

October 13, 2006

Memorandum

TO: Carol Christ

FROM: Richard Myers

SUBJ: Improving Administrative Reporting and Analysis

Over the past few years, administrative reporting has presented significant challenges to the college. Recent reviews of administrative technology, including focus group interviews, have identified several issues warranting attention and action: better tools and training for extracting data from the Banner administrative software system, enhanced capacity of managers to use analysis effectively to support decision making and planning in their areas; a more integrated approach to staffing reporting needs to recognize the increasingly cross-functional aspects of many analytical issues; and a more transparent model for identifying and adopting new administrative technology applications.

While most of these issues might be termed more operational than strategic in orientation, they are critical to our efforts to evaluate the effect of strategic initiatives in other areas, to monitor the condition and competitive position of the college, to extend the strategic planning and data-informed decision making cultures from an institutional to department level, and to ensure that senior staff and college committees are supported by useful and provocative analysis to support their discussions.

Retrieving data from administrative software system

We have long acknowledged the reporting challenges facing the college. The consensus is that getting accurate and timely reports in the format needed by many departments is very difficult. Improving our ability to extract and integrate data reliably from the current administrative systems must be a top priority if we are to accomplish the necessary ad hoc analyses in important planning areas.

Retrieving data in a meaningful format is a difficult task and requires a very thorough knowledge of Banner, the data elements and the specific methodology for defining a report. Data elements are not necessarily defined the same way by all departments. Data input from non-compatible systems can be time consuming and prone to errors. Banner experts exist in the larger departments. They have an understanding of departmental needs and of the relevant data elements. This expertise does not, however, extend to the smaller departments. Reporting support is available from ITS Banner experts, but they do not necessarily know enough about the details of data elements to be able to accurately match the information requirements with the database. Reporting difficulties have led to the

development of myriad small systems using Excel or Access, which permit departments to download segments of the larger database and manipulate those records to suit their information needs.

We are hopeful that the upcoming Banner Operational Data Store (ODS) implementation underway and the new Cognos reporting tools will enhance efforts in this area. Recognizing that Banner is a common administrative system among colleges and universities, we should identify a small working group to explore in detail how other similar colleges have developed more effective reporting environments within the Banner environment, including specialized tools, staffing structures, etc.

Moving from data to useful management information

Efforts to improve our ability to extract data from the administrative systems should be complemented with better training for managers on the availability of data in their areas, reporting strategies that are planning-related as well as operational, and how to translate management questions into report requests. We must support efforts across campus to translate data into information with the aim of increasing managers' understanding of situations and the need for action and their ability to identify and choose among alternatives. How can Banner be used more as a management information tool and less as a filing cabinet?

As we look to strengthen our decision-support functions, we should focus on the various roles and responsibilities associated with effective data-informed decision making and determine how best to allocate them across the college's administrative structure. Institutional research, for example, is currently detached from the college's committee structure. As a result, committees often underutilize this function by either completing data collection on an issue on their own or missing an opportunity to inject existing analysis or data into their discussions. While it is impractical to add the director of institutional research to every major committee and working group, we should seek opportunities for the director to meet regularly with the leaders of these committees to understand where her efforts might inform the committee's discussions of particular issues or to raise an issue of interest to the committee emerging from other analysis she has completed.

The college should make more and better use of the comparative information it receives on peer colleges through the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE), Higher Education Data Sharing consortium, and other groups. There is a considerable amount of data on-hand at Smith that could be mined longitudinally and comparatively to inform issues. Being able to provide context to data and analysis is a key ingredient in getting committee and senior staff attention on important issues. Perhaps we should consider the model of annual briefing books for senior staff, making use of the most relevant peer and other data.

Staffing orientation towards data management and reporting

There is a great variation in the reporting environments of various offices, with some having a well managed and structured portfolio of reports and an ability to generate ad hoc reports in response to special requests, while others appear to have a collection of reports assembled over time, and often written by external consultants, that they try to tweak to be more responsive. These latter units struggle to operate in an increasingly dynamic, planning-driven environment.

Silos of expertise exist with specific skills and experience with Banner. While there are decentralized departmental experts in Banner in selected departments, we have identified the need for more

teamwork and cross-training to respond to analysis that must increasingly cut across departmental areas. For example, departments often need information developed or maintained by another, but the definitions of data elements are not always the same. Should we consider a more integrated reporting staff model where the current staff are organized as a team, rather than assigned to specific offices, with each member having a primary but not exclusive assignment?

Striking an appropriate balance between a centralized versus decentralized structure has been challenging. While the centralized Banner experts in ITS are not close enough to departmental needs, the "reporting staff" in the departments often lack adequate technical expertise. The complexity of the Banner system has led most departments to assign one person to understand the data and the process of getting information out of the system. This makes the department vulnerable to staff turnover and to delays.

Implementing new technology applications in administrative areas

Staff have commented on the difficulty in moving an idea for a new administrative application through the process to approval, implementation and adequate ongoing support. Part of the challenge stems from the lack of transparency and structure to the process individuals should follow.

We should first clarify that the responsibility for identifying new applications rests with individual managers, oftentimes drawing ideas from colleagues at other institutions, not with the ITS staff, although the latter should be viewed as a critical resource in exploring the feasibility of the idea on campus. We should also more firmly integrate technology proposals into the regular budget hearing and development process so that they are treated similar to requests for new staff, major equipment, and space needs.