SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is a simple but useful framework for analyzing your organization's strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats that you face. It helps you focus on your strengths, minimize threats, and take the greatest possible advantage of opportunities available to you.

The aim of any SWOT analysis is to identify the key internal and external factors that are important to achieving the objective. These come from your unique position, skills and mandate within your organization. SWOT analysis groups key pieces of information into two main categories:

- Internal factors – Strengths and weaknesses internal to your department or program.

- External factors – Opportunities and threats presented by the external environment, such as competing programs, limited resources, leadership direction, etc.

SWOT analysis may be used in any decision-making situation when an objective has been defined.

SWOT can be applied at multiple levels and throughout the department and program planning process.

SWOT analysis can be used to "kick off" strategy formulation on a large scale or to plan for a specific opportunity or initiative.

When carrying out your SWOT analysis, be realistic and rigorous. Apply it individually and with your team. It is often the precursor for deeper analysis of alternative courses of action.

How to Use SWOT Analysis

Use the prompts on the following pages to brainstorm strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats on worksheet on the last page of this document or in another form for you.

The prompts for each category are in the form of questions. This particular criteria examples are for a new business opportunity. Identify criteria appropriate to your own SWOT situation. Some questions and criteria examples may seem redundant; that's OK! The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats you write will highlight the significance of it for the team discussion and development of future strategies.

The Rules of Brainstorming

- Quantity, Not Quality!
- Welcome the Strange
- No Reaction
- All Ideas Recorded
- Clarifying Questions Only

Strengths

An organization's or program's strengths are its resources and capabilities that can be used as a basis for developing a new direction and/or competitive advantage. Consider your strengths from both an internal perspective, and from the point of view of your stakeholders. Be realistic; if you have any difficulty with this, write down a list of your organization's characteristics. Some of these will likely be strengths.

When identifying your strengths, consider the following:

- Attributes of the department that are helpful to achieving an objective.

- What do you do well?

- What unique resources can you draw upon?

- What do others see as your strengths? What do you do effectively, both departmentally and program-wise?

- Does your department have an excellent reputation? Why?

- Does your department have outstanding subject-matter expertise? What kind of expertise? Be specific.

- What unique skills does the department ? What specific skills do others seek from you?

- What do your peers (within and outside of organization) see as your strengths?

- What gives you credibility when seeking support from stakeholders?

- What unique or lowest-cost resources can you draw upon to further your goals?

Strengths Criteria Examples

- Advantages of proposition?
- Capabilities?
- Competitive advantages?
- USP's (unique selling points)?
- Resources, Assets, People?
- Experience, knowledge, data?
- Financial reserves, likely returns?
- Marketing - reach, distribution, awareness?
- Innovative aspects?
- Location and geographic?
- Price, value, quality?
- Accreditations, qualifications, certifications?
- Processes, systems, IT, communications?
- Cultural, attitudinal, behavioral? Management cover, succession?
- Philosophy and values?

Weaknesses

Consider weaknesses from both an internal and peer basis: Do other people seem to perceive weaknesses that you don't see? Are your peers doing anything better than you?

Be realistic and be willing to articulate uncomfortable or unpleasant truths about your department by considering:

- Attributes of the organization that are harmful to achieving an objective.

- What could you improve?

- Where do you have fewer resources than others?

- What are others likely to see as weaknesses? What perceived and/or actual weaknesses does your department/program have currently?

- Does your department and do your programs have the resources to do your jobs effectively?

- Is the current department and program staffing compatible with your current and future plans?

- What could you improve departmentally (i.e., program offerings, communication and leadership strategies, individual skills, etc.)

- What are your stakeholders likely to see as your weaknesses?

- What factors could be barriers from your program achieving goals? (Be specific.)

Weaknesses Criteria Examples

- Disadvantages of proposition?
- Gaps in capabilities?
- Lack of competitive strength?
- Reputation, presence and reach?
- Financials?
- Own known vulnerabilities?
- Timescales, deadlines and pressures?
- Cashflow, start-up cash-drain?
- Continuity, supply chain robustness?
- Effects on core activities, distraction?
- Reliability of data, plan predictability?
- Morale, commitment, leadership?
- Accreditations, etc?
- Processes and systems, etc?
- Management cover, succession?

Opportunities

The external environmental analysis may reveal certain new opportunities for growth. A useful approach when looking at opportunities is to look at your strengths and ask yourself whether these open up any opportunities. Alternatively, look at your weaknesses and ask yourself whether you could open up opportunities by eliminating them.

When identifying your opportunities, consider the following:

- External conditions that are helpful to achieving an objective.

- What good opportunities are open to you?

- What trends could you take advantage of?

- How can you turn your strengths into opportunities? What opportunities can you envision to enhance the department or program?

- What interesting trends are you aware of in your field(s) of expertise?

- What are current changes in philosophy and/or practices in your field that could impact your plans?

- What are current changes in leadership/administrative direction, plans or policies that could support or otherwise positively impact the direction or your department or program?

- What are relevant changes in school leadership, population, resources, etc. that could lead to opportunities for your department or program?

Opportunities Criteria Examples

- Market developments?
- Competitors' vulnerabilities?
- Industry or lifestyle trends?
- Technology development and innovation?
- Global influences?
- New markets, vertical, horizontal?
- Niche target markets?
- Geographical, export, import?
- New USP's?
- Tactics: eg, surprise, major contracts?
- Business and product development? Information and research?
- Partnerships, agencies, distribution?
- Volumes, production, economies?
- Seasonal, weather, fashion influences?

Threats

Don't overlook external factors, such as organizational policies, changes in strategic direction or leadership, technological changes in your industry or restricted finances due to unforeseen organizational pressures or changes.

When identifying your threats, consider the following:

- External conditions that are harmful to achieving an objective.

- What trends could harm you?

- What is your competition doing?

- What threats do your weaknesses expose you to? What obstacles do you face?

- What are other peer institutions doing to innovate or change their programs?

- Are quality standards or specifications for your job, products, or services changing?

- Are there new regulations that threaten your approach?

- Is changing technology threatening your position?

- Does the school/organization have cash-flow problems?

- Could any of your weaknesses seriously threaten the existence of your department or program?

Threats Criteria Examples

- Political effects?
- Legislative effects?
- Environmental effects?
- IT developments?
- Competitor intentions - various? Market demand?
- New technologies, services, ideas?
- Vital contracts and partners?
- Sustaining internal capabilities?
- Obstacles faced?
- Insurmountable weaknesses?
- Loss of key staff?
- Sustainable financial backing?
- Economy - home, abroad?
- Seasonality, weather effects?

SWOT Analysis Template

What is your objective? _____

+ POSITIVE	- NEGATIVE	
Strengths	Weaknesses	INTERNAL
Opportunities	Threats	EXTERNAL