



Restructuring brings quality improvements to Auburn University

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Introduction

Universities have survived for centuries and are our most enduring social institutions. They are primarily focused on the young and paid for by the old through our governments and private sponsors. They are supposed to last forever. This historical ideal is in question today because of problems of inadequate funding and uncertain missions, in both the US and many countries throughout the world (Balderston, 1995). Increasing competition, a constant reduction in public funding, reduction in student enrollment and possible financial disaster are situations faced by many institutions of higher education today (Alstete, 1995; Kettinger & Wertz, 1993). With the growing demand for accountability within these constraints by university constituencies and budget reductions forced upon us by our various publics, what does the future hold? More of the same? It is hard to tell, but it is clear that we cannot simply 'ride out the storm'. All evidence indicates that we will have limited additional resources to work with for the foreseeable future. Facing this reality, educational leaders worldwide must maintain flexibility to adapt to limited funding, while maintaining and improving the quality of our educational institutions.

It is important to emphasize that, in this regard, the state of Alabama is not an isolated case. In many respects, Alabama is several years behind the trends that have occurred in other states across the US. Within this environment, how has Auburn University adapted, and how are we planning for our future? How are we lowering costs, improving quality and demonstrating a renewed focus on our students?

Auburn University's approach to quality improvement

Beginning in 1993, Auburn University developed a continuous quality improvement process, which has sharpened our focus on who we are and what we are capable of becoming. This process was led by the Auburn University twenty-first century commission, chaired by the president, with members including faculty, staff, student leadership, alumni and five trustees. This commission provided the leadership for the development of the university's vision, mission and institutional goals. Using the work of the commission as a guide, Auburn's leadership developed a strategic plan with measurable objectives and identified sources of funds. This planning process resulted in a university-wide strategic plan and renewed the spirit of working together for a common purpose. The university is increasing its productivity

by allocating resources where they will generate the best results and is improving its efficiency by reducing costs wherever possible. Within this spirit of teamwork, Auburn University has a renewed focus on who we are and what we can become as an educational institution, and a better understanding of who we serve. To maintain Auburn's recognized tradition of quality; academic programs and administrative priorities were established by university-wide committees. Before any programme or administrative service was eliminated or merged into another area, our leadership teams considered whether the area was central to our established mission and goals, was of lower quality in performance, was of higher cost per unit of output or was less productive in terms of output for the investment made. Using the programmes and administrative priorities established, student affairs completed a comprehensive quality improvement process which led to restructuring programmes and services for students throughout the division. The 3-year process focused on linking the planning, assessment and budgeting process.

On 1 September 1995, the president appointed a new vice president for student affairs to lead the restructuring and planning process. The major responsibility of the vice president was to design a system to streamline and improve the quality of programmes and administrative services for students, lower costs across the division and respond more quickly and more courteously to our students. Our students are our most important constituency and are central to everything we do. We have a keen and invested interest in our students; we place a high value on their academic and extracurricular experience, so they will develop into responsible Auburn graduates and future leaders. Although Auburn students have continued to rank well above the national norm on standardized tests for many years and have proven themselves as alumni, we must continue to work toward improving our ranked position among the best universities in the US. Currently, many indicators of Auburn's national academic stature recognize its strong undergraduate programmes and the overall quality of the undergraduate experience. The strong commitment by our faculty and student affairs staff will not only bring more success and prestige to our programmes but also increase the probability that Auburn University's vision and mission will become a reality.

Translating the vision into action

Quality begins with a vision, and any organization that does not have a leadership team to translate this vision into strategic and action plans will wander aimlessly into the future. This leadership team must have a vision for the future, a clearly defined mission and measurable goals to help to shape the future. With these key ingredients in hand, the president, provost and vice president at Auburn University initiated a major quality improvement process for the division of student affairs on 16 October 1995. The primary goal of this quality improvement process was to study and evaluate all programmes and services throughout the division and to answer the following questions. What are we doing? Does it relate to Auburn's mission? How well are we doing it? Does it help students to reach their goals? How can we do our jobs better?

Building on Auburn's tradition of excellence, a 25-member, campus-wide student affairs quality improvement core team was appointed by the president to answer these questions. This core team consisted of student affairs staff, faculty and students who had a strong commitment to improve the quality of our students' overall educational experience. The vice president for student affairs was appointed by the president to chair and facilitate this group. The core team developed a vision statement, a mission statement for student affairs and a profile of the ideal Auburn graduate. With these in hand, the quality improvement core team members chaired 18 separate cross-functional teams with over 200 participants campus-

wide. These teams studied and evaluated every programme and administrative service throughout student affairs. Each report provided strategies to support the academic success and total development of Auburn's 21 500 students. Upon recommendation from the quality improvement core team, the president carefully reviewed an approved cross-functional team reports. In addition, on 4 December 1996, a formal report with all recommended changes was presented to the president, provost, vice presidents, deans, faculty, students, state of Alabama officials, board of trustees members and other guests. The core team and cross-functional teams provided the visionary leadership and foundation for the major accomplishments over the past 3 years. Their ideas, strategies and recommendations that were approved by the president became a part of the division of student affairs strategic plan.

Change brings major accomplishments to Auburn

Restructuring brings change, and change is never easy. We have no choice but to look into the future, develop a vision and plan of action, identify major changes that will have to be made and make them (Colvin, 1997). Between 1995 and 1998, some of the major changes within the division of student affairs that helped Auburn University to reach its institutional goals included the following: reduced full-time positions from 198 to 132 (33%); consolidated all programmes and services into enrollment management services and student life; privatized student health, which eliminated a US\$465 970 deficit; and eliminated a \$199 000 operating deficit in the Foy student union. One of the greatest accomplishments that directly affects our students' educational experience was the merger of student affairs and academic affairs.

Student affairs and academic affairs merge

Beginning in the late 1800s, faculty transferred much of their responsibility for the social, affective and moral development of students to student personnel professionals, which became peripheral support roles (Garland & Grace, 1993; McConnell, 1970). Throughout the US, academic affairs and student affairs have traditionally been separate operations. With this division of responsibility, the total learning experience for students became fragmented at best. Although the need to focus on and integrate intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of undergraduate student learning has been voiced as a major concern (American Council on Education, 1949; Astin, 1984, 1993; Boyer, 1987; Brown, 1972; Miller & Prince, 1976; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Springer *et al.*, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Williamson, 1957), the struggle for collaborative learning continues between student affairs and academic affairs (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Bruffee, 1984, 1993; Jackson, 1993; Katz, 1985). Students do not separate social processes from classroom learning: most students perceive it and live it as a seamless process (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky *et al.*, 1986; Kuh *et al.*, 1991; Terenzini *et al.*, 1992; Tinto *et al.*, 1994). "The role of faculty is critical. While they generally do not receive recognition for participating in the co-curriculum, many can be convinced that their participation is valuable and of benefit to students. The key to success lies in student affairs staff promoting clear and understandable educational goals for students while at the same time working collaboratively and cooperatively with faculty, advisers, and academic deans" (Sandeem, 1991).

Beginning with the work of the quality improvement teams, an important goal was to develop a closer working relationship between student affairs professionals and faculty to benefit our students. Effective from 1 October 1997, this goal was accomplished: the merger of student affairs with academic affairs. Working together as a student affairs and academic affairs team, Auburn students will have a continuous, rich experience, beginning with the

first contact with the university through graduation. Another important benefit of this merger is that student affairs professionals share a more visible and viable role with academic leaders in the decision-making process affecting our students and the future of our university. One example that demonstrates how student affairs professionals and faculty are working together to make a difference in the total educational experience of our students is the development of a new student success center.

Student success center

The total restructuring of student affairs has been built around the quality improvement process. Best practices that integrate benefits for students of academic affairs and student affairs have been identified. One of the major purposes for creating the student success center was to improve the retention rate of freshmen from 79% in 1995 to 85% by the year 2001. Auburn University's retention rate increased from 79% in 1995 to 82% in 1997. The national retention rate at public doctoral institutions in the US is approximately 78%.

The center was named by our 1995–96 freshmen. The students wanted to avoid names such as 'academic support', which carried an academic stigma by suggesting that only students with problems would use the center. They wanted the name built around 'students' and 'success'. As a result, the students recommended that the center be entitled 'student success center', which was approved by the president and provost. Four major programmes and 26 activities were identified, evaluated and restructured into the student success center to support students from the time they are enrolled at Auburn University (e.g. freshman year experience and students in transition) until they complete their academic career, graduate and are placed with an employer (e.g. career development services). The student success center has direct linkages with colleges, schools and other areas such as the athletic department and the Auburn University medical clinic. Any student needing help with an academic problem, a personal problem, or needing any type assistance can go to the Student Success Center.

The retention cross-functional team report (Backscheider, 1996) identified the following pressing needs to be addressed by the student affairs vice president and programme leaders in collaboration with academic affairs: (1) inaugurating individually planned schedules for freshmen; (2) controlling registration of first-quarter freshmen and transfer students; (3) improving financial forecasting for students; (4) orienting parents to the academic environment and expectations for their children; (5) expanding attention to helping new students understand the change of culture, transition to new study habits, and new expectations; (6) enhancing and introducing programmes that help students to learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills; (7) enhancing both the social and academic means of 'connecting' entering students to Auburn University; (8) improving the environment for groups of students and educating ourselves and others to understand that different students have different needs; (9) reducing class sizes; (10) inaugurating more courses like SM199 (orientation course for pre-health majors); (11) developing a student success center for all students.

Analysis of national research data indicates that the student who succeeds will be skilled, connected and confident. The retention cross-functional team reported that strong partnership and collaborative efforts enhance programmes already under way and increase the number of students who succeed at Auburn University and graduate (Backscheider, 1996). Retention must be a university-wide, continuous effort. Based on the university senate approval of this student retention report, a university senate retention committee, chaired by the eminent scholar who chaired the cross-functional team, has been appointed to continually study retention problems campus-wide. This committee provides a forum for faculty and student affairs professionals to continue to work together for the success of all students.

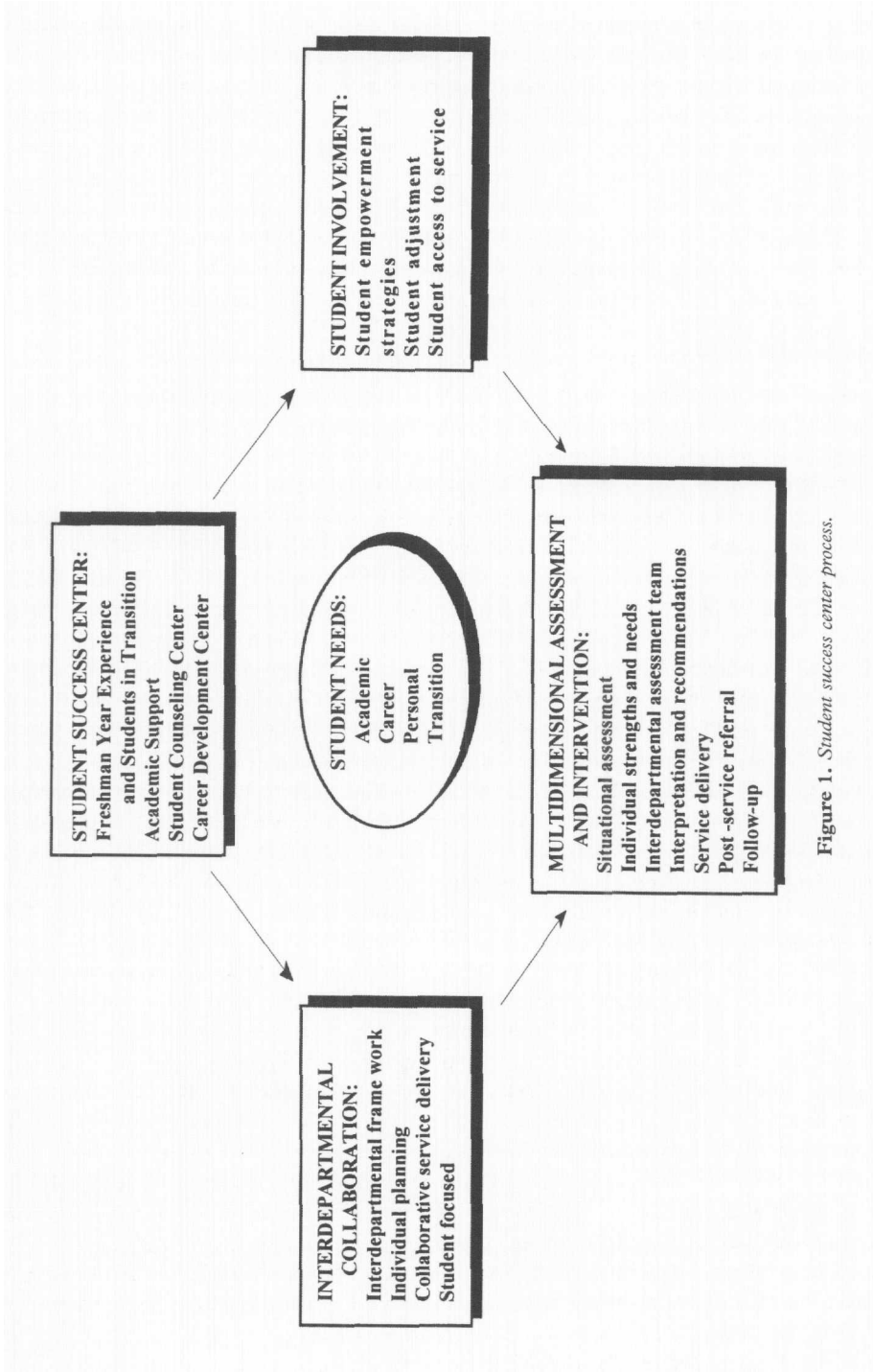


Figure 1. Student success center process.

The relationship between the student and the university is the driving force for success or failure. Processes and procedures coordinated, implemented and evaluated by the student success center team are illustrated in Fig. 1. This process shows the requirement for collaborative efforts and cross-discipline teams to work together to provide a comprehensive education for our students. Professional staff from the student success center and provost's office developed procedures to identify students with academic warning and to readmit suspended students through the student success center. This is one of the most important decision-making processes between student affairs and academic affairs that affects the success of the student at Auburn University. The student success center has been selected as one of six National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) exemplary programmes internationally for demonstrating comprehensive services to students.

Challenge for the future

Many colleges and universities will be forced to confront a complex and demanding environment as well as the changing economics, demographics and technology behind it. The message is clearly defined for many of us here today and is on the horizon for many others. As leaders of higher education, we must adapt rapidly and accept that the top of the organization is going to be very different. Here the leadership will be personalized, providing the 'soft glue' that holds the university community together. The president's leadership team must provide a sense of common identity, led by a common purpose. Most importantly, mere words cannot create this glue: it has to be lived by the president (Hesselbein *et al.*, 1996).

It will take knowledge and courage for any leader, whether a president or an academic department head, to walk into a job, identify and confront self-imposed and institutional barriers, put into place a strategic plan of action calling for major changes and involve individuals at all levels of the organization in the process. Although changing time-honored, tradition-bound, deeply ingrained ideas and practices held close to our hearts is never easy, we must assume the responsibility to translate the vision of our institutions into strategic and action plans. Although change is difficult, when the barriers come down, the results are rewarding: a competitive, productive and motivated workforce focused on the future. Morale improves, performance increases and the organizational culture begins to change. The challenge and the future is ours to embrace.

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