The 2008 – 2010 unit action plans are due in March. An action plan is a unit’s short-range effort to implement its strategic plan. A strategic plan outlines the unit’s broad objectives for three to five years, whereas an action plan details what the unit intends to do during the next two years.

An effective strategic plan has three integral components: (1) a desired outcome, (2) a strategy for achieving it, and (3) at least one measure for assessing whether or not the outcome is achieved. AIEA is tasked with evaluating unit proposals in order to determine if all three components are present, if they are clearly stated, and if the proposed measurement will, in fact, assess whether or not the desired outcome is achieved.

Ideally, your action plan will follow directly from the strategies that you already outlined in your unit’s strategic plan. But as unit goals, activities, and strategic plans are constantly changing, you may find that you want to revise your strategies in order to facilitate the development of your revised action plans. Here are some possible scenarios:

(1) Perhaps new opportunities have arisen since you wrote your present strategic plan and taking advantage of these opportunities would meet the original spirit of your plan –

*For example, you had proposed to hold a writing workshop to improve student writing skills, but you have since learned that there is a new learning capsule that students can use to become better writers. Your revised strategy/action might be to provide this capsule to all majors.*

(2) Perhaps you now realize that your previously stated strategy, though doable, will not help you achieve your unit’s goal.

*For example, you had proposed to have your unit’s faculty meditate every morning in order to improve their publication rates, but upon further reflection, you have decided that this activity might not bring the desired results. Instead, you now propose to invite several journal editors to campus to speak with your faculty.*

(3) Perhaps you have come to the realization that your proposed strategy would be difficult to operationalize – i.e., hard to convert to concrete actions.

*For example, after a careful review of your present plan, you realize that your original strategy, “to become an international leader in the field,” might be difficult to implement. Instead, you narrow strategy to “participation in leading international forums.” This might involve*
actions such as submitting papers to the program review committees of international societies.

A template has been provided for detailing your action plans. As you begin to use it, you may find that it is sometimes challenging to identify an appropriate measure of success. Indeed, the review process has identified a number of concerns that are common to many of the plans proposed last year. Such concerns can be sorted into relatively few categories. AIEA has coded them to facilitate efficient feedback. The codes with brief descriptions are enumerated in Table 1. Please consult this table as you go forward.

Finally, some plans seem overly elaborate or unnecessarily complex. AIEA has one overarching recommendation. Keep it simple. There is considerable merit in writing simple plans. They are easier to construct, easier to implement, and easier to evaluate.

One way to keep your plan simple is to propose a step-by-step implementation over several years. Let’s say that the desired outcome is an improvement in student scholarship. The action plan for the first year might be to establish a baseline for purposes of subsequent comparisons. There will be several activities involved in doing this. Describe them. For example, scholarship can be defined in a variety of ways, but one measure could be the number of student co-authors on posters presented at professional forums. A baseline could be established by counting the number of student presentations during Year 1 of plan. Having established a baseline in Year 1, then an initiative aimed at improving student scholarship could be undertaken in Year 2. The impact of the initiative could be assessed in Year 3, especially if a delayed impact is expected. Presumably the number of student presentations would increase, indicating success. If not, then reasons for the disappointing outcome could be explored and a new initiative might follow.

It is important to recognize that there are several levels of assessment in the given example. Each takes the form of a question requiring an answer. (a) Did your unit complete the action plan for Year 1 by establishing a baseline (yes or no)? If so, what was the baseline value (a frequency)? Did your unit complete the Year 2 action plan by implementing an activity presumed to improve scholarship (yes or no)? If so, was the impact on student scholarship measured in Year 3 (yes or no)? If so, was the outcome an improvement (% change)? And so on.

A final comment: Note that a unit can be considered effective in carrying out its plan, even if preliminary results are disappointing. It is assumed that the unit will continue striving for improvements, and that eventual successes will be more likely if it does.
# Table 1

**Itemized Feedback and Feedback Codes**

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| 1.   | One or more of the plan’s components is stated in terms so broad that it is not clear what the unit intends to achieve, implement, or measure.  
A hypothetical case might be, “highly sophisticated learning methods will be used to teach cutting edge courses.” |
| 2.   | There is a disconnect between one or more of the plan’s components. In other words, a plan proposes to achieve a particular outcome but proposes to measure something else.  
For example, a unit proposes to increase the quality of student writing by having students write more papers. The proposed measure is the number of papers that the student writes, but number papers, though a valid measure for some purposes, does not appear to be a measure of quality.  
In another hypothetical case, it is specified that a “qualitative analysis” will be performed, but no measure of quality is identified. The term “qualitative analysis” is vague.  
As a final example, a unit proposes to increase faculty scholarship. The proposed assessment is “faculty vitae will be reviewed annually,” but the measure to be extracted during the review remains unspecified. |
| 3.   | The plan proposes to measure an improvement in some variable, but there is no baseline for basis of comparison, and so there is no way to determine if a change has occurred.  
For example, the unit proposes to improve student scholarship by encouraging undergraduate research participation. The proposed measure is the number of student presentations at professional forums, but improvements cannot be assessed without a baseline. |
| 4.   | The plan proposes to assess an outcome that is not under the unit’s control.  
Let’s say that the desired outcome is to add a faculty position. The unit might propose to assess whether or not the position is granted. A problem with this approach to assessing success is that the unit does not have the
authority make this decision. Moreover, there are many factors not under the unit’s direct control that might influence the outcome. One solution to this dilemma is to assess the actions that the unit took in pursuit of the desired outcome. The assessment in this case might be categorical, e.g., did the unit submit a proposal to the appropriate dean (yes or no)? Alternatively, the assessment might be quantitative – e.g., how did the dean rate the proposal using a Likert Scale? (Circle one: very weak 1 2 3 4 5 very strong.)

5. The assessment measure is vague or not specified.

As examples, a unit’s objective is to increase the number of majors by developing a marketing plan. The proposed measure is a “statistical analysis of the data,” or, “A report will be submitted.”

6. Assessment of strategic plans or action plans is confused with assessment of student learning objectives.

Student learning objectives are specific levels of student accomplishment, often specified as minimum standards for a course, certificate, or degree. Strategic planning outcomes assess a unit’s effectiveness relative to its stated planning goals and the actions taken to achieve them.

7. Unit proposals sometimes confuse the term measures with the term outcomes.

A unit’s desired planning outcome might be to improve student scholarship, but the term improvement is not a measure. An appropriate measure in this case might be an increase in the number of student posters at professional meetings.