

The Self-Study as a “Strategic Event”  
Cultural Change through Coordinated Self-Study and Strategic Planning Processes

Todd Drew  
Peru State College

Dan Hanson  
Peru State College

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This paper presents a case study regarding coordination of accreditation self-study (SS) and strategic planning (SP) processes to engage a college community in discussion leading to consensus on organizational culture change. The case involves the experience of Peru State College, a public open enrollment institution in southeast Nebraska. Organizational development approaches are presented, with a focus on sustaining institutional momentum and improving student engagement. Student impact results are also shared.

## **The Self-Study as a “Strategic Event”**

### **Cultural Change through Coordinated Self-Study and Strategic Planning Processes**

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#### ***Introduction and Context***

The purpose of this paper is to share a case study of what was found to be a successful strategy to coordinate accreditation self-study (SS) and strategic planning (SP) processes to engage the College community in discussion leading to consensus on organizational culture change. The case involves the experience of Peru State College, a public open enrollment institution in southeast Nebraska. The College offers a mix of online and traditional undergraduate programs and online graduate programs in education and organizational management. Nebraska’s first college, Peru State was established in 1867 and currently serves around 2,400 students.

In fall 2009, new executive leadership, along with faculty and staff were considering defining the strategic direction for the College. The current strategic plan horizon extended only to 2008. These groups were also considering the best process to support reaffirmation of accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and prepare for the related site visit in fall 2011. The College was dealing with many challenges, including organizational fatigue from a decade of rapid growth and programmatic innovation, a history of complicated relations with the institution’s constituencies, and rapid changes in the competitive environment. All of these conditions were more acute given the institution’s small size and unusually limited resources. As initial discussions were held on campus to define the state of affairs, it became evident that the primary factors constraining the organization were an unclear vision for the future and inchoate values. These were thought to be addressed through an intentional organizational intervention based on proven organizational development concepts, models and practices.

#### ***Planning for Change***

As deliberations progressed, change facilitators developed strategies in several key areas essential to the overall change effort (developed based on Cummings and Worley 2008, 164-184):

- Motivating change, including creating readiness and overcoming resistance;
- Creating a vision for the change initiative and desired outcomes;
- Developing political support, including identifying and involving key stakeholders;
- Managing the transition through organizational structures and project plans;
- Sustaining momentum, through continued support for the process and desired new behaviors.

Before undertaking an intentional organizational development process, facilitators considered the change management literature and the organization’s readiness for change. Most helpful was developing an understanding of

resistance to, readiness for, and alternative models to foster change. Organizations have their own ingrained and distinct cultural attributes, not all of which are consciously processed by stakeholders. They often suffer from insight, action and psychological inertia that collectively serve as barriers to change (Godkin and Allcorn 2008). To manage through organizational inertia and deal with resistance to change, a formal development model was adopted.

Although there are many conceptualizations of change processes, in this case the Positive Model or philosophy (described in detail in Cameron, Dutton and Quinn 2003) was adopted by facilitators. This approach usually involves, as one might guess from the title, “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI) as opposed to the deficit identification and solution generation approach inherent in the classic Action Research Model. AI focuses on more comprehensive stakeholder involvement, valuing positive elements of organizational culture and creating a positive orientation to change to enhance the organization’s potential (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000, Watkins and Mohr 2001).

### ***Process Characteristics and Results***

The process started with several assumptions, one of which was the notion that the quickest way to doom a change initiative is to label it as such. It becomes less organic and more artificial, which immediately sparks a reaction from the practically-oriented who wonder how such a significant endeavor can be undertaken and sustained. Coordinated SS and SP processes provided a mechanism for fundamental issues to be discussed from the strategic point of view and provided a greater sense of urgency as the hard deadline of the SS report’s submission loomed. Use of the phrase “practically-oriented” to describe stakeholders illustrates another critical assumption consistent with the AI approach, which was that stakeholders were not “entrenched” but instead fundamentally interested in change. Still, change should be clearly mission-related and supported with evident commitment from leadership. A third assumption was that stakeholders had to be reminded of the benefits of change efforts. The process coordinators created a “Strategic College Enhancement Model” to characterize the practical and interrelated benefits of organizational change. Although this model was not distributed formally, it was used in speeches and planning sessions to organize leaders’ comments. This provided a sense of greater purpose and context for the change effort.

Key elements of the coordinated SS and SP processes included:

- Direct leadership commitment and involvement in that the President chaired and facilitated the SP process and the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) coordinated the SS process. The SS steering committee was chaired by a faculty member.
- A detailed project plan and timeline of two year’s duration was created and shared. These documents and a draft SS report were reviewed by the College’s HLC representative, who also made a campus visit to help introduce the

process and answer questions. This was an essential step toward making effort allocation decisions, particularly in determining the level of evidence needed to support various conclusions.

- Steering and subcommittees were established for both processes with much consideration for representation from various stakeholder groups. Overlapping membership facilitated communication. Existing shared governance bodies were represented on committees and were kept informed and involved throughout the process.
- Committee participants were invited to experience professional development activities associated with the process. For example, the College invested in sending a large team of faculty and staff members to HLC workshops and the VPAA participated in a Harvard University leadership development experience focused on organizational change.
- Input was gathered through town hall, senate, school and department meetings where anyone could make a strategic proposal as well as through a series of stakeholder surveys developed by the committees. Proposals were shared and refined in an iterative process with stakeholders and information gathered on perceived viability and political support.
- All activities of the College were clustered into a number of broad programs, each of which was reviewed by stakeholders and reports shared with the relevant committees and/or governance bodies.
- Meetings often featured dissemination of “best practice” literature and the institution’s own assessment data to focus discussions.

Results of these efforts included a new, well-defined vision statement and a recommitment, now organizationally, to the original process theme of “*essential engagement*” as well as the development of organizational values symbolized by the terms *engage, inquire, discover and innovate*.

The most valuable investment the College made during the process was professional development for participants. Not only was practical knowledge gained and shared from these experiences and organizational commitment reaffirmed, but esprit de corps developed quickly for participants who previously did not have much opportunity to work together. The highest risk taken in the process was to have senior leadership so directly involved as facilitators. While this showed the commitment of senior leadership necessary for organizational change, it also had the risk of appearing too “top-down” in approach. To address this risk, several committees were used and were chaired by faculty members and other professional staff. The process was conducted with complete transparency with evolving ideas and tentative conclusions being shared with stakeholders as quickly as practical. All feedback was presented to steering committees and governance bodies. Stakeholders with known opposing views were intentionally selected for leadership roles and invited to present their perspective.

### ***Sustaining Momentum***

Institutionalization of change occurs when organizational citizens are effectively socialized about the change process and related activities; participant commitments are secured at key points in the process and by appropriate members of various levels of the organization; desired behaviors are rewarded and/or conditions are created for intrinsic rewards to be experienced; there are mechanisms to foster diffusion of understanding and practicing desired behaviors; and a means of sensing and calibrating deviations from the desired behaviors exists (Cummings and Worley 2008, pg. 205-206). In addition to the classic strategy of sharing the strategic plan with all stakeholders, various organizational systems that could impact behavior were reconsidered and modified with stakeholder support to foster the new cultural orientation toward engagement.

In the realm of the symbolic, campus email signature blocks were changed to include the values tag line, an engagement logo was created (affectionately known as the “Gearhead Guy”) and used in communication materials and on banners around campus, and “*Caution! Engagement Zone*” mouse pads were provided to interested employees and placed in public computer labs. Then the College began to take a life-cycle approach to organizational citizenship from employee attraction through promotion. Employment announcements, interviews, orientations, campus communications, position descriptions, individual performance reporting and evaluation forms, rank promotion and tenure processes, etc. were all reconsidered and modified, when possible, to add a focus on engagement. The College identified new peer groups for performance benchmarking, including aspirational peers, and engagement assessment data were emphasized in faculty, staff and executive meetings. Organizational leaders were coached to ask in what way proposals were supportive of the strategic plan and new values. Presidential addresses included updates on strategic plan progress, progress in terms of key performance indicators and anecdotes regarding engagement success. An annual SP progress report was prepared and shared publicly on the President’s webpage along with the original plan document and SS reports.

At the strategic level, two significant organizational decisions were made to indicate commitment to the engagement initiative and directly foster progress toward an engagement-oriented culture. The first was the creation of an Institute for Community Engagement (ICE), the mission of which is to provide engagement-related programming for students in the form of new courses and experiences, as well as to model effective student engagement practices and support them with practical advice, resources, and administrative time and energy. Although resources are quite limited, the creation of the ICE was prioritized and launched early in the plan execution period. The second significant strategy to promote engagement as an organizational value was to create Student Engagement Enhancement (SEE) funding for an internal grant program. Approximately one-third of the faculty received some form of funding and the diversity of new project ideas was impressive. The funding commitment for these two initiatives, while not large compared to initiatives at other institutions, was significant in the context of the College’s size, hence reinforcing the commitment to the new values.

### ***Initial Benefits***

The College received a strong reaffirmation of accreditation with no follow-up reporting required. The team noted the “animating vision” and “overwhelming support” of the new strategic direction. This was a significantly better outcome than that of the prior evaluation when, due to a lack of organizational attention to several key areas, a focus visit and further follow-up reporting was necessary. Compared to past experiences, the process was more efficient in terms of time and resources, provided more focus and seems to have, Hawthorne Effect possibility acknowledged, generated results. The process was efficient in that all information gathering served two purposes: guiding the strategic plan and providing evidence for reaffirmation of accreditation. The SP and SS processes were mutually reinforcing. In the past, for this institution and likely others, the goal of reaffirmation of accreditation became an end in itself. Institutions can focus on that goal alone and thus the whole experience runs the risk of becoming a compliance exercise with little sustained impact. Integrating SS and SP processes can increase attention paid to both, make outcomes more relevant to more individuals and sustain impact for a longer period of time. In this case, the College appears to have adopted the values comprehensively and conversations supporting decisions now frequently feature the key organizational values generated by the combined processes. The experience and resulting values clarification directly drove subsidiary planning processes in athletics, enrollment management and marketing, facilities and student life. Alumni and donor relations were also enhanced in the sense that they provided new opportunities for contacts and conversation. Many curricular changes were made to academic programs to develop and support the capacity for greater engagement in and outside the classroom. The most significant changes were made in the College’s general studies program which was completely reconceptualized to add, among other things, a capstone-like requirement. Several new courses were created, including a new Community Development course focused on community engagement activities. Perhaps most notable as a qualitative result was the unanimous vote of Student Senate to create a new fee for scholarships to support international engagement experiences.

There is preliminary quantitative evidence of a positive impact on students:

- Full-time freshmen retention for those entering in 2011 increased nearly six percentage points from the five-year average of the years prior to the process.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Supportive Campus Environment (SCE) scores for first-year students significantly improved with scores for 2012 significantly above the Plains Public peer group and statistically equivalent to the NSSE top 10%.
- NSSE measured perceptions of overall quality significantly improved for first-year students in 2012 with scores significantly higher than Plains Public and Small Public peer groups and statistically equivalent to the Small Private aspirational group.

- A significant decline in NSSE Enriching Educational Experiences scores for seniors was halted and stabilized for the last two years.

### **Conclusion**

The process described here is not perfect and remains a work in progress. Additional evidence of success will be provided if, over time, National Survey of Student Engagement perception scores for seniors improve in a manner and pattern similar to those for first-year students. The College continues to struggle with maintaining a commitment to the values that emerged, especially in the face of new budget challenges. However, it appears clear in this instance that the value of accreditation self-study can be intentionally evolved from an elaborate documentation exercise culminating in a report as an outcome, to an integrated part of strategic planning and ultimately to a springboard for organizational development. Although the techniques applied in this case were in a small college setting, they are likely to be scalable for organizational size, transferable across organizational types (e.g., for public & private organizations), and useful regardless of strategic question (i.e., not just for refining values, but to consider strategic questions like adoption of new technology or instructional approaches such as blended coursework or e-texts). The Higher Learning Commission's new Open Pathway approach directly supports the integration of self-study and strategic planning processes as well as the concept of using reaffirmation of accreditation as a catalyst for organizational development. This case describes an example of how this might work and the associated initial results.

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Todd Drew is Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dan Hanson is President at Peru State College.