

## Introduction to the SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges) Analysis

A SWOC analysis is a strategic planning tool that can be used during the curriculum assessment and review process to make informed decisions based upon collective input from multiple stakeholders. Within the context of curriculum development, a SWOC analysis can be used as a powerful framework to discuss and clearly identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges related to an existing degree program or major (see for example Henzi et al., 2007; and Gordon et al, 2000). The objective of conducting a SWOC analysis (in conjunction with other curriculum assessment tools) is to develop key areas of focus for improving the curriculum. The SWOC analysis is particularly effective when conducted in collaborative group settings at the early stages of the curriculum assessment process (e.g. faculty retreats, student, alumni and/or future employer focus groups).

Table 1: SWOC Matrix, including guiding questions

	<b>Factors likely to lead to positive change and further improvement in the quality of the program</b>	<b>Factors which may compromise further improvement in the quality of the program</b>
<b>Inside the Program (Internal Attributes)</b>	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>What have been the strengths of our program? What are we known for? What are we most proud of? What are we doing well? What/who are our key resources and exemplars? What do we control (people, resources, knowledge) that gives us an advantage? What are our key areas of expertise? What resources or capabilities allow us to meet our mandate/mission? What positive aspects of the program have students/faculty or others commented on?</p>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <p>What are we doing poorly or struggling with? What frustrations/challenges have students/faculty expressed? What do we need to fix? What are the internal weaknesses and deficiencies in resources or capabilities that may be hindering the program's ability to accomplish its mission/mandate?</p>
<b>Outside the Program (External Attributes)</b>	<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <p>What opportunities will most dramatically enhance the quality of our program? What changes in demand do we expect to see over the next years? What key environmental/ market factors may positively impact the program? Where can we create more value for the program? What external or future opportunities exist for the program? What are some key areas of untapped potential?</p>	<p><b>Challenges</b></p> <p>What are the key challenges or threats to the quality of our program that need to be addressed? What are others doing that we are not? What future challenges may affect the program? What external or future challenges or threats does the program face?</p>

## **Example SWOC Analysis Process for Curriculum Review**

There are many methods for conducting a SWOC analysis. The most important factor for conducting a SWOC is to ensure that the process is collaborative and ensures the collective generation of ideas, which can be used effectively to help inform future curriculum discussions and decisions.

### *Objectives:*

1. To discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges related to the existing program
2. To develop key areas of focus for improvement in the curriculum

### **For Larger Group sizes (~12 people and over)**

#### *STEP 1: Generating Ideas (45 minutes)*

Although a SWOC analysis can be facilitated as a large open discussion, to ensure equal participation, it often works best when participants are provided with an opportunity to collaboratively generate ideas in small groups (e.g. 3-5 members).

- Divide participants into 4 groups.
- Post 4 flip charts around the room labeled individually as: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges.
- Invite each small group to a designated flipchart.
- Provide 5-10 minutes for group members to individually reflect on the SWOC quadrant that they have been designated to, based on the guiding questions provided in Table 1. This will help to ensure equal participation in each small group.
- Provide 10-15 minutes for each group to record as many ideas on that specific area. At this point, it is important to remind groups to generate as many ideas as possible.
- After about 15 minutes, invite each group to rotate, review what each previous group has recorded, and to add any *additional* points to the respective chart. Repeat the process until each group has rotated to each of the areas (e.g. S, W, O, and C).

#### *STEP 2: Prioritization (45 minutes)*

- Once each group has returned to their original flip chart, provide some time for them to discuss and summarize the top 3-5 themes recorded on each flip chart.
- Record the key themes for each section of the SWOC on a separate flip chart.
- Invite each group to summarize and present these key themes to the larger group. Ensure that you provide time for further clarification and discussion of these key points.

#### *STEP 3: Moving Forward (30 minutes)*

- Provide time for an open discussion, based on the following questions:
  - Which strengths can be leveraged? What is our best opportunity? Why?
  - Which key weaknesses and challenges must be overcome? Why? How?

- Based upon this discussion identify and summarize 3-5 key areas of focus for improvement, “What should be the key areas of focus for improvement in our program?”
- Record these key areas for improvement on a separate piece of flip chart paper entitle *Moving Forward*. These key themes represent the key areas of focus for improving the quality of the program, and can be used effectively to help inform future curriculum discussions and decisions.

### **For Smaller Group sizes (less than 10 people)**

#### *STEP 1: Generating Ideas (25 minutes)*

- Post 4 flip charts around the room (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges)
- Provide 10-15 minutes for each participant members to individually reflect on all quadrants of the SWOC matrix based on the guiding questions provided in Table 1. This initial time for reflection will help to ensure equal participation. During this time, ask the participants to summarize one-key point per sticky note. Remind participants to generate as many ideas as possible, even if there is overlap with others’ ideas.
- Invite participants to post their sticky notes on the appropriate SWOC chart around the room.

#### *STEP 2: Prioritization (45 minutes)*

- As a large group, review each SWOC quadrant by clustering the sticky notes into key themes. Overlapping and repeating notes can be placed over top of each other to clear clutter.
- Provide time for everyone to discuss and summarize the top 3-5 themes recorded on each flip chart.
- Record the key themes for each section of the SWOC on a separate flip chart.
- Ensure that you allow for further clarification and discussion of these key points.

#### *STEP 3: Moving Forward (30 minutes)*

- Provide time for an open discussion, based on the following questions:
  - Which strengths can be leveraged? What is our best opportunity? Why?
  - Which key weaknesses and challenges must be overcome? Why? How?
- Based upon this discussion identify and summarize 3-5 key areas of focus for improvement, “What should be the key areas of focus for improvement in our program?”
- Record these key areas for improvement on a separate piece of flip chart paper entitle *Moving Forward*. These key themes represent the key areas of focus for improving the quality of the program, and can be used effectively to help inform future curriculum discussions and decisions.

## Documenting the Process

The outcomes of the SWOC analysis will inevitably be used to help inform further curriculum discussions and decisions. It is important to clearly document the input, insight and ideas collaboratively generated during this process. The following table may provide a useful template for concisely summarizing the key outcomes of the SWOC analysis.

<b>SWOC Analysis</b>		
<b>Date:</b>		
<b>Stakeholders:</b>		
<b>Strengths</b>		<b>Importance (High/Medium/Low)</b>
S1.		
S2.		
S3.		
S4.		
<b>Weaknesses</b>		<b>Importance (H/M/L)</b>
W1.		
W2.		
W3.		
W4.		
<b>Opportunities</b>		<b>Importance (H/M/L)</b>
O1.		
O2.		
O3.		
O4.		
<b>Challenges</b>		<b>Importance (H/M/L)</b>
C1.		
C2.		
C3.		
C4.		
<b>Key Strategies for Moving Forward</b>		<b>Importance (H/M/L)</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

## References

Gordon, H., Hazlett, C., ten Cate, O., Mann, K., Kilminster, S., Prince, K., O'Driscoll, E., Snell, L., and Newble, D. (2000) Strategic planning in medical education: enhancing the learning environment for students in clinical settings. *Medical Education* 34: 841-850.

Henzi, D., Davis, E., Jasinevicius, and Hendricson, W. (2007). In the students' own words: what are the strengths and weaknesses of the dental school curriculum. *Journal of Dental Education* 71(5): 632-645.