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One of the principal challenges facing metropolitan universities is to find a way to explain their contributions to their communities. The metropolitan dimension to these institutions' missions is not well understood by the public, nor is it well documented by universities themselves. This article explains how and why California State University, Sacramento and Portland State University have taken very different approaches to confronting this challenge and offers suggestions and conclusions based on these experiences.

Assessing the Metropolitan University Mission

Everyone engaged in higher education administration is well aware of the pressure to be accountable. Accrediting agencies, policy makers, and others are asking universities to account for the value of the educational enterprise. The principal tool for addressing accountability is assessment, which is carried out at two levels. Assessment of student learning outcomes has received the most attention, but at least as important is *institutional* assessment—an accounting of the degree to which a university fulfills its broad institutional mission. For metropolitan universities, whose service to the region is an integral part of the mission, institutional assessment is vital but especially challenging. This article explores how two metropolitan universities have undertaken this challenge in very different ways.

Assessing the metropolitan mission is challenging for two reasons. First, the metropolitan university mission is not well understood (a fact which occasioned the founding of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities). Policy makers routinely look to traditional indicators of quality that are inappropriate to our institutions, such as four-year graduation rates, entering SAT scores, and federal research grants. These measures fail to capture the essential role that metropolitan universities seek to play in their communities, such as regional economic development, contributions to lifelong learning, and first generation access to college. Even our own faculty, who come principally from research universities with very different missions, may not fully appreciate the metropolitan dimensions of our

mission. As a result, they may not orient their own teaching, research, and service to best match the mission. As those of us involved in institutional assessment attempt to promote understanding of the metropolitan mission, we encounter the second challenge: defining, implementing, and measuring the metropolitan mission.

California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) and Portland State University (PSU) took different paths on the journey to understand, communicate, and assess the metropolitan mission. These paths reflect a striking difference in institutional culture that belies the apparent similarities of mission, history, geography, and institutional size (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Comparison of Two Metropolitan Universities

	CSUS	*PSU*
Founded	1947	1946
Renamed "University"	1972	1969
Type	public comprehensive	public comprehensive
Status within state system	23 campus system	7 campus system
City population	370,000	471,000
Metropolitan population	1 million	1.6 million
Enrollment	25,000	15,000
Percent undergraduate	79%	71%

CSUS has a process-oriented culture, possibly a remnant of administration-faculty distrust from the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, as well as from its status as one campus in a very large system with a history of regulation. It is most comfortable when carrying out plans that have been developed and adopted by an agreed-upon process. PSU has an action-oriented culture, for reasons possibly related to the "trailblazer" orientation of Oregonians combined with PSU's origins as an extension center for returning World War II veterans. Strategic actions, which have catalyzed organization members around key ideas, have been favored over formal planning processes.

Culture is one of the metaphors that Gareth Morgan (1997) advises public managers to use to "read" their organizations and provide a basis for facilitating organizational change. CSUS and PSU have succeeded in adopting and assessing a metropolitan mission in large part because they have each adapted approach to culture. CSUS has relied extensively on its strategic plan and integrated planning process to shape the understanding and the assessment of the mission. PSU has chosen to proceed without a formal strategic plan and to organize its work around its graduate and professional programs, a strong liberal arts curriculum, and reforms in general education that bring the University into direct and continuing contact with the community. Both approaches are described below.

CSUS: Strategic Planning to Guide Assessment

The Process

The integrated planning process at CSUS brings together planning, assessment, and resource allocation. Institutional assessment and the university budget are driven by the themes of the strategic plan. The planning council, with representation from all campus constituencies, meets bi-weekly throughout the fall semester to review assessment reports that address priorities established for each strategic plan theme. The council also reviews key performance indicators (KPIs) that have been approved for each theme. Subgroups of the council are empowered to analyze assessment data (the reports and the KPIs) and recommend to the full Council on implications of the data for next year's budget priorities. By the end of the term, the council recommends resource priorities to the president that, once approved, become the basis for budget requests. In the spring, the council reviews the budget as presented by the three vice presidents, who must explain how it addresses the resource priorities.

Through this process we have established a culture of evidence whereby planning and budget decisions are derived from assessment data. By grounding all our institutional assessment in the themes of the strategic plan, which provides the purpose for our assessment and the questions we need to answer, we have avoided the common problems of getting lost in the data and providing data for data's sake. For example, we administer an extensive set of standardized surveys to students, faculty, staff, and alumni. But, we never report survey results out of context of the strategic plan. Instead, we merge into each assessment report those survey data and relevant institutional data that deal directly with the issue at hand. In this way, we can always answer the question, "So what?"

The specific tools of the integrated planning process are described in Table 2.

Table 2
Elements of CSUS Integrated Planning Process

Document	*Purpose and Characteristics*
Strategic Plan	Thematic; framework to guide decisions
Key Performance Indicators	Set of 6-12 per theme; data and its adherence to standards; long term
Theme Assessment Papers	Comprehensive, 5-year evidence-based report for each theme
Planning Priorities	Set of 2-4 priorities per theme, to focus assessment efforts; short-term
Progress Reports	Annual evidence-based report for each planning priority
Resource Priorities	Annual thematic assessment-based guide for budget process

Assessing the Metropolitan Mission

Our strategic plan communicates the metropolitan mission of CSUS throughout its eight themes: teaching and learning, academic programs, scholarship, pluralism, enrollment planning, campus life, public life of a capital university, and institutional effectiveness. We build in overlap in communicating the metropolitan mission because how the mission affects curriculum, pedagogy, scholarship, and the life of the university on and beyond the campus is still not widely understood. Themes, associated planning priorities, and KPIs are all selected with the metropolitan mission firmly in mind. Some examples of KPIs with strong metropolitan university significance are:

- Responsiveness of teaching to individual needs
- Availability of a variety of instructional methods
- Regional emphasis of academic program
- Diversity of the student body relative to the region
- Issues of pluralism addressed by faculty through the curriculum

Table 3 illustrates the whole process for the enrollment planning theme.

Table 3
Overview of the Enrollment Planning Process

Strategic Plan Goal	To serve a diverse student population and facilitate timely graduation
Selected KPIs	Preparedness of new students
	Time-to-degree by profile group
	Student satisfaction with course and schedule options
	Delivery of programs through the region
	Improve all students progress toward degree
Selected Planning Priorities	Improve coordination with Continuing Education
	Support alternative schedules and delivery modes
Selected Resource Priorities	Improve retention efforts for at-risk students
	Support for new remedial initiative
	Advising and orientation
Selected Resource Allocations	Distributed education
	Expanded support service hours
	Year-round operations and evening/weekend

The Big Remaining Challenge

An important part of the metropolitan mission is the impact the university has on its region. Our public life of a capital university theme, whose goal is to establish partnerships and programs of mutual benefit to the university and the Sacramento region in the areas of human and social services, cultural life, economic development, and public policy issues of regional and statewide significance, most directly captures

this dimension. Assessing this theme has been difficult because none of the standardized surveys or institutional data are relevant. To assess how we are viewed in the region, we need to go to the region. We are in the early stages of designing an instrument for this kind of assessment. Before we got to this state, however, we went down an unfruitful road that is worth describing. Our first theme assessment paper was an inventory of our efforts in the region. This approach had three problems. First, we hadn't defined public life sufficiently to inventory it. Second, an inventory is out of date the day after you finish it. Third, and most importantly, an inventory is not an assessment of outcomes; it is just a listing of inputs or commitments. The "so what?" question was untouched.

We have since developed a framework that defines the theme as the ways in which our instruction, scholarship, service, and other programs contribute to the human/social services, cultural, economic, and public policy dimensions of the region. The framework further differentiates our commitment to doing certain things (i.e. inputs) from the public benefit of having done them. While we may choose to inventory select areas if we suspect problems, our assessment effort will focus only on the public benefit, or outcomes, part of the framework. To a large degree this will be dependent on designing an instrument that asks key stakeholders about the impact of the university, and will be a valuable extension of our previous assessment efforts.

PSU: Strategic Actions to Guide Assessment

While PSU has been in the forefront of national attention regarding its reform of general education, it has not been a leader in assessment. A culture of change, initiated in the early 1990s, moved the institution forward in a number of areas. Efforts to change capitalized on the entrepreneurial spirit that has characterized the institution since its earliest days, encouraging development of new approaches both in academics and administration. Efforts to develop processes for the assessment of teaching and learning, as well as institutional assessment, were slower to follow these innovations. By the close of the decade, however, these processes had begun to take shape.

Historical Context for Planning and Assessment

A statewide property tax limitation measure, passed by voters in 1990, resulted in substantial budget reductions for Oregon's colleges and universities. PSU eliminated academic units, programs, and faculty positions in 1991-92. At the same time, the Oregon University System imposed enrollment caps on each of the eight system institutions.

To manage uncertainty, the president initiated a strategic planning process for PSU, which included broad participation across the campus and its external community. The intent was to state a clear mission for the university and create a unique identity within Oregon's university system that would help PSU focus its programs and activities toward specific goals. The strategic planning committee identified four general themes: metropolitan context; academic, research, and service programs; serving the community and today's students; and managing the university's future.

Several factors constrained implementation of the plan. The document proved to be too ambitious in its goals and too specific in its language. It did not specify how assessment or evaluation would be carried out or which units or individuals would be responsible for implementation of new activities. At that time, a climate for assessment did not exist on campus and the entrepreneurial nature of faculty culture served as a counterweight to formal processes. Although some PSU faculty may not want to be thought of as innovators, but simply wish to do things well, it is clear that creative actions have been vital to PSU's success. These actions have grown out of circumstance and culture and have not fit easily with our attempts at formal planning.

Strategic Action as Planning

One important result of the strategic plan, however, was adoption of a mission statement that reflected PSU's urban context and set a direction for the future. A plan for development of a university district to define the campus physically within the downtown area soon followed. At the same time, innovations in the undergraduate curriculum were emerging across campus, outside of the formal planning process. Reform of the general education curriculum capitalized on PSU's urban mission and context to institutionalize service learning and community connections, and coincided with reforms in science education and the innovative use of technology in large classes.

As PSU moves forward into the twenty-first century, the administration has articulated an umbrella strategy, allowing the administration to set broad goals and communicate clear messages about the mission of the institution, while leaving faculty, staff, and students freedom to create and implement activities supporting the metropolitan mission. An overarching goal is to develop PSU as a model for a new urban university for the twenty-first century, capitalizing on our circumstances and environment rather than attempting to emulate other institutions.

This will be accomplished in part through strategic efforts to tie academic and administrative initiatives to the budget. The resource allocation model adopted by the Oregon University System in 1999 allows institutions more autonomy over their budgets. In 1999-2000, PSU initiated a strategic budget process involving direct participation by the faculty senate budget committee. The process includes a set of criteria linked to the broad strategic goals of the institution by which all budget proposals will be evaluated.

The university assessment council has begun work with departments and programs to develop plans for the collection and analysis of teaching and learning outcomes. Assessment is intended to encourage teaching and learning excellence and is viewed by faculty and administration as a scholarly activity. Faculty attitudes toward assessment have changed dramatically since the mid-90s, moving from substantial resistance to scholarly curiosity and general acceptance. Typical of PSU, the leadership of key faculty members, rather than any direct administrative action, beyond appointment of the assessment council, has been crucial in bringing about this change.

Assessment results are fed back into teaching, curricular, and administrative activities where faculty and students can see direct results. Although attempts at program assessment have largely failed, classroom-based assessments and mechanisms for gathering feedback from students about their learning experiences have provided evidence of program effectiveness. Some techniques currently in use are classroom assessment, focus groups, portfolio assessment, and student self-assessment. The office of institutional research and planning uses data from the student information system to track, on the institutional level, student participation, progress, retention, and graduation, and routinely links survey results with these data to gain insight into student satisfaction and characteristics. As the resource allocation model is implemented, program assessment results will not be tied to resource allocation, but will be tied at the division level to the institution's broad strategic goals.

Challenges

In its struggle to thrive within the Oregon University System, PSU has relied on the creative thinking and strategic actions of its faculty and administration. While some faculty do not view their efforts as innovative, it is clear that PSU is the institution it is today because of its entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to capitalize on its unique place in the Portland metropolitan region. PSU frequently has had to operate on short-term goals as resource, space, and political limitations have restricted its ability to develop long-term plans. Successful planning has been possible, even in the absence of formal processes, with the adoption of an umbrella strategy tied to a clear statement of the urban mission.

Our challenge as we move forward will be to maintain our innovative character while adopting processes that make sense in our culture. While strategic actions in support of our urban mission will continue to drive our planning decisions, we will be open to alternative models. Program review, university-wide assessment planning, and the systematic collection and analysis of data in support of the resource allocation model will provide us with the information we need to assess our progress toward institutional goals.

Conclusion

The experiences at CSUS and PSU lead us to offer conclusions in three areas: communicating the metropolitan mission, understanding institutional culture, and using data to accomplish institutional assessment.

Mission Issues

We cannot overemphasize the importance of communicating the metropolitan mission in conversations both on and off campus. The lure and familiarity of traditional models of higher education are powerful. We should not assume that our constituents understand fully how the mission of the metropolitan university affects the academic program, pedagogy, scholarship, service, campus life, and community engagement. Nor should we assume that they understand why traditional means of describing and

measuring institutional accomplishments are inappropriate. The traditional university has been accepted for hundreds of years; by comparison, the metropolitan university model is brand new. Even our own faculty need to be reminded constantly that where they work is not like where they were educated.

For both culture types represented here, a laser focus on the metropolitan mission is invaluable. At CSUS the mission is a continual refocusing of the documents and discussions used in the planning process. It is built into each theme of the strategic plan, reflected in the KPIs and associated standards, and discussed at biweekly meetings of the council for university planning. The metropolitan mission supplies the criteria for decisions regarding budget, academic program emphasis, new faculty hiring, and the university's extracurricular offerings. At PSU the metropolitan mission is played out daily in the lives of every undergraduate student and those faculty who teach in the university studies general education program. Having made the decision to orient the senior capstone course around community-based themes, the annual selection of new topics and identification of faculty and community partners requires consideration of how best to merge education with community objectives. Many graduate and professional programs, too, incorporate community-based research, internships, or practica. For both institutions, the focus on mission promotes understanding of the mission itself and of the need to engage in assessment for purposes of accountability.

Culture Issues

Both the process-oriented culture of CSUS and the action-oriented culture of PSU are variants of the garbage can decision processes that are widely believed to characterize decision making in universities and other complex organizations (March and Olsen, 1976, 1989). In neither case does decision making follow ideal, rational models where goals are well defined in advance and appropriate means selected based on careful analysis of options and projection of consequences.

Even at CSUS, where decision making is closer to the deliberate end of Mintzberg's deliberate-emergent continuum (1987), it is far from the classic rational model. Most of the important planning questions cannot be answered with certainty, even after careful analysis. What are the benefits of alternative teaching strategies to our various student populations? What kind of class schedule would best meet student needs? How can curriculum best promote pluralism? What kinds of extra-curricular activities will increase students' bonds with the university and promote retention? CSUS made huge strides in its assessment efforts when members of the council for university planning stopped asking for certainty in the data or for clear-cut answers to the means vs. ends question and agreed instead simply to commit to work on selected issues where the data raised serious questions.

In this era of accountability and performance budgeting there is an unfortunate tendency to approach assessment as a rational science. Campuses strive to uncover causal relationships between dollar inputs and programmatic outcomes, and attempt to delineate goals, objectives, strategies, and outcomes as if they could be rigorously

controlled and manipulated. Experience at CSUS has shown that it is possible to honor the culture's dependence on process while recognizing the fundamental messiness of assessment. The integrated planning process has been accepted as a collaborative, evolutionary effort, based on a culture of evidence, to make the university a better place. Textbook approaches have been steadfastly avoided as inconsistent with both the specific campus culture and the generic character of universities.

Similarly, PSU has learned through attempts at formal strategic planning that overly rational approaches are too specific and too ambitious for the task of assessment. The campus was able to let go of ambitious processes and retain core concepts. From there, the concepts served to organize the innovative activities that were emerging across campus. One by one, the campus implemented strategic actions, not strategic plans, that provided the focus for assessment. Rather than be driven by a process, assessment at PSU is built into each of the actions. Assessment has become an accepted part of the process of learning from doing.

Our experiences suggest that, regardless of the specific culture, success of institutional assessment rests upon two foundations: a commitment to use data to inform planning, and a demonstrated link between planning and budget allocations. Once campus constituents see that the flow of dollars is influenced by assessment, they will see assessment as a legitimate undertaking.

Data and Definition Issues

For those who feel at times like they are drowning in data, the most important lesson to draw from our experiences is the need to be very selective about using data. We should use only those data that have a clear purpose and answer questions that we want to ask. These purposes and questions are supplied by the mission and the corresponding planning themes. It is easy to get caught up in data for data's sake. In an open environment where data are shared, data beget data. Every question we attempt to answer with data can raise new questions that require more data. Before we procure the additional data, and before we provide the data in the first place, we need to ask the "so what?" question. We need to force those engaged in assessment to choose the best indicator or review the most meaningful measures. We can, as CSUS has done, use a small number of key performance indicators to judge progress at the macro level and probe additional measures only if we see any red flags in the overview measures. Clearly we need to collect vast amounts of data but don't need to report, in a regular manner, more than a fraction of it.

A second data issue of paramount importance to metropolitan universities is the development of measures to engage the public. We cannot find these measures in standardized surveys of students, faculty, and staff, or in our vaults of institutional data on ethnicity, enrollment, faculty workload, and budgets. We must develop new measures by going out into the community, asking how we are doing, and documenting it. But first we should define what is meant by public engagement, community outreach, or whatever we choose to call it. This is no easy task, but must be addressed if we are to

garner any legitimacy for the claims made about the contributions of our universities to the greater community.

Finally, our experiences underscore the changes that have occurred in the role of institutional research (IR). As focus has shifted from inputs and activity accounting to accountability for outcomes, IR staff have become responsible for interpreting data in light of intended outcomes. This puts a premium on collaboration with other constituents and other offices across the university whose interpretations are needed. In addition, the demands of organizing vast amounts of data to support assessment has led to innovation in the use of information technology, essential both to organize the data and to communicate it. Assessment is not principally about collecting the data and building the culture of evidence. It is, most fundamentally, about communicating that evidence to the broader community so they can understand what their universities contribute and so that those contributions can continue to grow.

Suggested Readings

March, J. G., and J. P. Olsen, *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations*, 2nd ed., (Bergen: Universitetforlaget, 1976).

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