

Conducting a SWOT Analysis for Program Improvement

Betsy Orr

University of Arkansas, Arkansas, United States

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of a teacher education program, or any program, can be the driving force for implementing change. A SWOT analysis is used to assist faculty in initiating meaningful change in a program and to use the data for program improvement. This tool is useful in any undergraduate or degree program. Strengths and weaknesses are revealed and adjustments to curriculum, internships, learning activities, education policies, etc., are justifiable if based on a SWOT analysis of a program. Major improvements to a program can be a direct result of using this analysis with undergraduate and graduate students.

Keywords: program improvement, business education, assessment

Introduction

How do you have meaningful involvement with the candidates in your teacher education program? Most institutions require an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on applicant qualifications, candidate and graduate performance, and unit operations to evaluate and improve the unit and its programs.

SWOT is an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. A SWOT analysis is a simple tool to assist faculty to initiate meaningful change in a program and to use the data for program improvement. After spending a considerable amount of time with undergraduate students in advising sessions, it was evident that these same students were capable of assessing the existing program and could vision how a restructured program should look. A SWOT analysis was conducted at the undergraduate and graduate levels with students who were admitted to the teacher education program.

Strengths

The strengths refer to the things the organization does well. To identify the strengths, we consider the areas that others view the organization or program as doing well. Strengths may be the curriculum, leadership, school relationships, faculty, and/or reputation. Other questions to ask are “What do you do better than anyone else?”; “What unique resources do you have access to?”; “What do your stakeholders see as your strengths?”; and “What are the indicators of success at your school?”.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses refer to the things the organization needs to improve. Weaknesses in resources or capabilities hinder the organization from achieving a desired goal or mission. Consider what people in your area are likely to see as weaknesses. By understanding your weaknesses, you can focus on specific areas you need to improve.

Questions to address are “What could you improve?”; “What should you avoid?”; “What are people in your area likely to see as weaknesses?”; and “What factors hurt you in recruitment?”.

Opportunities

Opportunities are trends that your organization could take advantage of. These are outside factors or situations that exist that may affect your organization in a positive way in achieving a desired goal or mission. Examining the trends is helpful in identifying opportunities.

Threats

What obstacles do you face in your organization? This is the time to look at what others are doing. What are they doing better? Threats are outside factors that current exist that affect your organization in a negative way.

Literature Review

Classroom assessment should involve active participation between the students and the educator to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what is expected (McLaurin, Bell, & Smith, 2009). Danca (2006) described “How a SWOT analysis works...”. It accomplishes this by assessing an organization’s strengths (what an organization can do) and weaknesses (what an organization cannot do) in addition to opportunities (potential favorable conditions for an organization) and threats (potential unfavorable conditions for an organization). SWOT analysis is an important step in planning and its value is often underestimated despite the simplicity in creation.

According to Balamuralikrishna and Dugger (1995), a SWOT should cover the internal environment of the institution (i.e., faculty and staff, learning environment, current students, operating budget, various committees, and research programs), and the external environment of the institution (i.e., prospective employers, parents and families of students, competing colleges, preparatory high schools, population demographics, and funding agencies).

Osgood (2006) suggested that the SWOT list becomes the basis for further strategic planning. This suggestion is supported by Creswell, LaVigne, Simon, Dawes, Connelly, Nath, and Ruda (2000) that,

The results of a detailed SWOT analysis also provide valuable material for continued planning and support-generating activities. The strengths can be presented and emphasized to potential supporters. Discussion of weaknesses and threats provides useful information for strengthening the project or plan where possible, or anticipating the effects of environmental threats.

Utilizing a SWOT analysis can be used as a means for departure of a strategic plan, thus, making it a flexible instrument. To operate in this manner, the company must concentrate its future objectives on its strengths (Houben, Lenie, & Vanhoof, 1999).

Relevance

A SWOT analysis is a high-level and critical thinking exercise for students. The practice can be duplicated in any education setting. Teachers can conduct a SWOT analysis of their particular classes, teacher preparation program, or internship experience. Frequently, educators have a vague idea of their SWOT. Discussion of these areas takes place in meetings with students, other faculty, or mentor teachers. However, action is usually never

taken on the ideas for program improvement.

The implementation of a SWOT analysis should be considered as just one input to strategic planning. It should never be used alone.

Procedures for Conducting a SWOT Analysis

The procedures for conducting a SWOT analysis are simple and straight forward. However, in most cases, the procedures are determined by the person conducting the SWOT analysis:

(1) Identify the group you will work with: for example, one particular class, all students enrolled in a particular program, a subset of advisees;

(2) Explain the purpose and goal of the activity;

(3) Choose a recorder: This should not be the facilitator;

(4) Use a flip chart or some other method, in round-robin fashion, each participant will identify strength. The recorder will record the responses on the flip chart. If a participant chooses to pass, he/she will say "Pass" and the next person will continue. Example strengths may be high quality students, strong support staff, current technology, accreditations, locations, and curriculum;

(5) A different sheet of paper will be used for weaknesses. Examples of weaknesses are lack of diversity in faculty, outdated buildings, morale, limited budget, outdated curriculum, scheduling of when courses are offered, and out of date software;

(6) A different sheet of paper will be used for opportunities. Examples of opportunities are changes in technology, changes in population profiles, industry trends, and geographic area;

(7) A different sheet of paper will be used for threats. Examples of threats are competition from other universities, national decline in teaching, legislative effects, economy, and geographic area.

In developing the list of SWOT, the institution and organization goals and missions should be considered. The SWOT analysis should illustrate where you are now and where you want to go.

Implication for Action

A SWOT analysis of a teacher education program or any program can be the driving force for implementing change. It is one tool to use in a strategic planning process. Strengths and weaknesses are revealed and adjustments to curriculum, internships, learning activities, education policies, etc., are justifiable if based on a SWOT analysis of a program. The SWOT provides a focused measure on how your students perceive the program.

Contextual factors, such as students, subject, and societal influences may cause a SWOT analysis to be misled. For example, if students in a particular class had negative impressions of the instructor, the SWOT analysis could show that the curriculum was weak, if the students participating in the SWOT identified the curriculum as a weakness.

References

- Balamuralikrishna, R., & Dugger, J. C. (1995). SWOT analysis: A management tool for initiating new programs in vocation schools. *Journal of Vocational and Technical Education*, 12, 1.
- Creswell, A., LaVigne, M., Simon, S., Dawes, S., Connelly, D., Nath, S., & Ruda, J. (2000). *And justice for all: Designing your business case for integrating justice information, center for technology in government*. Retrieved May, 2000, from http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/guides/and_justice_for_all?chapter=9 §ion=2

- Danca, C. (2006). *SWOT analysis*. Retrieved April 12, 2006, from <http://www.stfrancis.edu/ba/ghkickul/stuwebs/btopics/works/swot.htm>
- Houben, G., Lenie, K., & Vanhoof, K. (1999). A knowledge-based SWOT-analysis system as an instrument for strategic planning in small and medium sized enterprises. *Decision Support Systems*, 26(2), 125-135. Retrieved from <http://0-www.sciencedirect.com.library.uark.edu/science/article/pii/S016792369900024X>
- McLaurin, S. E., Bell, B., & Smith, C. (2009). *A practical rationale for classroom assessment: The SWOT approach*. Retrieved October 1, 2009, from <http://0-www.eric.ed.gov.library.uark.edu/PDFS/ED507140.pdf>
- Osgood, W. R. (2006). *Where is my business headed and why?* Retrieved April 12, 2006, from http://www.buzgate.org/me/bft_swot.html