

# Introduction to Project Planning

At the core of operational planning is the development of projects. Using a project based planning structure has a huge number of benefits including:

- Project planning focuses on change and improvement
- Project planning follows a repeatable, teachable methodology
- Projects have clear end dates for evaluation
- Projects communicate rationale and activity
- Projects, by definition, assume finite resources

A project is defined as

*A discrete piece of work with set boundaries of scope, time, resources and anticipated outcomes.*

This means that a project is not something that is ongoing; it is a piece of work that a manager can say is finished at some point. It is also limited in scope and results that will be achieved, this means the project has a limitation on the amount (or quality) of work that will be completed. Without these limitation projects tend to grow in size and duration resulting in delivering something that cost

Using projects as the basis of planning helps with communication. Rather than producing a long list of activities, service area managers can now communicate the work they are planning to do in terms of expected aims, results and outcomes. This helps staff and other people involved quickly understand the work that is being completed.

This concept is also an important part of evaluation. With activity based management the focus of evaluation is shifted towards the question of whether activities are completed. With project based evaluation there is a much more useful line of questioning including

- Did the project deliver the required results?
- Was the project delivered on time and with the stated resources?

This makes institution level discussion far more productive as the focus moves away from the minutiae to discussing higher level concepts.

Planning for service areas is driven by

- Development or revision to priorities or strategic goals
- Required change identified through program review or outcomes assessment
- Less frequently, new and emerging opportunities and trends

## Thinking of Projects

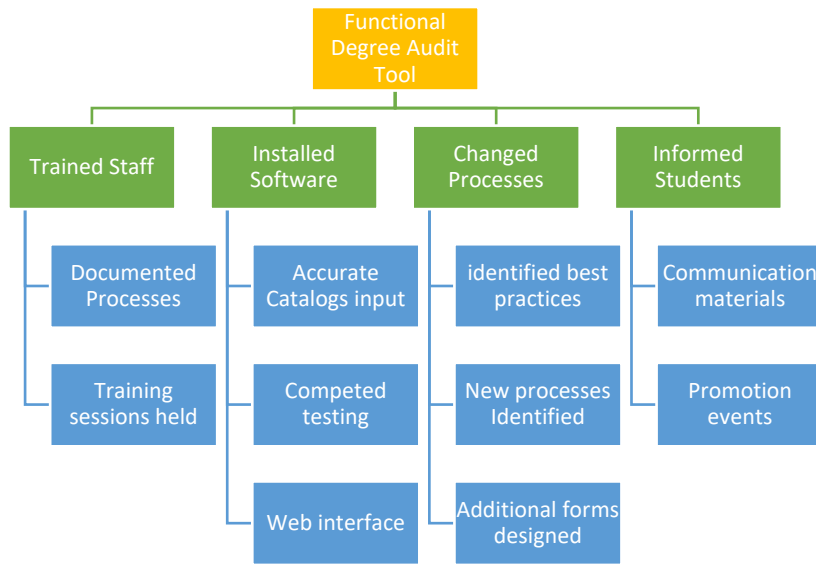
Every unit has a part to play in advancing the mission and vision of the college. Every unit needs to articulate how it can help to advance the current Strategic Goals and Priorities of the college.

Project planning is about change, change that is brought about usually by implementing new or enhanced products, services or procedures. One way to think about this is backwards design.

Backwards design starts with the end in mind first, what is the final high level product that you want to deliver? This could be a newly implemented IT system, a completely new academic program or new set of user manuals and training.

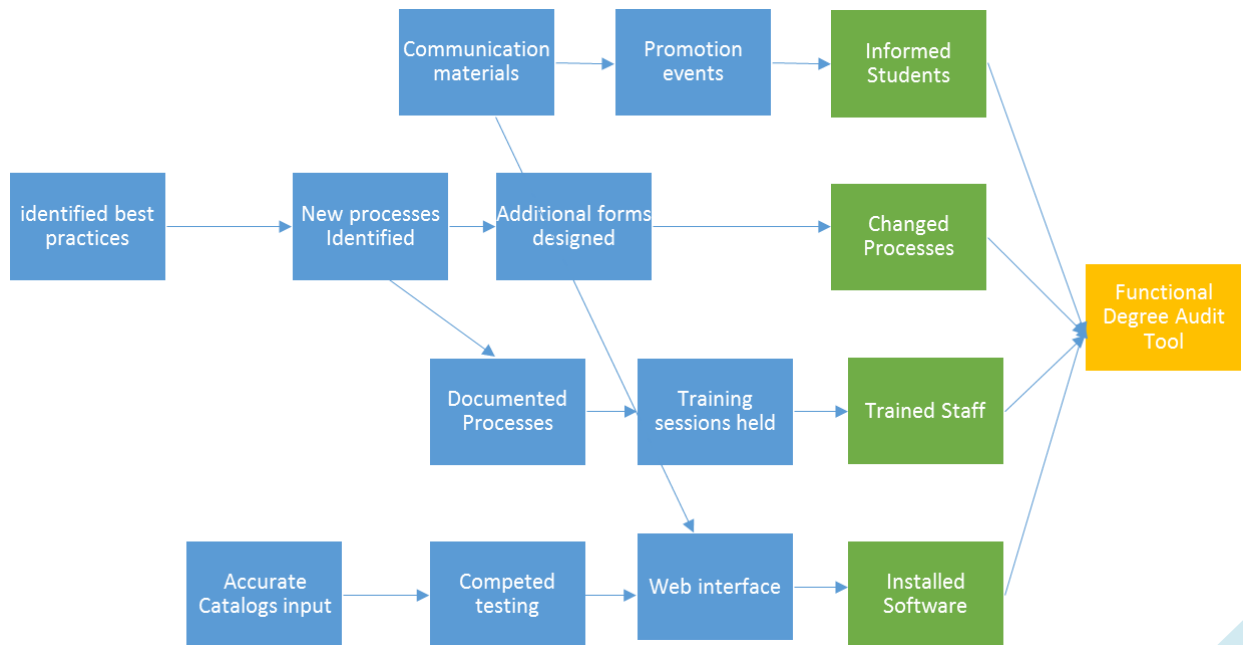
With this end in mind we need to work backwards thinking of all of the things that need to be in place before we can produce our final product. You can keep breaking down your products that need to be in place until you end with a hierarchy of work in a Product Tree This is a hugely beneficial task as it can start to identify potential problems, other areas that will need to be involved or outside products or services that need to be purchased for success. This process should be as inclusive as possible and certainly include input from those who will be doing the work.

EXAMPLE PRODUCT TREE



One thing not demonstrated in this diagram is the order in which the various steps are completed. For example, we would not “Document Processes” until we had “New processes identified”. We can take our completed Product Tree and turn it into a flow chart which gives us an idea of what is happening when.

PRODUCT FLOW DIAGRAM



With all of this information we have a much better sense of what needs to start when, where potential; 'pinch points' will be, who needs to be involved. All of this is used to develop our list of activities that can be assigned to individuals with due dates. At this point we have a well-written and realistic Project Plan.

This works particularly well for large or complex projects. Simpler projects may be able to be mapped out with limited need for formalized planning processes. This is where project planning is more of an art than a science and reliant on manager experience and knowledge.

At the very least a project should be documented using the following information:

**Description and Rationale:** A brief description of the project to include the problem being addressed, how this project will fix the problem and the expected outcomes of the project.

**Relevancy:** How the project may relate to strategic goals, area outcomes, priorities or even accreditation standards.

**Activities:** A brief description of all the activities needed to complete the project. Includes timeline, area responsible as well as any resources required.

**Outcomes:** Detailed description of the expected outcomes of the project as well as an evaluation of those outcomes after the project is complete

It is important to remember – the impression may be that project management is a lot of 'overhead' forget the point. **All** projects are managed. The question is how effectively they are managed. For instance:

- Your project is going to face issues. Do you want to proactively resolve them or figure them out as you go?
- Your project will face potential risks. Do you want to try to resolve them before they happen or wait until the problems arise?
- Are you going to communicate up front or deal with conflict and uncertainty caused by a lack of project information?
- Are you going to manage scope or deal with cost and deadline overruns caused by doing more work than your budget covers?
- Are you going to build quality into your plan or fix problems later when they will be more costly to resolve?