

Strategic Management of Brazilian Universities

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In a world where change is center stage, it is crucial for organizations to think and act strategically. For knowledge-centered organizations, management practice is required in this dynamic context. Brazilian universities and, indeed, the entire system of higher education and infrastructure for scientific and technological innovation must confront new challenges using sophisticated management and planning techniques.

A simple overview of numbers reveals how the heterogeneous higher education system in Brazil has become based on the variations in institution size, teaching and research quality, academic missions, funding sources, and extent of political oversight. Currently, 2,314 higher education institutions in the country enroll 5,115,896 students; the vast majority of these institutions are private, with 2,069 institutions enrolling 3,764,728 students. The public sector contains federal institutions (94 units, with 752,847 students), state institutions (84 units, with 480,145 students), and municipal institutions (67 units, with 118,176 students).

Despite the size of the system, net enrollment (percentage of 18-to-24-year-olds) was estimated at only 14 to 15 percent of the age cohort by the Ministry of Education, for 2009. This trend is not nearly enough to meet Brazil's development needs, as a rapidly developing economy.

MORE AUTONOMY DEMANDS NEW SKILLS

For a quick and effective response to the urgency of increasing participation and improving overall quality, strategic planning is key. Yet, no single formula is appropriate for Brazil, given the diversity of the sector and the different goals and challenges of public and private institutions.

Major events have raised attention to the deficit of strategic-management capacity. Since 1989, state universities in São Paulo have been given greater autonomy, which not only changed the relationship between universities and the government but also transferred greater responsibility to individual institutions. This shift of responsibility accentuates the magnitude of effective and professional institutional management. Moreover, the intense growth of the private sector during the last two decades has introduced new priorities to the discussion of strategic planning. Clearly, this sector must respond to fierce competition, the limitations of tuition income, and the expansion of distance learning.

However, attention to higher education management only began to take shape in the 1990s, when the preoccupation with evaluation and educational quality took center stage. Aiming to stimulate the development of a planning culture, in 2001 the federal government began to require that all higher education institutions prepare an Institutional Development Plan in order to get approval

for their courses and credentials. The plan covers a five-year span, based on the following themes: institutional mission and targets, academic and administrative organization, pedagogical planning, physical and academic infrastructure, institutional performance assessment and monitoring, and an implementation schedule.

With no tradition of such effective strategic planning, both the public and private sector face numerous obstacles. Few institutions have developed a “planning culture”; few staff members have the training or skills necessary to participate in strategic planning; information systems are inadequate; and few systems or people are capable of monitoring and controlling the execution of a strategic plan.

Although several universities in Brazil approach world-class stature and are conducting and publishing research of international caliber, amateurism almost always prevails with the management of university financing, institutional engineering, decision making, and other factors. At some institutions researchers do practice sophisticated methodologies, with great rigor, and demonstrate considerable empirical acuity in their scholarly work. These same professors and scientists assume key roles in the administration and management of Brazilian universities but typically lack the training and skills to perform these tasks well. The problem is certainly not intellectual capacity but lack of experience and knowledge.

CAN BRAZIL RESPOND?

Centers for training specialists in university management are desperately needed and will have an important role in this context. It is not clear how this training

will be attained, especially because the models used for noneducational organizations are not definitely suited for higher education institutions.

Brazil needs exposure to successful models implemented in other countries. Better management, strategic planning, effective oversight, and coordination are critical developments needed to advance the quality of higher education in Brazil so that it can keep pace with the rapid growth of the Brazilian economy.