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Instructional Support Centers and The Art of Surviving: Some Practical Suggestions

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American colleges and universities are in considerable distress as they face the necessity or the prospect of budget cutting. They are troubled because their hopes of enhanced quality and widened access are thwarted. Faculty and staff are insecure and discouraged. Many presidents and deans who have dared to propose specific budget cuts are under siege. The magnitude of the problem varies among institutions but few are totally exempt. It is not a happy time in academe (Howard R. Bowen, 1982).

When resources were plentiful, we were spared the awkward need to evaluate older programs in the light of new ones, of deciding whether those programs no longer central to a university's mission or duplicated nearby should go in order to fund adequately programs of higher priority (Frank Newman, 1982).

Anyone familiar with the American Higher Education System does not require additional data to be convinced that the next decade will not be an easy one for most colleges and universities. Inflation, decreasing enrollments, changes in the student grant and loan programs, and the drive toward reducing taxes in many states have all combined to bring a sense of uneasiness to campuses that have long prided themselves on being islands isolated from the world of layoffs, budget reductions, and other fiscally related trauma.

While the number of institutions that will actually close in the next

few years may be limited, there is little question that almost every college and university (private and public, large and small, two-year, four-year, and graduate) will experience enrollment decline with individual programs and departments being reduced or eliminated.

Support Agencies—Out on the proverbial limb. As one of the newer units in the organization, instructional development agencies are among the most vulnerable to cuts or elimination. Rarely perceived as an integral part of the traditional university, without a long history and without the obvious mission of the computer center, AV center, library, admissions and development offices, newer units such as instructional development and faculty development offices can expect to be one of the first areas on any list for possible reduction or elimination. In a recent study of 61 instructional improvement centers, Gustafson and Bratton (1983) reported significant budget reduction in well over half between 1975 and 1982.

Survival cannot be left to chance. There is little question that when they are effective, instructional development agencies can play a significant role in helping an institution meet the challenge of the next decade. They can assist administrative offices and departments in establishing priorities and setting criteria for resource allocation. They can have a direct impact on enrollment, attrition, and the overall health of an instructional program. In addition, they can help improve the effectiveness of faculty and attitudes that both faculty and students have toward the academic climate. However, for agencies to maintain their support, two things must occur:

1. The unit must be effective. It must have a positive and significant impact on the institution; and
2. This relationship (if it exists) and the significance of it must be understood by the decision-makers.

What follows are six specific suggestions for action designed to promote the health, effectiveness, and longevity of instructional development centers.

Steps to Survival

1. Identify the priorities of your institution

What is important? Which programs require and merit help? What new areas are to be developed and where are those programs that require major revision? What institutional commitments to change or improvement have been and are being made, i.e., what are the priorities for the next few years. This information can be obtained from:

1. Publications/Reports
2. Formal Meetings
3. Informal Conversations
4. Public Hearings

As you might anticipate, the information you collect may at times be vague and even contradictory. While it is not always an easy task to identify the key priorities, your first step must be to develop a draft of such a statement.

Once you've developed your list, check it out with key decision-makers, the people whose perception will affect the future of the agency and those to whom the agency reports. Expect to revise and revise again. From this list, you'll identify those statements where substantial agreement exists. It is these sets of institutional goals that will determine the priorities of your agency. If there are instances where you seriously question the logic of what you have found, this is the ideal time to let people know your concerns and to serve as a catalyst in having change occur and differences in perspective eliminated or at least reduced.

2. Identify the key decision-makers

It is amazing how often academic units fail to identify those individuals who will be most important in deciding whether or not their particular operation should be supported, reduced, or eliminated. This group includes:

1. Administrator(s) to whom the unit directly reports

2. Other administrators and administrative aides
3. Deans and department chairmen with whom the unit works (including those who have the responsibility for the courses and programs that are being supported.)
4. Faculty being served
5. Faculty and staff on key committees (advisory, academic affairs, curriculum, etc.)
6. Unofficial opinion leaders and other respected faculty

3. Identify the criteria the decision-makers will use to judge the agency

It is often surprising how little we know about the factors that others use in determining our worth. Several years ago we developed those criteria that various individuals use to judge their work (1). It soon became apparent that not only were wrong assumptions being made but also several agencies were emphasizing activities that were not particularly significant to the institution. Others were collecting and providing the wrong kind of information in their reports. It was found, for example, that while the directors of several faculty development offices had set one kind of goals for their units (large number of faculty served, improved faculty attitudes, publications by staff, etc.), the administration to whom they reported were interested in impact on attrition and recruitment—factors not mentioned by a single director. At one institution a support agency was voted out of existence by the faculty who perceived the unit as placing more emphasis on national reputation than on providing them service.

While some administrators will tend to resist being specific, the fact that you are using the data to help serve the institution by improving the quality and effectiveness of instruction will usually help you get over this hurdle.

1. What criteria are being used to judge your worth?
2. Which of these criteria are deemed most important?

4. Develop goals that are clearly defined

If goals of various decision-makers differ and, in addition, are not

compatible with those of the center's staff, try to reach some agreement. This will often require discussions and some significant changing of attitudes on both sides. However, without basic agreement, you will be totally vulnerable to the charge that what you are doing is not particularly important to the institution.

1. Can agreement be reached among the key decision-makers as to which criteria are most important?
2. What type of data/support information do the decision-makers want, i.e., what are they looking for?

When some disagreement as to priorities still remains, it is the responsibility of the administrator of the unit to determine, usually with the help of others, which specific goals will be selected for emphasis and maximum rapport.

5. Select your projects with care

So often, if we're not careful, we wind up doing things that may be fun and personally rewarding but that are of low priority to our institutions. If at all possible, the projects selected should:

1. Relate directly to the priorities that have been established
2. Meet the criteria established by the decision-makers
3. Be cost effective
4. Have a good chance of success

Project selection is no easy task. It requires care in not only selecting what you will do but also in the selection of the faculty with whom you will work and the design process you will follow. It is crucial that projects undertaken be not only successful and conducted in an efficient manner, but that they meet priorities established for the unit. It is extremely important that goals of the unit be realistic and that every promise made be kept. Many of the factors that should be considered in the selection of a project for development will be found in TABLE I. There are times when, as a result of administrative pressure high risk projects must be undertaken. In these instances, it helps if the anticipated problems are identified and, along with a

realistic set of goals are sent to administrator making that decision. Perhaps most important of all factors is the specific faculty with whom you work, for without dedicated, competent faculty a project cannot succeed.

6. Those who need to know must know

All of the individuals identified as decision-makers must be kept informed of what is happening and what the results of projects have been. For some, this has to be on a weekly basis; for others, monthly or perhaps once or twice a year. All too often we keep administrators and chairmen of key committees in the dark only to find out when their support is solicited that they do not appreciate surprises or may have valid objections or concerns about the project—concerns that could easily have been taken care of if they had been contacted earlier and were involved. Many fine ideas have been shot down because basic homework has been overlooked.

We have many channels of communication open to us. These include:

- Formal Reports (focusing on what the reader is interested in knowing)
- Informal Reports - delivered in person perhaps with brief summary handouts.
- Informal conversations.
- Selected distribution of the materials that were produced.
- Selected distribution of journals and other materials that contain appropriate and significant information.

In addition, we should not overlook the power of positive informal comments to our colleagues by faculty and administrators who have worked with our units and received its services.

In Summary

In facing challenges of the next decade, *agency survival cannot be left to chance*. We must recognize that there will be a direct

relationship between the homework we do, the quality of our units, the impact we have, and the survival potential of our centers.

AN AGENCY THAT DOES NOT EFFECTIVELY MEET THE NEEDS OF THOSE IT SERVES WILL NOT AND SHOULD NOT SURVIVE.

TABLE I

Project Selection: Some Factors to Consider

I. Does need for the project exist?

(statements of need and general priorities from both formal and informal sources)

Student statements/failure rate/attrition/enrollment

Faculty statements

Community statements/employment history of graduates

If successful, how significant is the impact?

II. Is the area stable?

Is the program stable?

Are administrative changes under way?

Are key faculty changes under way?

Are curriculum revisions under way?

Is there long-range growth potential?

Enrollment patterns

National needs assessment

National trends and governmental directions

III. What is the potential for success?

Does the Dean's office support the project?

Is department commitment available (faculty and chairmen)?

Is faculty base (quality and numbers) available?

Is the project at the beginning of a curriculum sequence?

Is the time frame realistic to reach goals?

Will involved faculty follow required/recommended procedures?

IV. Does the agency have the necessary resources available?

What commitment is required (staff, production, budget, etc.)?

Is staff available?

Can time frame be met or can time frame be modified?

If necessary, can scope of project be modified?

V. Are there political factors that should be considered? (Are these political overrides?)

How does the project fall within priorities of individual school or department?

Does project represent a breakthrough with school or department or key individual?

How does the project affect university-wide support program balance?

Does the project have priority of top administrators?

Options

1. full support
2. support with fewer resources/slow down the development process
3. do not support
4. support with all those concerned aware of the high risk involved

Note: If key factors change during design process, the decision to support should be revised if and possible modified.

References

- Bowen, Howard R. *Sharing the Effects: The Art of Retrenchment*. AAHE Bulletin, Vol. 35, No I, September, 1982, p. 10.
- Newman, Frank *Selecting the Effects: The Priorities of Retrenchment*, AAHE Bulletin, Vol. 35, No I, September 1982, p. 13
- Gustafson, Kent. L. and Bratton, Barry. "Instructional Improvement Centers in Higher Education: A Status Survey." Presented at the American Education Research Association Meeting, April 1983.

Note

1. A review of this instrument will be found in the Winter, 1979 issue of *Planning for Higher Education*. Profile 30—"To Be Or Not To Be?" A Method for Evaluating Academic Support Agencies," by Roy B. Cohn, published by the Educational Facilities Laboratory under a grant by the Ford Foundation. A revised edition is available through the Center for Instructional Development at Syracuse University.