STANDARD 2: APPENDIX 2.7.

MODERATOR'S GUIDE

NEASC PLANNING AND EVALUATION FOCUS GROUP

1. **Set up room and tape recorder.**

2. **Welcome participants and ask them to register.**

3. **Give nametag or tent and marker.**

4. **Invite them to help themselves to refreshments provided.**

5. **When all are in place and time to begin, introduce self, note-taker and purpose for the session thus:**

"Thank you all for agreeing to participate in this focus group today. Today's discussion is just one of several information gathering session being conducted by the Planning and Evaluation Standard subcommittee, as part of the 2007 New England Association of Schools and Colleges Accreditation study. The accreditation process provides assurance about the educational quality of the University. There are 11 quality standards included in the accreditation study. Today we will be talking about your experiences with and perceptions of strategic planning at the University of Rhode Island.

"My name is _____. I am (share role at the University) and I will be facilitating today's discussion. My role today is simply to keep the discussion moving. We would like for you to interact with one another as much as possible. Comments that others make may help your thinking and we don't want to stifle anything that will help you to participate. We'll also keep track of time and attempt to move things along punctually, promising to have you out of here by _____.

"I would also like to introduce _____. S/he is here to record your responses, so that we won't forget or lose the important points that you have made during the discussion. Later on we will produce a written report that will be incorporated with other focus groups that will be conducted. I also want to mention that when the report is written your names will not be included. So anything you say today will be held in strictest confidence. We do that so that you will feel comfortable to say whatever is on your minds. And since we are maintaining confidentiality, we ask that you not share the responses of other participants with anyone outside of today's focus group.

"With your permission we will be tape-recording today's discussion. We use the tape recorder as a backup for the note-taker. The tape recorder will help her to catch the comments that she is not fast enough to write down. After she listens to it to make sure we have recorded all the information you have shared with us, we will either destroy the tape or tape over it. For those who may be tape recorder shy, once we get into the discussion, you won't even notice that it is there. Is everyone OK with that?
(PAUSE)
If that is okay with everyone, I do ask that when we speak, that we speak one at a time, as clearly as possible and in a loud enough voice for the tape recorder to pick up your voice. I will start the tape recorder after we have gone around and introduced ourselves.

"Let's take a moment then to make introductions. When we go around introduce yourselves, as you would like to be called today, your department and role at the university. Who would like to begin?

At the completion of self-identification....

"Thanks. Now I'll just summarize once more the ground rules for this session:

- 60 minutes time limit

- tape-recorder will be turned on

- your responses will be anonymous

- try to speak clearly and loudly

- all of your responses are important so try to participate as much as possible

- finally, we appreciate your time and contribution

Are there any questions before we begin?"

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Based on your experience and knowledge, what does strategic planning mean to you? (Go around, get a response from everyone)

2. How do you go about the task of strategic planning in your department? What does it look like in your department?

3. Some of you have described a (high/moderate/low) level of activity and (broad/moderated/limited) level of participation. What factors do you think contribute to this?

4. What has been valuable about the strategic planning process in your department? (also inquire as to what has not been valuable)

5. What would help to enhance the quality and the level of participation in your group's strategic planning process?

6. My next question has to do with the degree of connection and alignment you feel exists between your department's strategic planning process and the overarching design of the strategic planning process at URI.

   • By a show of hands, how many of you have some familiarity with the new 2006-2009 strategic plan, "Steps Toward Transformation?"

   • Similarly, by a show of hands, how many of you have some familiarity with the University's mission statement?

   • Can you describe in what ways the university's strategic goals and mission relate to your work and the work of your department?

   • When you engaged in strategic planning in your respective departments did you do so with some awareness of the university wide strategic initiatives and goals (either the 2003-2006 plan or the current 2006-2009 plan)?

   • Does your department/college/unit have goals or future plans that are designed to support and contribute to the broader goals outlined in the University's strategic plan?

- **Do you have suggestions for how planning can be improved in your department and the university overall?**

STANDARD 2: APPENDIX 2G.

Focus Group Summary Report

I. What does strategic planning mean?

Several people specifically mentioned a mission statement:
Looking at a mission statement and planning what you need to do to accomplish it
Fitting your mission into the University's mission

Many people talked about goals and a destination:
Provides a destination
Goal statement
Long-term planning
Goals, timelines, and stages
Where you want to be and develop a way to get there
Generating goals
Evaluating process of goals

A couple of people mentioned having multiple people involved:
Consensus
Everyone is involved
An effort to get all interested parties together

A few people discussed needs:
Needs
Checking in the climate and seeing what's needed
Incorporation of the needs, wants, and desires of the clients

Two people said that it needs to be adaptable.

Several people described taking into account the reality of the situation:
Competition for scarce resources
Realistic goal
Reality of the situation
Taking note of the reality of the situation

One person mentioned survival:
For continued survival of the organization

II. Strategic planning in your department

Several people described a formal planning process.
A few people discussed retreats and meetings.
Four people mentioned that everyone was involved in the process.

Two people said that they planned in subgroups.
Two people said that a management group or advisory group was involved.
A few departments included students and/or alumni.
One person stated that the process included a top down and bottom up approach.

Several people said that there was no formal process. A couple of people stated that there was no strategic planning/long-term goals. Many others said that there was a low level of activity. Those in this category provided the following observations:
- Too busy
- Seems pointless when you know you have no resources or support
- Last time it was done was ten years ago, nothing happened
- Budget and other resources pulled before plan comes to fruition
- Discouraged by limited resources
- It is hard to plan for the future when you do not know the budget
- Problems arise when you run out of resources
    - Creativity becomes exhausted
    - Staff becomes disillusioned

Many people said that the process was reactive. Some of the comments were:
- Short term
- Trying to survive rather than plan for the future
- Crisis management
- Outside forces can drive the planning
- There is an informal process for immediate issues

Several people said that planning was impacted and constrained by the budget. One dissenter implied that funds were poorly managed.

A majority of people in one group said that there was limited or no feedback. Another person was more optimistic and said that the level of feedback was improving.

Other comments included:
1. Out of date
2. More philosophical
3. Occurs annually
4. Mimics the University's 3 year strategic plan
5. There is a difference between a sound do-able plan and pie in the sky thinking

III. Factors contributing to level of strategic planning

High levels (a few people fell in this category)
- Hope
- Past experience with limited planning
- Not afraid to ask
- Customer needs are changing at a constant rate
- Customer numbers are rising with no increase in resources
- Recognition of the need to plan over a number of years to be successful
- Desire to do a good job

Moderate levels (some fell in this category)
- Past successes
- University mandate
- The University plan drives the department directly
- Pretend to plan only to defend funds

Low levels (many fell in this category)
- Administration changes
- Limited feedback in the past
- Lack of communication from above, information and decisions not shared
- Limited resources and knowledge
- Minimal connection with other departments
- Planning may be considered overwhelming
- Seeing no progress is discouraging
- Resources appear and disappear when you least expect
- Change is hard to manage
- A top-down approach leaves people feeling uninvolved

Other factors:
- Convince team that planning is important
- Budget constraints
- Priorities as far as budgets, goals and projects
- Not having the big picture of where the University is going
- Driven by outside plans
- Time constraints
- Staff must feel invested in the change to be successful

V.   What has been valuable or not valuable?

Valuable
- Gathering information from outside sources
- See what people are thinking and willing to do
- Notice where you fit in
- Find out more about department and other departments 11
- Understand different viewpoints 11
- Clear identification of problems, needs 111
- Develop a common, streamlined focus
- Can think out of the box
- Gets past daily concerns
- Communication 111
- Prioritization
- Seeing the end results 11
- Collaborative effort 111
- Opportunity to work with Grad students, young professors who bring creative ideas and excitement 11
- Getting to know your colleagues
- Bringing staff together/ teambuilding

Not valuable
- Exercise in futility
- Takes too long 11
- Always a step behind
- Lack of feedback
- No follow through with plans
- Poor planning, too rushed
- Many have limited hope which produces little work
- There is a lack of skills
- Did not consult with everyone 11
- Little accountability
- Poor leadership
- Other events overtake
- Bar is set too high in the University's new plan
- Low level of departmental involvement and participation in the University's new plan
- Players change and this affects what you want to do
- Top down not bottom up
- How do we contribute to the mission?
- Disconnect between the wording of the mission statement
- Lack of resources hamstring the plan
- Seen as undeliverable promise
- Cynical attitudes of "veterans"

VI. What would help?

Communication
- Better communication
- More openness
- The process has to be transparent

Knowledge and understanding
- Understanding the structure of how this decision is made
- Overall coordination of the various parts to easily see what's going on
- Graphs and charts to visualize changes on campus
- The money was already known

Planning
- Formalizing the budget two years in advance
- Main planning to see the overall project's progression

Involvement
- Ideas should come from the bottom
- Survey before the University's plan is made
- More involvement and excitement
- Collaborate with the community, ask for their opinion
- Involve students to get their feedback
- Suggestion boxes
- Work together
- More people involved in the decisions

Feedback
- More praise and recognition for accomplishments
- More feedback on the plans
- More accountability

Some Success
- Some fulfillment of the plans
- Ability to see the end result/ change

Other
- Generate external funds
- Better leadership
- Help people think outside the box, be creative

VII.   Connection and alignment with the University plan

Almost all of the participants said that they had some knowledge of the most recent plan and the mission statement. One person commented that it was hard to find on the website.

Most people in most groups felt that there plan was tied to the University plan. However, the ability to cite specifics varied by group:
- No mention of specifics was made in 1 group
- One member mentioned specifics in 1 group
- Half of the members mentioned specifics in 1 group
- Most of the members mentioned specifics in 3 groups

There were several comments made at this point:
- One person said that their department found it difficult to support and contribute to the broader goals of the University because of limited resources e.g., space, money, people.
- Another person said that the people at the top need to look at the plans of the individual departments. There was some agreement on this comment.
- One person believed that the plan was unclear and should have financial notes
- One person said that they felt "apart" from the plan
- Another person cited a section of the University plan that s/he felt was unreasonable

Suggestions for improvement
- Share information among departments
- Help departments work together
- Use a bottom-up approach
- Start plans earlier
- More collaboration
- Information needs to filter down
- Plans should not be ignored
- Feedback in both directions
- Back up the plan with resources
- Have a clear expectation with reasonable, actionable items
- Have models or templates for like departments available
- Have a central entity review all plans to ensure that there is no duplication of efforts, or to link opportunities

Several people thought that plans were created and submitted, but never read.