

Using Focused Groups for Assessment

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Abstract — A S.W.O.T. (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of a teacher education program, or any program, can be the driving force for implementing change. Strengths and weaknesses are revealed and adjustments to curriculum, internships, learning activities, education policies, etc. are justifiable if based on a S.W.O.T. 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; focused groups; S.W.O.T.; assessment*

I. INTRODUCTION

Meaningful change should be purposeful and driven. Curriculum changes should be based on relevant data. 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.

The origins of a S.W.O.T. analysis dates back to the 1960s at Harvard Business School and other American business schools [1]. S.W.O.T. is an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A S.W.O.T. analysis is a simple tool to assist faculty to initiate meaningful change in a program and to use the data for program improvement. The S.W.O.T. analysis was originally designed as a strategic tool for business schools; however, the use of S.W.O.T. is not new to the education setting. Balamuralikrishna and Dugger stated “Gorski (1991) suggested this approach to increase minority enrollment in community and other regional colleges.” [2]

There are various methods to conduct a S.W.O.T. analysis. Jackson, Joshi & Erhardt (2003) conducted a S.W.O.T. analysis by reviewing 63 studies on workplace diversity on teams and organizations [3]. Researchers at the University of Warwick linked S.W.O.T. analysis to resource-based planning embedding it with the overall planning process [4]. Not all S.W.O.T. analyses will look at the four areas of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Houben, Lenie & Vanhoof conducted a S.W.O.T. analysis and concentrated only on internal strengths and weaknesses [5].

Yearly, focused groups are identified and these groups are invited to participate in a S.W.O.T. analysis of the degree program. When given the responsibility undergraduate students are more than capable of assessing the existing program and develop a vision how a restructured program should look. A S.W.O.T. (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis was conducted at the undergraduate and graduate levels with students who were admitted to the teacher education program. The S.W.O.T. analysis was used for the purpose of program improvement in the existing undergraduate program.

A. Strengths

The strengths refer to the things the organization does well. To identify the strengths consider the areas that others view the organization or program as doing well. What are the resources and/or capabilities that allow you and the students to achieve the stated goal. 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?”

B. 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?”

C. 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 are helpful in identifying opportunities that you have not considered. Opportunities may be the technology that is available in your school, industry or lifestyle trends, or even a change in leadership in politics.

D. Threats

Threats refers to obstacles you face that is preventing you from taking advantage of opportunities. 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. Examples of threats may be what other institutions are doing, loss of faculty/staff, loss of student enrollment, and/or economy.

II. LITERATURE

Classroom assessment should involve active participation between the students and the educator to ensure there is a clear understanding of what is expected (McLaurin, Bell & Smith, 2009) [6]. Danca (2006) describes how a S.W.O.T. analysis works....."It accomplishes this by assessing an organizations 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) [7]. 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 S.W.O.T. 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 [2]. Osgood suggests that the S.W.O.T. list becomes the basis for further strategic planning [8]. This suggestion is supported by Cresswell (2000) "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." [9].

Utilizing an S.W.O.T. 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) [5].

III. RELEVANCE

An S.W.O.T. analysis is a high-level, critical thinking exercise for students. It is an internal perspective from the point of view of your stakeholders – your students. The practice can be duplicated in any education setting. Teachers can conduct a S.W.O.T. analysis of their particular classes, teacher preparation program, or internship experience. Frequently, educators have a vague idea of their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Discussion of these areas takes place in meetings

with students, other faculty, or mentor teachers; however, action is seldom implemented on the ideas for program improvement.

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In developing a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats it is important to focus on the goals and mission of the organization. A S.W.O.T. analysis should always begin with a desired goal or mission. The end result is incorporated in the strategic plan of the organization.

IV. PROCEDURES FOR CONDUCTING A S.W.O.T. ANALYSIS

The procedures for conducting a S.W.O.T. analysis are simple and straight forward. However, in most cases the procedures are determined by the person conducting the S.W.O.T. 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, or all of your stakeholders.
2. Explain the purpose and goal of the activity.
3. Develop ground rules. All responses by members in the group are considered.
3. Choose a recorder. This should not be the facilitator.
4. Using a flip chart or some other method, in round-robin fashion, each participant will identify a 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 may be 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 may be 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 may be competition from other universities, national decline in teaching, legislative effects, economy and geographic area.

In developing the list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats the institution and organization goals and missions should be considered. The S.W.O.T.

analysis should illustrate where you are now and where you want to go.

8. Combine similar items. Discuss unclear keywords and reach consensus on the meaning of the keyword.

9. Activity wrap up. If a long list has been generated allow time to prioritize the list so that the most important items are listed first.

Frequently, a follow-up meeting is required to develop the action steps.

V. IMPLICATION FOR ACTION

A S.W.O.T. 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; however, it should not be the only tool. Strengths and weaknesses are revealed and adjustments to curriculum, internships, learning activities, education policies, etc. are justifiable if based on a S.W.O.T. analysis of a program. The S.W.O.T. provides a focused measure on how your students perceive the program.

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

A S.W.O.T. analysis should be used with other tools for program improvement. Frequently, exit interviews with students are utilized with the S.W.O.T. analysis.

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