



ASQ Education Brief

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Facing a New Reality

University's strategic planning addresses higher education's new landscape

by Julie Furst-Bowe

Dramatically shifting demographics and a serious decline in the number of high school graduates, particularly in Eastern and Midwestern states, are driving the need for significant changes in U.S. higher education. There also are state and federal demands for increased completion rates, continuous technological advances and increased expectations for students. And for public universities, there are added pressures of decreasing allocations of state funding while trying to maintain affordable tuition.

It's clear that traditional methods of operation—such as recruitment and programming focused on recent high school graduates, or annually increasing tuition and fees—are no longer feasible. To remain viable in a competitive environment, higher education institutions must consider replacing these methods with systematic ones that improve the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of their academic programs.¹ And institutional leaders should

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October 2015

recognize that faculty and staff members must be included in all aspects of the change process, including: identifying what areas need improvement; designing new programs, services or processes; and implementing changes in their respective areas.

At Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), enrollment of traditional students (high school graduates) had increased for several years and enrolls 14,000 students annually. The university had largely focused its new programs and services in meeting the needs of a growing population of traditional-age students (18 to 22 years old), including investments in new residence halls, additions to academic buildings and transitioning from Division II to Division I athletics.

Like many similar institutions, SIUE was building its infrastructure and reputation by relying heavily on the “four R’s” in which most large schools thrive—rankings, research, real estate and rah! (sports).² Most students were from central or southern Illinois and instruction was mostly delivered in traditional classrooms. With steady state support and a growing student population, there was little need to do anything differently.

This started to change in the fall of 2012 when the state budget was reduced by 6% and student enrollment declined for the first time in six years, creating a serious budget shortfall. SIUE’s first 10-year strategic plan, developed in 2002, was in its final year and it was clear that a new, bold plan would have to be created to address changes in the external environment.

A campus-wide strategic planning committee was formed—comprised of faculty, staff, students, administrators, alumni and community representatives—to review the university’s mission, vision, values and long-term goals given the current and projected future context for public higher education. It reviewed trends, strategic planning best practices, comparative data

in changing student demographics, state support for public higher education, and enrollments at area universities and community colleges.

After revising and approving mission, vision, values and goals statements, complementary plans also were developed (such as academic, enrollment management and IT plans). Initiatives and short-term objectives under each of the long-term goals also were developed, and there was a strong desire to involve a large number of faculty and staff members in the development process, particularly for teaching and learning objectives. Senior leaders recognized the need for innovation, but real change required mobilizing faculty and staff to address issues they believed were important.

In 2013, SIUE's provost initiated several mediated conversations with faculty and staff regarding the changing landscape of higher education and how these challenges could affect enrollment, teaching, learning and the university's continued viability. These town-hall style meetings gave faculty and staff members a forum to share their thoughts about the university's strengths, challenges and opportunities.

Following these meetings and presentations, faculty and staff were divided into groups to envision SIUE's New REALITY, which stands for reimagining excellence in academics and learning through innovation, technology and you. Each group engaged in exercises to discuss how the university could meet the challenges that lie ahead. After the exercises, faculty and staff could choose to participate in the following work teams that aligned with the new strategic plan's long-term goals:

- **Enrollment:** Expanding enrollment and reaching new student populations.
- **Retention:** Retaining students and improving graduation rates.

- **Competency-based and prior learning:** Designing competency-based and prior-learning assessments while ensuring quality.
- **Efficiencies:** Retooling our processes (such as admissions, registration or curricular reform) for speed and adaptability.
- **Experiential learning:** Enhancing and reinvigorating experiential learning throughout the curriculum and co-curricular activities.
- **Internationalization:** Developing international programming and improving campus support for international students.
- **E-learning:** Initiatives to increase the quantity and quality of online learning offerings.
- **Innovative pedagogies:** Supporting student learning and academic quality. Enhancing learning in face-to-face settings and in online, hybrid and blended formats.

The teams received assignments from the provost and had a short timeline to research, brainstorm and report their short-term and long-term recommendations. Work teams met multiple times, and all the groups were occasionally brought together for a progress report or guest speaker.

Each team's chairperson and the original leadership team became the Steering Committee, which reviewed short and long-term recommendations and prioritized the initiatives. Some work teams quickly identified and implemented recommendations, including simple changes relative to student billing processes, and others integrated their identified action plans into existing office operations or committees. The enrollment services offices—including admissions, financial aid and registration and records, along with the enrollment management committee—took the lead on implementing many of the changes. The major

recommendations were incorporated into the SIUE strategic plan while small improvements that were relatively easy to implement were channeled to the appropriate units for immediate deployment.

Entering the fall semester of 2015, the New REALITY initiatives have led to impressive results. SIUE boasted a record enrollment with increases in freshmen, transfer students, graduate students and international students. To reach new student populations, partnerships were developed with manufacturers and healthcare organizations within and beyond the St. Louis area to deliver more variety in SIUE's degree programs. The university also expanded its partnerships with community colleges in Illinois and Missouri. The number of articulation agreements (transfer policies for degree programs) with regional community colleges has grown more than 50% over the past three years, and a new regional tuition rate significantly increased the number of students from Missouri and surrounding states.

First to second-year retention improved from 69.2% for the class of 2012 to 75.3% for the class of 2014, a result of implemented recommendations from the work team that focused on retention and graduation success. These initiatives included the enhancement of supplemental instruction, tutoring, peer mentoring and a redesign and expansion of the honors program. SIUE also increased the number of scholarships provided to better meet the financial needs of students.

A group of interested faculty members and administrators attended training on developing competency-based instruction, and two pilot projects are currently in development. These projects would create online and competency-based versions of courses in general education and business. Based on the recommendation and momentum of New REALITY, SIUE

also revisited College Level Examination Program (CLEP) requirements and advanced-placement testing acceptance policies. In the last academic year, CLEP participation increased substantially, and various programs also are considering options for leveraging prior-learning assessments.

Several changes were made to expand and improve key processes for recruiting, admitting, registering and billing students, particularly graduate students. SIUE hired three staff members in the admissions office who would focus specifically on recruiting and assisting graduate and international students. Before these individuals were brought on board, the admissions office had focused their efforts solely on recruiting freshmen and transfer students.

These new staff members were able to host and participate in local, regional, global and virtual graduate recruitment events. They also assisted in facilitating agreements with employers and international universities, and additional recruitment materials were developed in multiple languages. The admissions website was updated and online admission applications were added to it.

Through these efforts, the university saw a steady increase in the number of graduate and international student applications. The additional staff in the enrollment management unit also worked with graduate program directors to determine SIUE's capacity for increased enrollment and streamlined the application review process for each program.

These steps helped to increase the number of students admitted into graduate programs and decreased the time needed to review and process graduate student applications. The increase also was a result of small, effective changes such as using expedited mail services instead of standard U.S. post service, allowing for online course registrations and eliminating

various forms of financial holds that prevented graduate students from registering. This fall, SIUE projects saw an increase in the total number of graduate students for the first time in more than a decade.

The efforts of the office of the provost, the academic units and shared governance have reduced time for curricular reviews and approvals. Concurrent reviews and coordination among groups also helped remove inefficiencies in the review process. By working with the colleges, schools and faculty to establish preapprovals and by shepherding proposals through the shared governance and SIUE System processes, several new academic programs have been approved, such as programs in integrative studies and nutrition.

To improve recruitment and retention of international students, faculty and administrators visited several countries to form partnerships and develop dual-diploma agreements with universities in Europe and Asia. An international recruiting team was hired, an English as a Second Language Institute was established and services that would benefit international students were added to the campus, such as a car rental program. As a result, the number of international students has increased from 311 in the fall of 2012 to more than 500 in the fall of 2015.

The provost's office issued two internal request-for-purchase processes to spur growth in online course offerings. In January, 2015, SIUE offered its first completely online intersession (winter semester) with 672 students enrolled in 23 online courses. In the summer of 2015, 40% of the courses were delivered online, which increased the overall summer enrollment.

There was one recurring recommendation related to student learning and pedagogy: Develop a center to support faculty development. The center would build on the robust

professional development opportunities that already exist throughout the campus and could provide a centralized location to encourage faculty access and utilization. It would house resources and development opportunities regarding experiential learning, innovative teaching strategies, research and creative activities, as well as mentoring and leadership training. Progress on this recommendation includes the establishment of a faculty center advisory board, drafting of operating papers and plans for the facility.

The New REALITY teams also proposed centralizing online resources for faculty development. As a result, the office of the provost worked with IT services to develop a new online portal to facilitate faculty access to development opportunities.

Formally updating SIUE's strategic plan charted a new course for the university, and the New REALITY project³ encouraged collaborative brainstorming, problem solving, planning and actions that moved SIUE toward its goals. This complemented the strategic planning process and engaged talented faculty and staff in an inclusive, democratic initiative to help the university address the changing landscape of higher education.

References and note

1. Julie A. Furst-Bowe, "Systems Thinking: Critical to Quality Improvement in Higher Education," *Quality Approaches in Higher Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2011, pp. 2-4.
2. Ryan Craig, *College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of Higher Education*, St. Martin's Press, 2015.
3. For more information about Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's New REALITY project, visit the website at <https://www.siu.edu/innovation/newrealityproject.shtml>.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my colleague, Denise Cobb, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, for her assistance with this article.

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