and further actions required for ongoing pursuit of strategic objectives. The descriptive document focused on the column on the spreadsheet identified as “Follow-up Needed,” which indicated areas slated for priority attention in 1997. To this document we added commentary on the context for the upcoming year, which was changing rapidly from the projected context under which the 1995 strategic plan had been developed. For example, the University System mandated that all institutions were to move from a quarter calendar to a semester calendar effective Fall 1998.

Organizing the annual Action Plan in this way allowed us to begin to see how pursuit of our themes of Excellence and Distinctiveness could be accomplished by following the progress of many smaller activities and strands. In addition, from 1997 on, each annual Action Plan included new features. In particular, we added tables showing data across multiple years in such areas as internal and external support for programs. Other new tables provided student profiles. One table tracks cumulative additional support for each of the disaggregated areas of focus. Action plans may be viewed at www.gsu.edu/~wwwsen/strategic_plan/.

For the first few years following adoption of Strategic Plan 1995, paper documents were used during all stages of development of annual Action Plans. In 1998 the Strategic Planning Subcommittee, which drafts the Action Plans, used electronic documents. As we became more sophisticated in our approach and as it became easier to incorporate key data elements, especially financial support of programs, the Action Plans continued to evolve. However, we had not yet tapped the power of the data warehouse.

The UPP and Strategic Plan 2000

The Urban Universities Portfolio Project

Georgia State initially became involved with the UUPP with the intent to develop an electronic institutional portfolio that would serve reaccreditation efforts. We had recently endured a successful decennial reaccreditation review by the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools (SACS), but saw little value in the mounds of paper that had to be collected. We had attempted to assemble many files electronically, but the chair of our visiting team wanted everything on paper. Undeterred by this attitude, we perceived that the UUPP offered an opportunity to demonstrate to regional accreditation agencies the potential and feasibility of university-wide electronic portfolios to guide planning and improvement. A meaningful planning process requires collection of data and analysis of those data to determine the effectiveness of the university's processes, practices, and systems—activities that could be both supported and demonstrated by a Web-based, electronic institutional portfolio.

With the transition from a quarter calendar to a semester calendar in Fall 1998, the need to make current data accessible to decision-makers became even more pressing. Simultaneous with implementation of the academic calendar change, the University System adopted requirements that most undergraduate degree programs be limited to no more than 120 hours and a new System Core Curriculum of 60 hours designed, in part, to facilitate transfer. One impact of these changes was a shift in student course-taking patterns that made it difficult to predict course demand. In response, we developed a dynamic Web-based tool that gave department chairs and course schedulers access to up-to-the-minute data on “unmet demand” courses, allowing them to schedule additional sections or make other necessary changes to accommodate student needs and preferences.

In addition to unmet demand indicators, we developed other data arrays that enabled campus-wide administrative leaders and deans to oversee the admissions process as we raised our admissions requirements, and deans and departments to plan for increased numbers of majors as the number of traditional undergraduate students increased. Information about courses, instructors, students, and credit hours became part of a dynamic Web-based student database that provides internal users with access to information tailored to their specific data questions and needs. We have subsequently significantly strengthened our institutional research function and are further developing the data warehouse to include financial and human resource data as well as student data. A hallmark of our participation in UUPP was thus a focus on using the portfolio to improve the accessibility of data and encourage more widespread use of data to support decision-making.

Development of Strategic Plan 2000 with the Web

Initially, our use of the Web for the strategic plan and the annual Action Plans was limited to a depository mode. While a document was kept in draft electronic form during its development, only after the appropriate Senate committee approved it was the document listed on the Senate Web site. With experience, we transformed our process to one where we intentionally used the Web to circulate drafts, solicit ideas, and gather reactions to a given draft document. Members of the Strategic Planning Subcommittee, who represent key campus constituencies such as colleges and important committees, found that posting drafts to the Web made it easier to communicate with their constituents. By late 1999, we had refined this process to the point that development of Strategic Plan 2000 was aided significantly by use of the Web.

In Fall 1999, I convened three groups to discuss a series of questions that probed the current and projected environments and tested the current high priority areas in light of probable conditions to see whether we should add or delete areas from our current priorities. The three groups were: an academic group of 22 faculty members, a collegial group of 22 chairs and associate deans, and a 20-member administrative group that included the Deans' Group and representatives from the vice-presidential areas. Initially, eight questions were posed to the three groups. These questions, listed below, led to others, added in bold, that were addressed in subsequent meetings.

1. From your reading of the 1995 strategic plan, what is missing? Is the 1995 strategic plan sufficiently aspirational?
2. What have been the university's major accomplishments during the past five years?
3. Are these accomplishments aligned with our mission/vision?
4. What are the changes in the environment since the 1995 plan was developed?
5. What major changes in the environment will likely occur during the next five years?
6. What major goals should guide Georgia State's development during the next five years?
7. Who are we, and what do we want to portray?

8. What are the educational attributes or characteristics that enable Georgia State to establish a competitive advantage in relation to other institutions?
9. What are Georgia State's particular strengths in instruction, research, and service?
10. Which external constituencies are (or should be) served by Georgia State?
11. What are we doing now that will be better five years from now?
12. What programs or enablers are necessary to meet our projected clientele's needs?
13. What are the major challenges that need to be addressed in order to meet our aspirations?

As the groups' discussions progressed, they added planning assumptions in the areas of student enrollment, general funding trends, staffing expectations, and physical space changes. Each draft version of the plan was posted to the Web so that the campus community could comment as the plan was being developed. The first three drafts were written in the form of brief bulleted responses to the questions. The fourth draft had a narrative format similar to that of the 1995 Strategic Plan with its twin initiatives of Excellence and Distinctiveness. The availability of the evolving drafts on the Web made it possible for many more people in the campus community to contribute to its shaping. As a result, the final version that emerged was significantly different from the initial document presented to the Strategic Planning Subcommittee. The final document, approved by the University Senate in March 2001, has two main sections: (1) Enhance the academic mission and (2) Support for the academic mission. It includes many hyperlinks to Web sites where elaboration of a particular point or issue can be found. Each draft is available at www.gsu.edu/~wwwsen/strategic_plan/develop.html.

Annual Action Plan Updates with the Web

As was the case with Strategic Plan 2000, our experience with developing the 2001 Action Plan was that many more faculty, beyond the members of the Strategic Planning Subcommittee, were involved due to the availability of the draft documents on the Web. The final product had a much different look and feel than previous action plans, which were Word documents archived on the Web. The 2001 Action Plan Web site provides links to a status report on progress toward the various goals of the 2000 Strategic Plan that is organized around six major categories:

- Recruitment and Retention of Students
- Undergraduate Experience
- Graduate Experience and Research
- Academic Programs and Faculty
- Connection to the Greater Community
- Infrastructure/Support Improvement

In addition to explaining the context for the 2001 Action Plan, the document identified those areas that were to receive priority attention in 2001, again linked to each of the six major groupings.

The 2002 Action Plan includes dynamic links to some of the tables in the Data Warehouse, rather than static versions of the tables within the Action Plan document itself. We have learned that many members of the university community prefer to see trends displayed in graphs, instead of tables, and we are working to incorporate these modifications as well. Another feature we are considering is the use of “dashboard indicators” similar to those IUPUI developed during their collaboration on the UUPP. Dashboard indicators are visual displays of key performance indicators that denote the status of achievement on goals. For example, IUPUI uses green, yellow, and red to denote satisfactory performance, progress, or unsatisfactory performance on key indicators.

Integration with Effectiveness, Decision Support, and Assessment

Another development emerging from Georgia State’s participation in the UUPP is the use of the Web for academic program review. We have had an Academic Program Review process in place since the early 1990s and recently initiated an Administrative and Support Unit Assessment. Our academic program review is not different in form from similar processes at other institutions; that is, each program is reviewed every five to seven years, with a self-study followed by external and internal review and recommendations. But a key difference between our process and most others lies in the consequences of the review. Each review culminates in an “action plan” negotiated jointly by the department chair, college dean, and provost. The action plan focuses on alignment of the department’s contributions with the university mission, using the Strategic Plan as a guide, and it identifies high-priority items for funding over the next five-year cycle. These department action plans feed into the annual Action Plan. Overall execution of the Strategic Plan is successful because of this strong linkage with the budgetary process at the program level.

Currently, we are activating the effectiveness page of our institutional portfolio to make these processes and linkages more visible. Thus, the Academic Program Reviews and Administrative and Support Unit Assessments are linked to password-protected sites that describe the review process and contain the documents that these processes produce. Like the strategic planning site, this portal will serve both as documentation of the effectiveness process and as a resource for internal and external reviewers. With access to dynamic information in the data warehouse, it is much easier for a department to prepare its self-study. In addition, as we developed an electronic approach to program review, we were aided significantly by discussions with other UUPP participants. Specifically, California State University, Sacramento colleagues shared with us a pilot electronic department portfolio for their Sociology Department. To support implementation of the new processes, we have appointed a faculty member as Senior Faculty Associate for Program Review in the Provost’s Office. The Faculty Associate will work closely with Institutional Research and the units being reviewed.

A second portion of the Effectiveness Web page addresses student learning outcomes. The university has devoted its efforts in the last year to reviewing the writing component of general education and is currently adopting a new set of general education learning outcomes. In addition, a faculty member has been appointed as a Senior Faculty Associate for Student Learning Outcomes in the Provost's Office to work closely with departments and University Senate committees to develop learning outcomes for all undergraduate programs.

We are also experimenting with using the portfolio for annual progress reports. Our current practice is to ask departments annually for documentation of grants, publications, accomplishments, and so on. This information is summarized by the colleges, then synthesized by the Provost's Office into a university-wide report to the System office. As departments become more sophisticated in using the Web to collect and analyze data, they can demonstrate growth and add reflective commentary on their effectiveness and development. Thus, we hope to transform the chore of annual reporting into an integral part of continuous improvement and self-study at the department level.

While a major goal of the UUPP was to determine common characteristics of urban public universities, the project's timing and our own needs led us to focus our portfolio work on planning, providing data for decision support, and, more recently, managing processes that advance institutional effectiveness. We now use the portfolio Web site as a forum for campus-wide discussion of our annual Action Plans, which include increasing numbers of links to other documents on the Web. In addition, we benefited from project-wide discussions on how our urban location influences student learning and provides opportunities for community interactions; our own significant contributions to cultural and community life are better understood by our academic community as well, since community members can explore in depth various campus Web sites linked to

documents in the portfolio. Two examples can be viewed at <http://frp.aysps.gsu.edu/ocop/> and <http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwupp/engagement/index.html>.

References

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