AQIP Category Eight. Planning Continuous Improvement examines your organization’s planning processes and how your strategies and action plans help you achieve your mission and vision.

Southern Arkansas University has a long history of strategic planning. However, the processes have varied over time. Most recently, the strategic planning process has evolved into a three-year ongoing process. During the first year, the administrative council (AC) reviewed the environmental scan, SWOT analysis, and any mission and vision statement revisions, and then determined the broad goal categories that support accomplishing the University mission. The president appointed the Strategic Planning Council (SPC) from among the University’s key stakeholder groups. The SPC determined the goals and strategic initiatives and coordinated the process of soliciting input and feedback from the University community. Individual units support the mission by identifying and completing action items that are unique to their areas, but which ensure that the strategic initiatives are accomplished. Improvements in the University’s strategic planning processes were an outcome of transitioning to the AQIP pathway.

Processes for Planning Continuous Improvement vary in their level of maturity. Most elements of the planning process are systematic, including processes related to key planning processes (8P1), selecting strategies (8P2), developing key action plans (8P3) are systematic, defining objectives, measures, and targets (8P5) and employee development (8P8). These processes are repeatable with defined goals and are the target for continuous quality improvement.

Processes related to coordinating and aligning processes, strategies, and action plans (8P4) and processes related to linking strategies, actions, and resources (8P6) are aligned. These processes are stable, consciously managed by the administration and SPC. Communication is coordinated among constituencies, the administration, and the SPC.

Processes related to assessing and addressing risk (8P7) are reacting. These processes primarily respond to immediate problems without anticipating future changes.

**PROCESSES**

**8P1. What are your key planning processes?**

Southern Arkansas University’s key planning processes include strategic planning, budgeting, and planning for continuous quality improvements. These key planning processes incorporate planning and collaboration between the president, administrative council (AC), vice president’s council (VPC), AQIP council, the AQIP executive council (EC), and the strategic planning council (SPC). The University also has a master plan—the Blue and Gold Vision—for improving the campus and academic programs.

During the last three years, the University has reevaluated its strategic planning process and developed a better three-year planning cycle. The new SPC was appointed in 2012 and includes a diverse group of faculty, staff, and administrators engaged in the AQIP initiatives, students, alumni, and community members, and other key stakeholders. Figure 8-1 provides an overview of the strategic planning process.

The budgeting process at the University is well established and includes opportunities for administrators to request resources based on their strategic plans. The budgeting process is further discussed in 8P6.

Planning for continuous quality improvement is linked to the University’s AQIP Council, which is under the oversight of the AQIP EC. Opportunities for continuous quality improvement are proposed by faculty and staff members through the University’s AQIP Council. Opportunities for broad, campus-wide improvement are presented to the AQIP EC, which reviews initiatives for alignment with the University mission and selects three or four initiatives as Action Projects for the following year. Other continuous
quality improvement initiatives (CII) are implemented at the unit-level and are reported through the SAU SPUR system, our local initiative for Sharing Progress, Uniting Resources.

8P2. How do you select short- and long-term strategies?

The SPC reviews the University’s long term goals and recommends revisions and additions, which are guided by the institutional mission, vision and values, Brainstorming, SWOT analysis, and prioritization are essential parts of the process. Emerging trends (e.g., online learning and the incorporation of digital resources at the library), student surveys, continuous quality improvement initiatives, and student learning assessments also guide long-term goal. Long-term goals for the University’s strategic plan are then reviewed and approved by the AC, president, and Board of Trustees.

The SPC selects short-term strategies, called strategic initiatives. The SPC team that is assigned to each goal reviews emerging issues at the national, state, and local levels; results of key performance indicators; financial information; and campus feedback on topical areas for university priorities.

Other factors used in defining long and short-term strategies include federal and state legislation, mandates and policies from the Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE), input from key stakeholder groups, assessment results, and analysis of state and university budgetary effectiveness.

8P3. How do you develop key action plans to support your organizational strategies?

SAU’s planning process occurs from a top-down and bottom-up perspective. The University’s vision is communicated by the president, and the SPC reviews University goals, which align with the mission. The corresponding strategic initiatives are set by the SPC, working closely with the colleges, departments, and divisions. Individual units set action plans to support the achievement of the goals and objectives. As well, each area selects targets for the measurable outcomes associated with the action plans. As discussed in 8P1, opportunities for quality improvement initiatives flow from the faculty and staff through the AQIP Council. Opportunities with broad impact are proposed to the AQIP Executive Council for approval and prioritization as Action Projects for quality improvement. Approved AQIP action projects are integrated into the strategic planning and budgeting processes. Other CII are implemented at the unit-level and are reported through the SAU SPUR system.

8P4. How do you coordinate and align your planning processes, organizational strategies, and action plans across your institution’s various levels?

The current planning process is an outgrowth from the University’s Task Force for the Future (TFF) initiative developed in 2007. The TFF was charged with identifying future plans, which would position the University to begin its second century in 2009 with a dedication to quality and continuous improvement. The 2009-2014 Strategic Plan flowed from that group; however, it was soon apparent that a five-year planning horizon had two weaknesses: (1) it did not allow for the flexibility needed in today’s dynamic environment and (2) it did not facilitate meeting the ADHE requirement for a biannual strategic plan that is required prior to each legislative session. Therefore, the University’s chief planning officer initiated meetings with each planning unit in fall 2010 that produced an updated 2011-2013 strategic plan.

The University’s continuous quality improvement process and strategic planning process continue to mature. In 2010, the president appointed the University’s AQIP Council—a strong, diverse group of faculty, staff, and administrators to assume responsibility for SAU’s participation in the AQIP pathway. The AQIP Council reports to the AQIP Executive Council (EC), which includes the president, administrators, leaders from the Faculty Senate, Staff Senate, and Board of Trustees, and the AQIP coordinating team. Communication between the AQIP Council and EC help coordinate the planning
processes. In 2012, the president appointed the University’s new SPC—another strong, diverse group of faculty, staff, administrators, and other key stakeholders—to assume responsibility for the University’s strategic planning process. The SPC also includes representatives from the AQIP Council to ensure in integration between the strategic plan and continuous quality improvement. Coordination of planning processes occurs through communication between constituencies, the AQIP Council, and the SPC. Strategic initiatives are set by the SPC and communicated to the colleges, departments, and support units. In response, units identify action steps to support University goals.

**8P5. How do you define objectives, select measures, and set performance targets for your organizational strategies and action plans?**

The University’s new strategic planning process is based on a three-year cycle of establishing goals and objectives, reviewing results, and modifying goals. Figure 8-1 provides an overview of the process.

![Figure 8-1: Strategic Planning Process](image-url)
As discussed in 8P2, the SPC reviews and revises the University’s long term goals, which are approved by the AC, president and Board of Trustees. Related strategic initiatives are selected by the SPC and by the individual units in support of the mission and strategic goals. Operational and action plans are established by the colleges, departments, units, committees, or teams that are responsible for the achievement of particular goals or objectives. However, almost every unit has an action plan to help produce other more specific unit goals. For example, the School of Graduate Studies has an action plan to expand the number of graduate programs.

General outcome measures are selected by the AC. Units select measures according to their specific responsibilities. For example, measures in academic departments may be influenced by accreditation bodies, assessment plans, and program reviews; measures for non-academic areas may be influenced by research studies on retention, energy costs, governmental reporting, or building costs.

Senior leaders identify improvement priorities by reviewing gaps between current and expected performance, current performance compared to peer institutions, or current performance versus that defined in proposals from students, faculty, staff, or other stakeholders.

8P6. How do you link strategy selection and action plans, taking into account levels of current resources and future needs?

Addressing Core Component 5A

Strategic planning begins with the University’s Strategic Planning Council (SPC) and is implemented through the University’s budgeting process. Planning is based on the University’s mission and vision. Strategic goals are determined after reviewing an environmental scan and SWOT analysis, which factor in external and internal elements including current resources, projected budgetary requirements, and potential surpluses or shortfalls in funding and income. The University’s quality improvement initiatives are cross-walked with University goals to ensure integration of planning initiatives in both the strategic plan and subsequent budget planning. (3A)

The University’s resource base supports our educational programs and plans for continuous improvement. SAU receives approximately 34 percent of operating funds from state appropriations, an amount which has decreased by about 1 percent in each of the past three years. The administration and Board of Trustees (BOT) contribute to the University’s stability by budgeting modest increases in tuition and fees to offset reductions in state funding and by carefully managing expenditures. Budgeting continues to be conservative but with flexibility to allocate resources to meet high priority needs. Table 8-1 identifies recent improvements that support quality improvement initiatives. (3A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8-1: Funded Improvements for Quality Improvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software to support assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expanded services to support online learning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including online course review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer upgrades for faculty teaching online classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment of director to implement improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transitional studies programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of early alert system to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>retention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The University administrators continuously monitor trends in higher education, the economy, and the political arena. They pay particular attention to any developments emanating from the Arkansas state legislature and ADHE that will affect SAU, such as the performance-based funding initiative that were recently implemented. This information is included in annual planning and budget consideration. (3A)
The administration and Board of Trustees strategically manage funding for expansion of the physical infrastructure through the SAU *Blue and Gold Vision*. Since 2002, SAU has committed over $100 million for campus improvements, including new buildings, other facilities, renovations, and academic enrichment, with funding from a combination of bond issues and philanthropy. *(3A)*

As discussed in *category 4*, the University supports its well-qualified faculty and staff. Despite a tight operating budget, the University maintains faculty resources sufficient to meet academic needs and to support expanding programs. SAU maintains a low student-to-faculty ratio of 16:1 and provides support personnel to adequately meet student needs. Table 8-2 shows full-time faculty; during the same period, the number of full-time non-instructional staff has increased from 178 to 188. *(3A)*

Educational and general revenue provided by the state as well as student tuition and fees are dedicated to supporting academic units and student support services that allow for the production of SSCH. The University maintains individual fund units to provide control over funds as required by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) and complies with the generally accepted guidelines adopted by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB). As required, auxiliary funding is self-funded by revenue earned from within the function they provide. SAU’s major auxiliary units are student housing, food service, athletics, bookstore, and health service. *(3A)*

The budgeting process at the University is well established and includes opportunities for administrators to request additional resources based on their strategic plans. The vice president for finance (VPF) distributes budget packets to all budget units in February. As shown in Figures 8-2 and 8-3, budget requests are completed and submitted to the next level of budget responsibility.

Each department, support unit, and college is responsible for monitoring expenditures, which is facilitated by the University’s online POISE system. Budget managers may check account balances, view account activity, and view all departmental account statuses. Additionally, the Office of Financial Services periodically provides account activity reports. *(3A)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8-2: Full-time Faculty</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tenured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8-2: Academic Budgeting Flowchart*

*Figure 8-3: Non-academic Budgeting Flowchart*
8P7. How do you assess and address risk in your planning process?

Potential risks are identified by the Board of Trustees, the president, the VPC, AC, and the SAU planning process. Risks identified may arise through legislation, mandates, and audit findings. Risks are also identified through SWOT analysis, which is conducted every three years as part of the strategic planning process. These risks are communicated to the administration for discussion. Action steps are identified, incorporated into university action plans, and then monitored through the strategic planning process. As an institution, however, we recognize this is an area for improvement.

8P8. How do you ensure that you will develop and nurture faculty, staff, and administrator capabilities to address changing requirements demanded by your organizational strategies and action plans?

As previously discussed in 4P9 and 5P9, the University has processes for developing its faculty, staff, and administrators, providing multiple opportunities for continuing education and professional growth. SAU provides financial support for faculty and staff development, internal workshops, tuition waivers to support development. As goals and action plans change, the University works to provide relevant development. For example, increased emphases on online courses and programs has increased the need for faculty training about technology and best practices for online instructional development and delivery. Working through the Online Education Advisory Council (OEAC), the University offers many programs to assist faculty who are learning to develop high quality online courses. For example, the OEAC provides brown bag training programs during which presenters share best practices for developing online courses and share information about the quality assurance rubrics for online classes. The University also provides funding to support the changing needs of faculty through grants for faculty research, scholarship, and innovation through teaching with technology grants and research grants.

As discussed in 4I1, however, the University’s processes for faculty and staff development have been identified as an area for improvement. One of the University’s ongoing quality improvement action projects focuses on improving the professional development programs for faculty and staff. Information about the implementation of continuous quality improvement initiatives and strategic planning initiatives flow to the university community through presentations to units and departments, university-wide forums, and through the AQIP Council.

RESULTS

8R1. What measures of effectiveness of your planning process and systems do you collect and analyze regularly?

The University relies on a combination of direct and indirect measures to provide data related to effectiveness of the planning processes. Key Performance Indicators are summarized in Table 8-3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Measurement of</th>
<th>Tables &amp; Figures</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completed Capital Projects</td>
<td>Effectiveness in achieving goals of the Blue and Gold Vision</td>
<td>Table 8-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Endowed Professorships</td>
<td>Effectiveness in achieving goals of the Blue and Gold Vision</td>
<td>Table 8-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of Quality Improvement Initiatives</td>
<td>Effectiveness in achieving AQIP goals</td>
<td>Table 8-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results of Legislative Audit</td>
<td>Effectiveness of budgeting and financial reporting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and Staff Headcount</td>
<td>Effectiveness of human resource planning</td>
<td>Table 8-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At this time no measures of effectiveness of the strategic planning process itself. The University focuses on the achievement of performance results, many of which are discussed in other categories.

8R2. What are your performance results for accomplishing your organizational strategies and action plans?

**Blue and Gold Vision.** One key measure of effectiveness relates to progress made on the University’s *Blue and Gold Vision.* SAU has a reputation for its strong academic programs, but most of these programs have seen outstanding results with limited and outdated resources. In 2002, the president outlined the *Blue and Gold Vision* to expand and update the campus. The *Blue and Gold Vision* is SAU’s first capital campaign to raise $102.2 million for improvements to the University through a mix of public and private financing. Through the *Blue and Gold Vision,* SAU will be investing in its faculty, students and campus.

One key goal of the *Blue and Gold Vision* is related to expansion and renovation of the physical plant. Measures of the effectiveness of the capital programs are provided in Table 8-4. Additional information about some of these projects is available on the SAU Foundation website at *Blue and Gold Vision.*

Another key goal of the *Blue and Gold Vision* is to increase the number of endowed faculty professorships, which allow the University to recruit and retain faculty who are exceptional in their field. Since 2002, the University has added over $1.3 million to the endowments, providing a total of over $1.9 in funded endowments for faculty professorships. Table 8-5 summarizes the professorships secured as part of the *Blue and Gold Vision.*

**Continuous Improvement Initiatives.** As part of the University’s AQIP planning process, SAU identifies key areas for continuous quality improvement. During the past three years, the University has...
successfully completed three campus-wide quality improvement initiatives and numerous local continuous improvement initiatives. Table 8-6 lists the projects that have been completed. Improvements related to these initiatives are discussed in the improvement sections for other categories.

**Legislative Audit.** Accurate and complete financial reporting is a key measure of the University’s budgeting and financial reporting processes. SAU’s financial records are audited by the Arkansas Division of Legislative Audit. Over the last ten years, SAU has received successful audit results without an audit comment.

**Human Resource Planning.** As noted above in 8P6 (Table 8-2), the University effectively plans for needed faculty and staff resources, maintaining a low student-to-faculty ratio of 16:1. The University’s strategic plan includes an objective to promote an environment that values people. Employee length of service is one measure of achieving this performance goal. Figure 8-4 shows employee retention as of June 30, 2012. As shown, the average for faculty ranges from 5 years for instructors to over 20 years for professors. The average length of service for staff is almost 10 years. SAU believes that its low employee turnover rate indicates effective processes related to valuing people.

**8R3. What are your projections or targets for performance of your strategies and action plans over the next 1-3 years?**

As previously discussed, the University recently implemented a new strategic planning process and is completing the first year processes of identifying strategic initiatives and measurable objectives. At the University level, the strategic plan includes goals that link to our categories for continuous improvement.

During the spring 2013, strategic goals were distributed to each department and unit, and the units identified specific actions they were taking to implement one or more initiatives. These were compiled in a spreadsheet with methods of measurements and completion dates. In the fall of 2013, the University Administrative Council will review unit plans and measures of success.

**8R4. How do your results for the performance of your processes for Planning Continuous Improvement compare with the performance results of other higher education institutions and, if appropriate, of organizations outside of higher education?**

SAU evaluates faculty salaries in comparison to state and national averages to measure effectiveness of the human resource planning processes. As shown in Table 8-7, average salaries compare favorably with state averages but are below the national averages. These results indicate that the University is meeting planning goals related to maintaining regionally competitive salaries. The University also monitors IPEDs data in comparison to peer institutions. Table 8-8 summarizes key performance indicators that are monitored.
8R5. What is the evidence that your system for Planning Continuous Improvement is effective? How do you measure and evaluate your planning processes and activities?

Increased enrollment, program expansion, and improving graduation rates provide evidence that SAU’s systems for planning continuous improvements are effective.

**Enrollment Data.** One of the University’s strategic goals is to increase enrollment. Table 8-9 summarizes enrollment trends for new freshmen, transfer students, headcount for advanced programs, and total enrollment. As shown, SAU has experienced a steady increase in total enrollment, largely due to increases in master’s students. The number of new freshmen and transfer students has varied with decreases in 2012.

From 2008-2012, SAU added seven new programs, including graduate programs in business, kinesiology, public administration and computer and information science and undergraduate programs in fine arts, nursing, and engineering physics. In January 2010, the SAU graduate program was listed in the *Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board Agenda Book* (p. 5.7) as the Arkansas four-year university with the highest five-year increase in annual graduate student semester credit hours (SSCH) and full time equivalent (FTE) students. In February 2011, the SAU graduate program was listed in the *Arkansas Higher Education Coordinating Board Agenda Book* (p. 6.9) as second in the top three four-year universities with the highest five-year increase in graduate annual SSCH and FTE.

**Graduation rates.** One of the University’s strategic goals is to increase graduation rates. As shown in Figure 8-5, the number of bachelor degrees awarded has varied, but a trend is discernible if the decade is divided into two five-year periods. Between 2000-2005 an average of 370 bachelor degrees were conferred compared with an average of 380 in the second half of the decade. The most recent six-year graduation rate is about 30 percent.

As shown in Figure 8-6, the number of students earning graduate degrees has increased as the University has expanded its graduate programs. The University’s
commitment of resources and personnel to this campaign was recently recognized when SAU was classified as Master's M: Master's Colleges and Universities by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

8I1. What recent improvements have you made in this category? How systematic and comprehensive are your processes and performance results for Planning Continuous Improvement?

The most significant improvement is the revamped strategic planning process from a five-year cycle to a three-year rolling cycle. The process includes developing and updating unit plans every fall based on assessment data and other relevant data. This forms the basis for budget justification for the unit. Planning will be done in the fall, budgeting in the spring, and assessment through the course of the year. The process is in the beginning stage in this current format. Strategic planning has been a part of the University since the mid-1900s when long-term planning was expected. Long-term plans, however, do not effectively meet the needs of our institution. In this first year, co-chairs of the SPC met with each unit to solicit input concerning how the unit can contribute to the strategic goals and to assist each unit in developing strategic initiatives.

8I2. How do your culture and infrastructure help you to select specific processes to improve and to set targets for improved performance results in Planning Continuous Improvement?

The University’s transition to a focus on continuous quality improvement was based on a campus-wide review of the process of accreditation and the decision by all campus constituencies to focus on continuous improvement. In reality this was the culmination of many areas working to improve without a structure for overarching coordination. The AQIP Council and AQIP Executive Council formed the coordinating structure for continuous improvement initiatives. Both groups coordinate quality improvement initiatives and AQIP action projects with the goal of transitioning new, improved processes to the University’s standing committees, which will have responsibility for the ongoing operation of processes and make the University function more effectively.