Strategic Planning Recommendations: Open Forum #3

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Yesterday we held our last forum about our strategic planning priorities, and the feedback was very helpful. I want to highlight a few of the comments, but I will try not to repeat points already made in my earlier posts about the other meetings.

Rich Ducker asked whether these recommendations will be our priorities going forward, and whether it will be possible to add other priorities. These definitely will be our top priorities, and it means that we will spend time, energy, and money to support them before we support other new activities. One hallmark of the School has been our ability to respond quickly to good opportunities that present themselves, and that is something we will continue to do. Those decisions need to happen in the context of these priorities, however, and we should not take on new work that will displace them without agreement by the DAC that the new work is likely to have a comparable or greater impact.

Fleming Bell asked about the time horizon for implementing our recommended priorities and the time frame for revisiting them. As I said in posts about the other forums, each implementation committee will need to set deadlines for themselves and they also will need to divide their work into manageable stages. I will work with them to be sure that we are moving forward as quickly as possible. I’m not sure about the timeline for revisiting these recommendations and for considering new impact proposals. We will not be creating the entire planning process from scratch as we did this round, which will save lots of time. My guess is that we will formally solicit impact proposals every two years, but I want to wait and see how much progress we are making with this round of implementation. The bottom line is that we will have future rounds of strategic planning on a regular basis.

There were a number of comments about different elements of the recommendation to diversify our sources of revenue. Susan Austin asked if there is a way to help people at the School understand development and the grant process. We need to inform people about all aspects of the process—internal and external—if we really want folks to generate more grants and contracts. It will be a part of our implementation. Janet Mason made an important point about not letting the pursuit of grant funding divert us from our mission—she noted that funders typically want to give money for new projects rather than for existing work. I agree that we need to be vigilant, and one advantage for the School is that nearly all of our faculty members are in state-funded positions. Most of us can be highly selective because we do not have to accept grant funding to cover our salaries, and those who are more dependent on grants have done a good job of aligning funding with our mission. Jessie Smith noted that grant funding will not be available to support some areas of our work (there is not much available for courts), or it may not be available for work that is consistent with our values, which could put some people at a disadvantage if revenue generation is a factor in setting salaries. She encouraged us to use a broad definition of revenue in thinking about it as a factor in setting faculty salaries. I agree completely with another point made by Jessie—we need to pay attention to the potential long-term implications of any changes to our incentives.

There were a couple of interesting points made about the information resources project. Joel Galbraith encouraged us to think broadly about how we organize and manage information. It will not be enough to create some kind of information warehouse and make it accessible—that passive approach will not necessarily lead to a greater use of the information. Instead, we should find ways to encourage collaboration by our clients in developing and adding to the information. Angela Williams agreed that this project must focus on more than providing greater accessibility to information in a traditional way. We should be asking how people are likely to use different kinds of information, and then we should pursue multi-media options for making it available. Jessie Smith observed that it is a fallacy to think that the information needs of our clients are exactly the same across all of our groups. For example, judges and lawyers want technical information and they are willing to use publications that provide it. We cannot adopt a one size fits all approach to information.

The evaluation of our advising strategies is another component of the information resources project. Fleming Bell pointed out that one of our highest values to clients is their ability to call us when they want an authoritative opinion about their specific situation, especially in an emergency. Those inquiries will continue even if good information is available. The DAC recommendation does not suggest that we should stop answering questions from public officials. It does suggest that we could do some things to reduce the number of those calls. Is it possible to make information available to officials in ways that are more convenient for them and that might reduce our questions by 20%? I believe it is possible, and I believe it would be a very good thing.

Thanks to everyone who attended this session and the others. I encourage you to offer clarifications or other comments. We are moving forward with the implementation of these priorities. The next step will be to organize quickly some short presentations about the top priorities so that people can understand them better, refine them slightly, and give everyone the opportunity to express an interest in working on their implementation. Thanks again for everyone's contribution to this process.