

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

West Liberty University

Strategic Planning Task Force Concept Paper (2018-19)

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INTRODUCTION

“Operational Efficiency” is a broad but practical theme in West Liberty University’s strategic plan. While efforts to increase efficiency are nothing new to institutions of higher education, now—more than ever—public colleges and universities find themselves heavily scrutinized and held accountable for any evidence of inefficiency. As Bess and Ray note, in *Understanding College and University Organization: Theories for Effective Policy and Practice* (2012), “Effectiveness and efficiency are highly salient in the changing world of increased accountability in higher education” (p. 751), but as “salient” as operational innovations in higher education may be, those hoping to modify a university’s operational structure face many obstacles and pitfalls.

To be clear, in identifying “Operational Efficiency” as a major theme, West Liberty University’s Planning Task Force (PTF) is not advocating for across-the-board changes to WLU’s organizational structure or methods of operation. The narrow focus of the strategic plan’s goals and strategies would not advocate for or support extensive restructuring. Instead, goals and strategies related to operational efficiency will likely be directed at specific elements of the university’s operational models. Ultimately, strategies for this theme should help the university provide a more resourceful, proficient, and supportive structure that will benefit all of the university’s stakeholders. Taking into account data collected from WLU’s key stakeholders and research, the PTF has identified four broad categories that fall under the “Operational Efficiency” theme: Strategic Governance, Role Structure, Communication and Strategic Financing.

STRATEGIC GOVERNANCE

Creating strategies for a strategic plan that cannot or will not be approved by the university’s decision-makers complicates an already complex process. Bringing governance into the planning process from the beginning, and possibly even making governance part of the plan itself, helps create strategies that can be implemented effectively and efficiently. Including strategic governance as part of a strategic plan, however, means more than simply rearranging and renaming existing methods of decision making. As Richard Morrill notes, in *Strategic Leadership: Integrating Strategy and Leadership in Colleges and Universities* (2010), “The frustrations that exist on both sides of the administrative and academic divide

cannot be resolved simply with ever-more precise clarifications of the responsibilities of shared governance. The need is for new ways of thinking and new mechanisms of decision making” (p. 82). Consequently, including strategic governance as part of the WLU’s master plan will require innovative but practical strategies with realistic goals aimed at improving the efficiency of decision-making and implementation.

Strategic plans dealing with governance are further complicated by the fact that different constituencies often have different ideas about what “governance” means and what it should be. A vital part of the planning process, therefore, will be coming to a mutual understanding of terms, concepts, and goals. Even mid-to-lower-level administrators like chairs and program directors might have their own perceptions of governance that are unique to their positions, departments, or offices. At WLU, as with most public universities in West Virginia, any thorough discussion of governance must also include the Board of Governors, the Higher Education Policy Commission, and elected officials. Although complete consensus about the meaning and role of governance at WLU will likely be impossible, empathy will go a long way in making the planning process more effective. Ultimately, goals and strategies related to strategic governance in relation to WLU’s operational efficiency should be narrowly focused, practicable, and as beneficial to all stakeholder groups as possible.

ROLE STRUCTURE

During West Liberty University’s strategic planning process, many stakeholders—especially administrators, faculty and staff—expressed concerns related to what management specialists refer to as “role structure.” Most of these concerns fell under one of two categories: first, a need for more well-defined roles and, second, areas in need of additional support, oversight, or both. For the purpose of this paper, terms and concepts related to role structure apply to individuals, departments, programs and offices, not just administrative positions.

Role Ambiguity

Simply put, “role ambiguity” is a concept that “refers to the lack of clarity in understanding what expectations or prescription exist for a given role” (Rahim, 2017). Role ambiguity minimizes operational efficiency because inadequate or vague job descriptions make it difficult for members of an organization to perform their jobs effectively while also making it difficult to know who to contact with specific needs or concerns. Specific titles, however, or not enough, as “roles” and “jobs” are not necessarily the same

thing, and in an organization like a university, with a seemingly ever-changing organizational chart, ambiguity comes in several forms.

Offsetting ambiguity, however, can be a slippery slope if universities try to narrowly define roles so much that it becomes unclear who is responsible for broader, more complex tasks that require multiple levels of resources and authority (Bess and Dee, 2008). Oftentimes, role ambiguity is not the result of an inadequate number of jobs but, instead, an uncertainty of how existing positions are defined. At times, even employees with the same job titles are expected to fulfill different roles depending on their departments, colleges, or offices. For example, one college might believe that a chair or program director is responsible for a specific task while another college might feel as though that same task is the responsibility of its dean.

Role ambiguity can also occur when roles and procedures change without adequate communication and explanation. In a stakeholder survey given to WLU's faculty and staff, one participant wrote,

There are many areas within administration where the rules keep changing, but these changes are not being passed along through the appropriate channels so that faculty/staff are able to do their jobs in a correct and timely fashion. Often much time is wasted re-doing paperwork because the proper expectations or changes to procedures were not passed along.

Role ambiguity, therefore, can occur on a job-to-job level or, as the quote above demonstrates, on a much larger university-wide level where entire clusters of employees are unsure of how to effectively and efficiently do their jobs. Groups like committees, departments, and offices are often just as uncertain about their roles as individuals, even though clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all individuals and departments help universities achieve their goals in more predictable and measurable ways.

Role Conflict

“Role conflict” is typically defined as a situation where individuals within an organization are given diverse roles that are, at times, incompatible. Research has consistently shown that ignoring role conflict can lead to inefficiency by increasing the likelihood of anxiety, inadequate performance, and frequent turnover (Moorhead & Griffin, 2015). In university settings, role conflict is frequently the result of inadequate time or conflicting responsibilities (Bess & Dee, 2008). While inadequate time is an easy concept to understand, the possibility of having “incompatible” roles in the same organization might seem impossible if the overall mission of every employee should be the same. Such problems, however, can

easily occur if an individual is put into the position of advocating for different sets of stakeholders. For example, the chair of an academic department could find himself or herself serving as the chair of general education. Such a conflict of interest could make it too easy for the chair to promote curriculum changes that disproportionately benefit his or her department. While such roles are oftentimes unavoidable (and more “efficient” timewise), recognizing the possibilities of role conflict could help create strategies that promote effective efficiency and accountability.

Role Overload

According to Griffin (2015), “A final consequence of a weak role structure is role overload, which occurs when expectations for the role exceed the individual’s capabilities.” Factors that lead to role overload include inexperience, inadequate credentials, a lack of training, a lack of resources, or taking on too many roles at once. Such circumstances often lead to “burnout,” the repeated restructuring of committees, and a seemingly never-ending cycle of hiring and rehiring employees to fill vacated positions (Fischer, 2010). The obvious results of role overload include increased costs, diminished productivity, and inefficiency.

COMMUNICATION

Any university considering ways to increase operational efficiency must recognize the importance of communication, both internal and external. During West Liberty University’s last strategic planning process, Godown and Crow (2014) wrote a concept paper on “Communicating with Institutional Stakeholders,” in which they noted that the university had “taken steps in the last 5-7 years” to improve communication, a “critical component of [the university’s] success.” However, “like any organization” there was still “room for improvement.” Five years later, communication remains a major concern for almost all of WLU’s stakeholders, and given the ever-changing nature of communication, that trend will likely continue in future iterations of WLU’s strategic plans.

In the data collection phase of WLU’s current strategic planning process, both faculty and staff considered communication a major weakness, especially in relation to departments, programs, and offices operating as silos. Intentional or not, operational silos create lapses in communication that lead to confusion, unfamiliarity, inaccurate information, and even resentment. Ironically, as Gillian Tett (2015) notes, silos are often formed by those who think that such isolation improves “efficiency, accountability, and effectiveness” (p. 254). However, although “specialized silos” might be efficient in the short-term, they eventually make the university as a whole less effective.

Strategies related to operational efficiency must also consider communication logistics. Universities that do not keep up with the communication needs of its stakeholders run the risk of jeopardizing both productivity and security. While strategies related to role structure help identify who and where information should come from, communication logistics affect the actual delivery of that information, be it online and offline.

STRATEGIC FINANCE

In the end, strategies related to operational efficiency must consider the role of strategic finance, as even the most promising strategies in a strategic plan will likely require funds to support them. As Mitchell and King reason in *How to Run a College* (2018), the “overriding goal of strategic finance” is to “provide the institution with the resources it requires to be innovative and entrepreneurial.” While largely dependent upon the university’s overall finances, goals and strategies related to strategic finance might possibly need to be as “innovative and entrepreneurial” as the initiatives themselves. Strategies related to grants, endowments, student aid, and even state policy, for example, are already being addressed in varying ways, especially in the office of Institutional Advancement. However, any strategy, new or old, could supplement those efforts or create new lines of finances that will enhance the current situation.

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Questions for Consideration

Strategic Governance

- What does “strategic governance” mean to you?
- What makes strategic governance more efficient?
- What makes strategic governance less efficient?
- Where do you see disagreement about governance at WLU?
- What goals should the Planning Task Force consider in relation to strategic governance?

Role Structure

- What should be considered when establishing roles in an organization like WLU?
- What should be considered when reforming roles in an organization like WLU?
- Where do you see examples of efficient role structures at WLU?
- Where do you see examples of inefficient role structure at WLU?
 - Role ambiguity?
 - Role conflict?
 - Role overload?
- What goals should the Planning Task Force consider in relation to role structure?

Communication

- What communication strategies increase productivity and efficiency?
- What communication strategies decrease productivity and efficiency?
- Where do you see examples of effective communication at WLU?
- Where do you see examples of ineffective communication at WLU?
- What goals should the Planning Task Force consider in relation to communication?

Strategic Financing

- At WLU, are there examples of efficient or productive strategies related to financing?
- At WLU, are there examples of inefficient or unproductive strategies related to financing?
- What areas of WLU’s operation need more attention in relation to strategic financing?
- Are there areas that are currently given too much attention in relation to strategic financing?
- What types of goals and strategies will likely require significant funds?