

Launching University Initiatives

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This document offers an operational guide to creating and developing a wide range of university initiatives. Such initiatives could include new educational programs, research centers or “bricks and mortar” projects. The basic ingredients in launching a new initiative are:

- Defining the Initiative.
- Creating Buy-In
- Identifying Resources
- Implementation and Long Term Viability

This document outlines the tasks associated with each step and is not meant to be a policy or formal procedural document but rather a document that suggests some operational tactics for creating viable initiatives.

Defining the Initiative.

At the initial stages, the initiative needs to be defined with enough clarity that people can grasp the scope and consequences of it. However, there can be problems with defining it at too detailed a level. In such a case, the initiative can look like a mature project and largely prescriptive. Feedback from the broader community is important and provides an opportunity to continue to shape the initiative. A detailed proposal may not invite broader participation and may limit innovative or foundational suggestions.

A good proposal can be articulated in a short document of a couple of pages, a “thought paper” describing the motivation of the initiative. Keeping the initial proposal concise and to the point helps the reader grasp the initiative in a short time and lowers the activation barrier to reading the document. The thought paper can be circulated to a wide group to solicit comments and provide an initial sounding on the proposal.

This document should answer the following questions:

1. What activities are proposed in the initiative? Who will do what? Where will the initiative be housed? What people need to be on board?
2. Why is this an appropriate initiative for the institution? Does it make sense given the institution’s mission and goals? Is it an appropriate enhancement? Can it leverage existing resources for the University?
3. Will the institution be competitive in acquiring resources for the initiative? Will the institution be able to sustain these activities after an initial launch? Will the initiative enhance the reputation and goals of the institution?

4. What are the consequences of failure of the initiative? What are the risks involved? Will failure of the initiative damage the institution's reputation? Will opportunities to pursue other initiatives be lost?

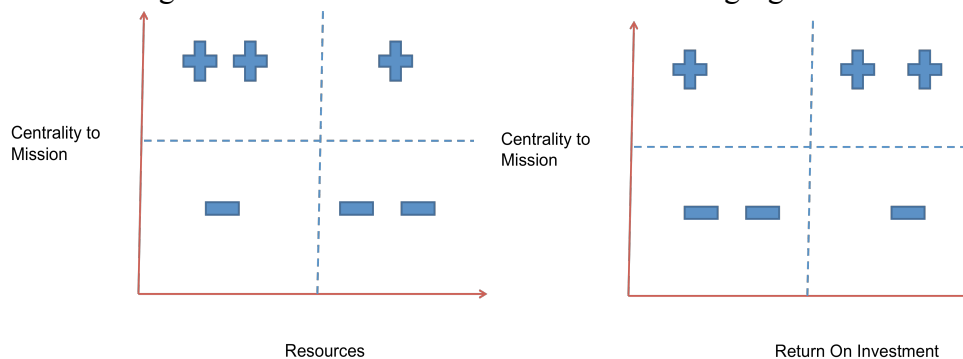
The goal of the thought paper is then to both articulate the goal of the initiative and to provide a broad justification, convincing a wide audience that the initiative is both achievable and desirous. The thought paper should not be viewed as a final or complete description of the project, but rather should be a living document that is shaped by the community.

Creating Buy-In.

Initially, most initiatives are driven by a single person. Invariably the launch and execution of an initiative will involve a team of people. For the initiative to be successful, not only does the entire team have to be on board, but the various stakeholders and the community as a whole must have some level of buy-in. Initiatives are greatly assisted if there is a champion in both the faculty and in the administration.

At some point, the champion(s) of the initiative must convene a group of stakeholders to discuss the initiative. The thought paper then serves as a straw man and a starting point for discussion. With a vetting of the proposal and initial discussions, the proponents can, hopefully, move from a group of stakeholders to a work group. The goal of the work group is to refine the proposal, promote it broadly in the community, identify internal and external resources and suggest an implementation plan.

A crucial feature of creating support for a project is to define the benefits of the project. These benefits are best seen if a formal evaluation of the project is possible. Such an evaluation is seldom done. However, there are some simple conceptual devices for loosely evaluating a project. Let's consider some of the crucial qualities required of a successful proposal. These ingredients might be "centrality to mission", "resources required to execute the project" and "return on investment". In thinking about the project, the group should be able to roughly ascertain whether these qualities can be ranked as high or low. This is illustrated in the following figures.



In the graph above left, we see that a project that has an excellent match with the university's mission and requires only limited resources will rank very high (++ , upper left quadrant), higher than those that match well the mission but require more resources (+ , upper right quadrant). Projects that do not match the mission are ranked lower (- or --

, depending on the resources required) in the bottom two quadrants. A similar argument can be held for the comparison of mission and return on investment shown in the rightmost graph. Using this device, the work group should be able to gauge in a qualitative way, the overall viability of the project.

Another approach is to simple rubrics to evaluate projects. The following is an example of such a rubric.

Quality\Rank	Low (1)	Medium (2)	High(3)	Total
Centrality to Mission				
Available Resources				
Ability to Attract Additional Resources				
Return on Investment (financial)				
Other Benefits (publicity, prestige, etc.)				
<i>Column Sum</i>				

The rubric is designed to score each quality as Low, Medium or High. A score of Low will mean that the project is weak in this area and High will indicate a strength of the project. The total score then reflects a judgment on the attractiveness of a proposal. Different criteria can be chosen and a broader scoring system (1-5, for instance) might be used, but the basic idea is to provide a simple evaluation on proposals. Rubric such as this can allow initiatives to be compared and they can also clarify the strengths and weakness of the proposal. This evaluation can be used to survey a broad audience and validate the need for the initiative.

Identifying Resources.

The formative stages of the initiative feature the creation of a thought paper and a work group. These two elements will be put to good use in the subsequent development of the initiative. The thought paper will serve as the prototype proposal for exploring funding possibilities with individuals, foundations and government agencies. The work group provides the nucleus of people to investigate these various opportunities. The work group can evolved from a group that defines the project to an operational group for implementation. Similarly, the thought paper is transformed from a document to define the initiative and promote it internally to a proposal for external funding. Because of its transitional role, it may be necessary to add individuals to the original work group. These should include individuals that can assist in identifying both internal and external resources. Ultimately, the group needs to explore funding opportunities from:

- a. Internal sources
- b. Individual donors
- c. Philanthropic foundations
- d. State and federal granting agencies

If sufficient buy in has been established in the previous stage of initiative development then institutional resources, such as access to the university's development office, should now be open to assist with these tasks. The presumption is that the work group will now

begin working with the development office to generate proposals for funding of the initiative.

Implementation and Long Term Viability.

At this point, an operational team needs to be formed that represents the individuals that will be executing the initiative. The university wants to avoid a situation where a large grant is funded and it is not clear exactly who has the time to carry it out. The choice of the operational team is extremely important as it dictates whether the initiative will use existing personnel or require new hires. An initiative that requires completely new people may not create efficiencies or synergies with existing programs. In an ideal world, some component of the new initiative will be budget relieving and will enhance programs that currently exist at the university. At an early stage, the impact of the initiative on operations needs to be assessed. In particular, one can ask whether new capacity has been added and what new resources are needed.

Long term viability offers additional challenges. What will be the business model of the initiative after the initial funding runs out? Will ongoing fundraising efforts be necessary to sustain the initiative? Does the initiative have to be completed in stages? When appropriate, creating a “steady state” budget for the initiative is useful and can inform the university on the long term commitments for the project. Often initiatives fail, not because they do not get funded, but because they cannot attract follow up funding. Having a well-defined long term business model is as important as the initial budget request.

A final feature in long term viability is the personnel associated with the project. Frequently, a single person may champion an initiative and be responsible for the execution of it. The problem that arises is that the project is totally dependent on one highly committed individual. If this person were to leave, the project would flounder. Ideally, any one of a group of individuals could step into a leadership role. When such a situation does not exist, the university needs to have a firm commitment to project continuity, even if it means hiring new personnel.