



## A fine tool to engage and align campus stakeholders

**H**ow can diverse campus stakeholders be successfully aligned in a common direction or engaged in a project? For example, suppose you want to create new cross-discipline academic programs that may reduce support for some traditional academic programs? Or how about marshalling support while investing millions of dollars and multiple years of effort in new enterprise resource planning (ERP) software?

New tools and group processes are needed.

### “Critical issues” sessions

A critical issues session is a specific type of focus group and it can provide a vehicle for fostering involvement and ownership among stakeholders. Multiple groups of 15 to 25 participants gather in sessions across campus to consider a proposed strategic initiative. The initiative is spelled out on paper in precise and unambiguous elements. A communicative facilitator leads each session.

Round-robin input is gathered. Reactions to the initiative are desired, but in a structured fashion. A question set may include ...

If we were to implement this initiative on campus as proposed....

- What major tasks will have to be accomplished?
- What potential problems might we face?
- What questions need answers before we start?
- What assumptions are we making that should be documented and validated?

A typical focus group will generate as many as 150 critical issues in a two-to-three hour session. All responses should be displayed around the room for all to see. The session is part venting of pet peeves, part creative brainstorming, and part fun. By its end, participants usually agree that the initiative will succeed if the list of critical issues is dealt with properly.

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The 1,000 points were analyzed and processed for re-circulation to the participants. Potential problems (2) were analyzed and became the basis of a risk analysis. The questions in need of answers (3) were used to formulate an ongoing project

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### The UMass, Lowell experience

Some 12,000 students attend the University of Massachusetts, Lowell on its historic urban campus. For many years faculty and staff had been gradually transforming the university. In the spring of 2005, the next steps were the topic of much discussion and debate. The issues involved new ways to organize and deliver knowledge, to encourage focused research, and to promote a different campus image.

By the fall of 2005 the provost, associate provost and administrative vice chancellors, in committee, put a stake in the ground. They announced five goals, each with precise deliverables, metrics and timelines. They then prepared to conduct critical issues focus groups.

During a four-month period, eight sessions were conducted at various campus locations. Some 200 participants attended, including

communication plan. The tasks (1) and assumptions (4) were used to revise the strategic project document that was posted for review by all.

How has it turned out for UMass Lowell? This is a five-year strategic project, so the final results are not yet in. But the university is off to a great start. Today multiple campus teams continue to meet and make progress on various project elements. John Wooding, the campus provost says, “The critical issues sessions were a turning point in helping us transform random campus discussions into focused actions.” ■



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