Student Affairs: An IT Governance Case Study

The Division of Student Affairs consists of 19 departments with approximately 1000 employees, including professional, associate and student staff. The Division has a consolidated IT department that is responsible for most IT services such as desktop support, messaging, file, print, backup, web, CMS, database, and associate infrastructure. The department does not manage the network as this task is assigned to another group. The department also provides value-added services such as purchasing and inventory, application development, project management, facilitation, and risk and compliance.

The consolidation of these services was accomplished over multiple years and included consolidation of staff who were traditionally managed by the individual departments. Since departments could no longer directly manage much of their IT work, the situation warranted creation of an IT governance structure.

Construction of the Governance Council

The purpose of the IT Governance Council (Council) is to provide recommendations for the prioritization, acquisition, implementation, and communication of information technology (IT) related projects and investments.

Authority

The Council was setup in such a manner as to give the non-technical IT governors authority to determine what the IT priorities of the Division should be, while allowing the director of the IT department to retain how to accomplish those priorities. To this end, the Council has the authority to recommend and change the priority of IT projects and allocation of IT project resources to include methods of cost recovery where appropriate.

The Council retains authority in the following areas:

- IT Principles - high-level decisions about the strategic role of IT in the business of the Division
- Business Application Needs - business requirements for purchased or internally developed IT applications
- IT Investment and Prioritization - how much and where to invest in IT projects as well as changes in prioritization

The Director for Information Technology retains authority in the following areas:
- IT Architecture - integrated set of technical choices to guide IT in satisfying business needs
- IT Infrastructure Strategies - centrally coordinated, shared IT services that provide the foundation for the enterprise's IT capability

The Council consists of six voting members plus the Director for Information Technology, for a total of seven voting members. The Director for Information Technology is the chair of the Council.

**Selection Criteria**
The six voting members are selected based upon the following criteria. These criteria are modified from the Baldrige National Quality Program

- **Leadership** - personal actions that exemplify the six core values of the Division: caring, diversity, respect, integrity, excellence and service; past actions that exemplify his/her commitment to cross functional communication, coordination, collaboration, and cooperation
- **Strategic Planning** - departmental practice and vision for how the Division develops strategic objectives and action plans
- **Customer Focus** - engages students and stakeholders for long-term success
- **Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management** - knowledge and a track record of commitment to his/her own department selecting, gathering, analyzing, managing, and improving its data, information and knowledge assets
- **Staff Focus** - demonstrated performance within his/her department in the engagement, management, and development of staff to utilize its full potential in alignment with the department and Division's overall mission, strategy and action plans
- **Process Management** - knowledge of and demonstrated performance in the design of work systems and the proven ability to design, manage, and improve key processes for implementing those work systems to deliver student and stakeholder value, and achieve organizational success and sustainability
- **Results** - high-level performance in all key areas - student learning outcomes, customer-focused outcomes, budgetary, financial and market outcomes, staff-focused outcomes, process effectiveness outcomes, and leadership outcomes
- **Role of Technology in TAMU Student Affairs** - knowledge of and commitment to the role of technology in the Division's functional areas
Other Procedures

Directors from the Division nominate candidates from their department on an annual basis. Appointments for vacant seats are made in July by the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs with a voting member’s term to begin September first of the same year. Directors, with the exception of the Director for Information Technology, are exempt from selection to the Council.

A voting member’s term of service is three years. Two voting members are replaced each year. The Council meets bi-weekly, and all meetings are open. The Council is advised by technical personnel recommended by the Director for IT as well as sponsor recommended. These technical advisors are non-voting.

Not all projects are vetted through the IT Governance Council. This can happen for a variety of reasons, but primarily because a project is small or part of maintaining current services (e.g. infrastructure refreshes). In order to be prioritized by the IT Governance Council, a project must require more than 80 hours to complete and meet at least one of the following conditions:

- Work that involves more than one department or entity
- Work that has a large impact on the Division
- Work that requires funds to be expended exclusive of salaries

Decisions of the IT Governance Council are communicated to the project sponsors (i.e. Departments) through their IT Liaison, a member of the IT team responsible for communication with the department’s customers.
Determining Priority

A key function of the Council is to determine the priority of projects. Depending on the priorities of the Division, some projects are necessarily more important than others. Other projects may not be in the best interests of the organization to pursue. A balance must be struck between Divisional and departmental priorities since a project may be important to a department, but not a priority for the Division. A process had to be created that would assess all of these factors in a somewhat objective manner while being flexible and agile.

The Council created a metric based upon multiple factors. These factors were developed over time in consultation with governance and will most likely be different for different organizations. It is not unusual for prioritization instruments to be developed that may even assign numerical values and weights to various factors based upon the needs and structure of the enterprise. The following is a suggested list of factors that may be used to prioritize IT work:

- Collaborative Scope – What is the collaborative scope of the work?
- Required – Is the project required for legal, audit, or technical reasons? Does the project reduce risk or cost to the enterprise?
- Current State – What is the current state of the system? Does one exist? Is it adequate, close to end-of-life, or in need of enhancements?
- Strategic Goals of the Enterprise – Does the work or project support the strategic goals of the enterprise?
- Timeline – What is the desired completion date?
- Operational Cost – Is there a positive return on investment?
- Off-the-shelf/Commercial – Can the work/system be implemented with existing off-the-shelf or commercial solutions?
- Efficiency – What is the effect on end-users? Do it address staff or system redundancy, reduce head-count or systems? Will it require additional staff to support?
- Recurring Costs – What is the effect on recurring budget?
- Customer Base – What is the scope of users impacted by the work?
- Additional Funding – Is the sponsor willing to expend additional funds to complete the project?
The Project Request Process
The follow flowchart details the project request process used by Student Affairs:

1. Request submitted by dept. (guided by Liaison)
   - Liaison collects necessary information to present to Liaison Group
   - More Information needed
   - Reviewed by Liaisons
   - Does the request warrant ITG Review?
     - No
     - Categorize track as Internal
     - Convert to Project when Active
     - Handoff to Senior Managers
   - Yes
     - Assign Priority
     - Director IT Informs Liaison
     - ITG Approve?
     - Return For Revision
     - Yes
     - Assign and Schedule Work
IT Liaisons are the first point of contact for requests. They work with project requestors to collect initial information on the project. That information is shared with the group of IT Liaisons where the request is categorized as either internal (i.e. does not meet the criteria for IT Council review) or IT Governance review. Projects that go through ITG review are prioritized, converted from requests to projects, then scheduled by the IT department’s senior management team. The department’s IT liaison is responsible for communication about the project back to the requesting department. Once the project begins, it is handed off from the liaison to the Project Management team.

**Summary**

By operating an IT governance structure that relies upon non-IT personnel to identify priorities, IT becomes more responsive to the business needs of the unit. The structure provides input from stakeholders across the Division. Setting the priorities at the Division level keeps the focus on the overall strategic direction of the major unit while giving flexibility to complete work for the minor units.

The project request process provides a clear path to collect necessary information, and appropriately categorize and prioritize work in line with the unit’s overall strategic direction. IT Liaisons provide a mechanism to communicate the progress of the request or project back to the requestor and department, including plans, timelines and metrics. Liaisons are also useful at engaging potential project sponsors and decision-makers in order to provide advice on IT choices and policies that fit business needs.