Chapter 25
Using Bad News to Make Good Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the past decade, three accrediting agencies found educator preparation programs at Big State University to have areas of concern. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) granted continued accreditation with the condition that Standard 2, the Assessment System and Unit Evaluation, undergo additional review. Likewise, the Counselor Education Program was reviewed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and although most standards were met, several, particularly in the school counseling area were not and resulted in "conditions." Finally, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) indicated that Big State University was out of compliance with certain requirements, particularly with respect to student learning outcomes in general education core courses. Although the SACSCOC concerns were directed at the university, they had a major impact on educator preparation programs.

Initially such accreditation conditions were viewed with great disappointment. However, they became the impetus for a variety of actions resulting in eventual full accreditation from all three bodies. More importantly, changes followed that ultimately produced an assessment system that provided an effective and efficient basis for ongoing informed decision making and continuous program improvement. These changes also resulted in a fundamental shift of faculty attitudes from "don't bother me," to recognizing assessment as an essential part of their professorial lives.

Along the way, a number of personnel, organizational, and technical problems were encountered, and many were resolved. What did became clear is that using data to inform decision making is an evolving process that can provide a solid basis for continuous program improvements.

BACKGROUND

Big State University was created by legislative action in 1923 and is now the largest (30,000 plus students) comprehensive higher education institution in the western two-thirds of the state. Originally formed as Texas Technological College, it opened in 1925 with an enrollment of 910. Graduate instruction began in 1927, and the College formally became Big State University on September 1, 1969. Texas Tech was first accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) in 1928. The educator preparation unit has been continuously accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) since 1963, and the Counselor Education Program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) since 1999.

Big State University is a public comprehensive university, being the only institution in Texas that includes a major university, a law school, and a medical school on the same campus. The university includes a Graduate School, nine academic colleges, an Honors College, and a University College (with a focus on outreach and distance education). The university is located in Lubbock, with a population of more than 200,000, being situated on the Southern Plains of West Texas and Eastern New Mexico.

The university is currently classified as a Research University Extensive by the Carnegie Foundation, making it one of the top 125 universities in the nation. However, Big State University is seeking to change that classification. The State of Texas currently has two Tier 1 public universities and is planning to increase that number. Texas Tech is actively pursuing that status, particularly by increasing research dollars and the number of doctoral graduates.

Strategic planning began as a coordinated university-wide effort beginning in about 2000.

Recently such planning has become more emphasized at all levels throughout the university. In the past two years Responsibility Centered Management (RCM) has became the focus for financial reform and has given greater importance to strategic planning.

A major activity within the University has been the development of Program Assessment Plans for every degree and certification program in the university. These plans are organized around student learning outcomes, associated assessments, and the use of data to improve programs.

The focus of Big State University is captured in its mission statement. "As a public research university, Texas Tech advances knowledge through innovative and creative teaching, research, and scholarship. The university is dedicated to student success by preparing learners to be ethical leaders with multicultural and global competencies. The university is committed to educating a diverse and globally competitive workforce, and enhancing the cultural and economic development of the state, nation, and world." This is an ambitious statement, and in keeping with Texas Tech's pursuit of Tier 1 status.

SETTING THE STAGE

Big State University began a strategic planning process in the 2000-2001 academic year, which focused on preparing the university for accreditation activities required by SACSCOC. The College of Education participated in these initial efforts. Prior to this time, neither the university nor the college had devoted the required time or effort to long range planning. This was noted in the fall 2000 NCATE review in which all standards were met. However, the only area for improvement that was identified was the need for long-range and strategic planning. The NCATE report encouraged college administrators to take the College's participation in University strategic planning most seriously.

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