

AN INSIDE HIGHER ED SPECIAL REPORT

# Smart, Succinct and Agile:

Strategic Planning in an  
Age of Uncertainty

**INSIDE**  
HIGHER ED





# Executive Summary

Challenges to higher education mount ever higher. The global financial crisis, which left institutions trapped in a vise between rising costs, shrunken endowments and curtailed public funding, has given way to a new period of rapidly changing student demographics, intense public scrutiny and disconcerting political unpredictability—plus still-rising costs, a worrying reliance on wealthy donors and, for public universities, uncertain state appropriations.

At the same time, colleges and universities find themselves thrust into competing roles, often without funds to pay for clashing priorities. Some are asked to serve as economic engines revitalizing neighborhoods or entire regions. Others are investing heavily in student services, information technology and online course delivery as they seek to reach new and diverse groups of students, retain more of the students they enroll or fend off competitors. Still others are stepping in to take on key responsibilities that are far from the core higher education enterprise, such as supporting

local school districts or owning hospital chains—either because those responsibilities present opportunities or because no one else is filling gaping vacuums in communities. And many colleges are struggling to make their budgets work just to support existing education and research programs.

The choices colleges make in this world of escalating demands and limited resources inevitably cost them time and money. So sound strategic planning is critical for all types of institutions—public and private, rich and poor, community college and research university. But many leaders seem to approach strategic planning as a requirement to be met, a box to be ticked off or an exhaustive wish list of all constituents' hopes and dreams. This approach frequently results in documents that are bland and predictable.

Most such plans are doomed to fade into irrelevance and become a strategic planning cliché: they will gather dust on a shelf. Worse, they will represent missed

opportunities for colleges and universities to use a powerful tool to help them make hard choices and set new courses in a fast-changing world.

Although no plan is perfect, one seeking to be all things to all people is likely to serve as nothing to anyone. A successful plan, on the contrary, can help rally a college's many constituencies around a set of shared values while charting a future toward clear goals. It is realistic about an institution's identity while steering it toward a better tomorrow.

This is not to say colleges must hew to a certain planning process or specific plan format. Given the vast differences among colleges and universities, it would be foolish to expect a single set of planning ideas to translate into success across higher education.

Nonetheless, higher ed leaders can draw upon a trove of wisdom and experience to develop the right planning processes for their institutions at any given moment in time. This report details the latest trends in strategic planning and best practices leaders can choose from to build a meaningful process able to motivate key constituencies. It includes a high-level look at planning models, case studies of colleges and universities that have overcome planning challenges, and key considerations for leaders embarking on a planning process. It also explores the different purposes planning can serve, from legitimizing

leaders' efforts to galvanizing fund-raising to helping a campus find its way in a confusing world.

This report aims to serve as both an introduction and in-depth resource for administrators, trustees and others at colleges and universities embarking on a strategic planning process. Among the key issues discussed are when to do a plan, who should or should not be involved, the relationship between plans and new presidents, the need to connect strategic plans to financial realities, how to keep the campus and internal constituencies engaged, the role of equity and diversity, the role rankings play, and how plans have changed over four decades. ■

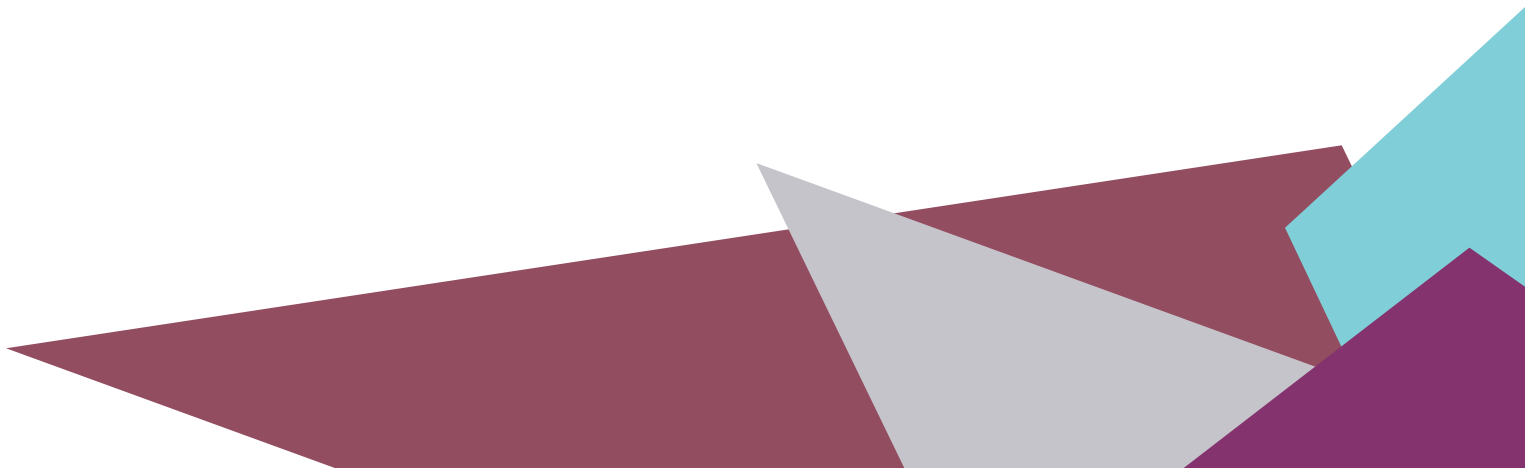


# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Belief in Strategic Planning</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Why Plan at All?</b>	<b>7</b>
Key Consideration: Accreditation	13
<b>The Art of Timing</b>	<b>14</b>
Snapshot: New Presidents Handle Inherited Plans	19
<b>The Planning Process</b>	<b>22</b>
Snapshot: Fast-Track Planning	28
Key Consideration: Who Has a Seat at the Planning Table?	30
Key Consideration: Making Metrics Measure Up	34
Snapshot: Planning for Equity	37
Key Consideration: Form and Function	40
<b>Rich and Poor, Public and Private Institutions</b>	<b>43</b>
Snapshot: Planning a Major Change in Identity	54
Snapshot: Planning After a Merger	57

# Table of Contents

<b>Best Practices</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Worst Practices</b>	<b>65</b>
Key Consideration: Climbing the Ladder	69
Spotlight: Q&A From Across the Pond	72
Snapshot: How Plans Have Changed	75
<b>Is Strategic Planning Worth the Effort?</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Sources</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Additional Reading</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>86</b>





# Belief in Strategic Planning

When Stanford University's School of Engineering started what was thought to be its first-ever schoolwide strategic planning process during the 2014-15 academic year, some of those involved wondered about the value.

One of the planning process's co-chairs, Jennifer Widom, says she personally didn't believe in strategic planning at the time.

"The engineering school just kind of chugs along, and people are pretty entrepreneurial and innovative already, and so why does one need to do strategic planning?" asks Widom, who at the time was senior associate dean for faculty and academic affairs at the School of Engineering, a top-ranked engineering school by almost any measure.

But Persis Drell, who became dean of the engineering school in 2014, thinks new leaders should begin with strategic planning. So plan the school did. A small faculty group recommended a process led by co-chairs who

were senior faculty members, one of whom was Widom. Midcareer faculty members ultimately drove the process, under which planners went through an open call for ideas, visited with constituencies at town halls and meetings, and decided what outputs they would produce.

They generated a series of public and private white papers examining [10 pressing problems](#) the school could address, such as "How can we use our strength in computation and data analysis to drive innovation throughout the university?" [Other papers](#) looked at issues surrounding non-tenure-line educators, diversity, and the high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay area, which can make it difficult and expensive for talented faculty members to live near Stanford.

The process also produced a glossy brochure, a website and a spreadsheet with 130 recommendations for changes. Widom, who has gone on to become the engineering school's dean, recently checked that spreadsheet and

found progress had been made on some items, some had been tabled and some were dropped—possibly without enough thought. It is time to look at the school's follow-up, she says.

Whatever the spreadsheet shows, Widom can point to ways strategic planning helped the engineering school. It drove significant changes in faculty employment, like changes to appointment type, length of appointments and financial guarantees for non-tenure-line educators. It helped officials gather ideas from different constituencies. Also, it laid the groundwork for the next generation of leaders.

“The process itself was perhaps more important than the output,” Widom says. “The midcareer faculty turned out to be a really great group who got very close to each other, and in 10 years they’re going to be the chairs of their departments, probably. I think those relationships built between those people from different departments may last for decades and be beneficial for decades.”

Widom has become deeply involved in an even greater strategic planning effort at Stanford, because she’s a member of the university’s senior cabinet. The dean who started the planning process at the School of Engineering, Drell, rose to become the university’s provost. She and Marc Tessier-Lavigne, who was named Stanford’s president in 2016, launched a long-range university planning process in 2017. It’s a relatively rare occurrence for Stanford, which still references past planning from the early 2000s.

Planning at the scale of an engineering school is different by an order of magnitude from planning at the scale of a college or

university. When the School of Engineering issued an open call for ideas, it received about 90, Widom says. When the university did the same, it ended up with close to 3,000.

“There are the resources, and then there is the breadth of the entity,” Widom says. “The School of Engineering, I think, is a small enough entity that we were able to include everybody and have a scope that we could talk about the whole picture and make decisions on priorities. The university is just so gigantic. It’s much harder to have a single picture.”

Stanford’s breadth is one argument for strategic planning, according to Drell.

“It’s a way to unify our community around some common aspirations,” she says. “And then as an administrator and a manager, I like to know where I’m heading in the long term, because that helps me make the day-to-day decisions I have to make.”

Stanford has been operating at the top of its game, Drell says. The same was true of the School of Engineering when she started the strategic planning process there.

But the world has been changing, and Stanford needs to think about how it will respond to new realities, Drell says. Being at the top of your game is a dangerous place.

“The analogy is when you’re at the top of the mountain, all directions are down,” Drell says. “But that is where you should take some risks and figure out: What is that higher mountain that you are going to climb?”

## Why Planning Matters

Skeptics argue that planning at Stanford—or

any top-tier wealthy research university—bears no resemblance to planning at the less-well-off institutions that educate the majority of the nation's postsecondary students. In some ways, they would be correct. Large, well-endowed institutions struggle to change direction quickly because of their mass. They have to sort through an onslaught of ideas from passionate, well-connected constituencies. They have to fight the illusion that their wealth means they do not need to make hard choices. Those are very different issues from the ones faced by small, struggling institutions, which must scrape together time for overworked faculty and staff to plan, and which must make decisions knowing that a significant misstep carries threat of closure.

All too often, colleges and universities follow planning processes out of alignment with the situation on their campuses. They produce plans that fail to identify their market position, acknowledge key challenges or make any meaningful choices. Many plans read like adjective soup, with line after line extolling excellence and innovation but little to no description of how the institution will reach excellence or become innovative—or why.

Discussion of strategic planning as a practice is often no better. Planners frequently careen between spouting platitudes and splitting hairs about process points or planning tools. Discussion of strategy itself and how it can be formed across the disparate groups on campus can seem distressingly rare.

"There is kind of a rote definition of strategic planning in higher ed," says David Strauss, a principal of the strategy-consulting firm Art

& Science Group. "There is a question of how effective it is."

Many institutions struggle to find an effective definition of strategic planning, one that fits their particular needs. But planning can take numerous definitions and forms. Its benefits aren't uniform.

"This is not a valueless exercise," Strauss says. "It's not a valueless exercise, even in the less effective times it's undertaken."

Common threads connect planning practices at universities different in size, scope and strength. Whether a university is public or private, surging or at risk of closure, it is increasingly likely to need to plan in a world in which higher education is changing and has an uncertain future.

Accreditors are scrutinizing plans more closely. Presidents are changing jobs more frequently. Students and donors alike seek colleges and universities with a sense of direction. Strategic planning can address all of those developments in different contexts.

Planning can serve as a political tool protecting colleges and universities from excitable trustees and lawmakers who have been struck by trendy ideas that don't necessarily fit into long-term goals. It can be a marketing tool for communicating with donors and students. Planning can be a form of soul-searching, choice making and coordinating between the various financial, operational and academic demands leaders shoulder. And perhaps most importantly, planning can help to motivate faculty and staff members who will need to be on board for any institution to change.



Make no mistake: strong planning processes have won over skeptics in the past.

"I'm a convert," says Joanna Ellis-Monaghan, chair of the mathematics and statistics department at Saint Michael's College in Vermont. "Early on, I thought this was just a waste of time, and I was not keen on this process at the departmental or the institutional level. I have seen how much of an incredible impact it can make when it's done well. So I'm quite interested in doing it well."

Saint Michael's has been through several years of leadership and strategic change. The college created a five-year strategic plan in 2015, about a year after its leaders [took the unusual step](#) of openly preparing for a future in which its enrollment fell by 10 percent to 15 percent. Its president during those times, John J. Neuhauser, decided to leave in the summer of 2018. Lorraine Sterritt succeeded him as president, and she now says she wants to grow enrollment beyond its current level of about 1,650 undergraduates.

She thinks that the college can add more students, even in the face of enrollment headwinds like a shrinking number of high school graduates in the Northeast.

"Strategic planning is absolutely critical in this day and age when we have those headwinds," she says. "The days are long gone when you could just move along from year to year and take things as they come. We really have to be out ahead of things with our planning. We have to be anticipating what programs will be of interest to our students. We have to be anticipating how the financial model of the college will work, since that's something that is very challenged right now

across the country."

The [college's strategic plan document from 2015](#) doesn't explicitly reference the idea of shrinking. Preparing for shrinking was the financial strategy with which the board was comfortable at the time, Neuhauser says. The strategic plan document, in contrast, sets goals like improving the college's academic standing, promoting learning experiences outside of the classroom and promoting faculty development.

"I really did want a set of new ideas, things that could energize the place in a period where I thought higher education in general was going to come under a tremendous amount of stress for political reasons, demographic reasons, all sorts of reasons," Neuhauser says. "Lord knows, in higher education, there are new things to do all the time if you have the courage to let go of old things."

All the different discussions about shrinking, growing and rolling out new strategic plans in a short number of years could very easily turn off faculty members if they feel whiplash. That's not the case for Ellis-Monaghan, who was a member of a committee examining faculty growth and development during Saint Michael's most recent planning process. Nor is it the case for some other faculty members at Saint Michael's who were involved in planning.

"I think one of the things the administration gets out of this is faculty buy-in," says Mark Lubkowitz, a professor of biology at the college who chaired a strategic planning committee on admissions. "You feel like you're part of the process."

Faculty members can sometimes identify

problems—or complain about them—without having to solve them. When he was a part of the planning process at Saint Michael's, Lubkowitz came to recognize that leaders don't have that luxury.

"I realized on this committee that the president really has to take the macro view and be able to put all these pieces together and put it into some sort of cogent, coherent position," he says.

Strategic planning does not always enjoy such enthusiasm from faculty members or different constituencies on campus. Indeed, the concept itself has survived various cycles of waxing and waning support in the decades since it made the jump from the military and business sectors to the world of higher education.

## Decades of Strategic Planning on Campus

Accounts generally trace strategic planning's formal adoption within colleges and universities to the late 1970s or early 1980s. Strategic planning had existed for years in the realms of business and the military, and college leaders had been doing their own planning long before then, of course. But those earlier higher ed plans in finance, enrollment, facilities and human resources were in most cases "one-dimensional forms of linear projection" accounting only for variables "under the control of the institution itself," according to Richard L. Morrill, a former president of the University of Richmond, Centre College and Salem College and a higher ed strategy consultant, writing in his 2007 book *Strategic Leadership*. Those

plans lacked key elements of strategic planning: responding to change and "coming to terms with a turbulent environment."

Pressure built on higher education though the 1970s as the economy floundered and governments increased regulation and scrutiny. Then in the 1983 book *Academic Strategy*, George Keller, a University of Pennsylvania higher education studies professor, laid out strategic planning as a way to respond to the changing environment. Keller's work "did not so much describe the details of the process as situate and articulate a new possibility at just the right moment," according to Morrill.

Since then, strategic planning in higher education—and other sectors—has survived round after round of criticism and support. In 1994, McGill University management professor Henry Mintzberg wrote *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. He also took to the *Harvard Business Review* to argue that the process of strategy making needed to be loosened, not formalized arbitrarily. Strategic planning, he wrote, was different from strategic thinking. What had been labeled strategic planning was really just naming and elaborating on existing strategies and visions.

"Strategy making is not an isolated process," he wrote. "It does not happen just because a meeting is held with that label. To the contrary, strategy making is a process interwoven with all that it takes to manage an organization. Systems do not think, and when they are used for more than the facilitation of human thinking, they can prevent thinking."

Mintzberg argued that the strategy-making process should start with taking what a manager learns from his or her experiences, the experiences of others within the organization

and hard data. It should then proceed to synthesizing what has been learned into a vision of what the organization should pursue.

While it may be tempting to dismiss concerns from 1994 as dusty criticisms that belong on a shelf, many of the issues Mintzberg discussed are brought up by the college presidents, planners and consultants of today. Those embarking on strategic planning continue to struggle to find the right committee structures, forum schedules and online comment systems for gathering information. They still grapple with the imprecise science of turning what they've learned about internal and external conditions into a vision for the future that is somehow consistent with their current culture. And they remain in search of the right balance between writing plans that hold employees to important goals and allowing staff and faculty members to think, change tactics on the fly and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.

"If people are nervous, they may not do their best thinking, and they may not have confidence in the inherent culture, values and historic capabilities of the institution," says Anthony Knerr, managing director of AKA Strategy, a higher education and nonprofit consulting firm. "But it's also easy, sometimes, to overreach. So the art form, I think, is finding the balance." ■



# Why Plan at All?

It is not hard to draw parallels between conditions today and those four decades ago, when strategic planning first started capturing the attention of college and university leaders. So strategic planning may once again represent possibility for stressed institutions at just the right moment.

Yet leaders sometimes fall into the trap of planning for superficial reasons. They plan because planning is expected of them. They plan because an old strategic plan is expiring. Some plan when they are new presidents on campus without much thought about why—they simply know strategic planning has become a traditional step for a new leader to take, a part of a new president's core requirements to be completed.

Those who start strategic planning simply to make clear that leadership has changed are unlikely to leave a significant mark, says Martin Kurzweil, director of the educational transformation program at the consulting

firm Ithaka S+R. The plans produced during their tenures are unlikely to be acted upon in any lasting way.

"That is a process of, or for, the sake of change," Kurzweil says. "It is often somewhat superficial, to me, and more about communications than about meaningful change at the institution level."

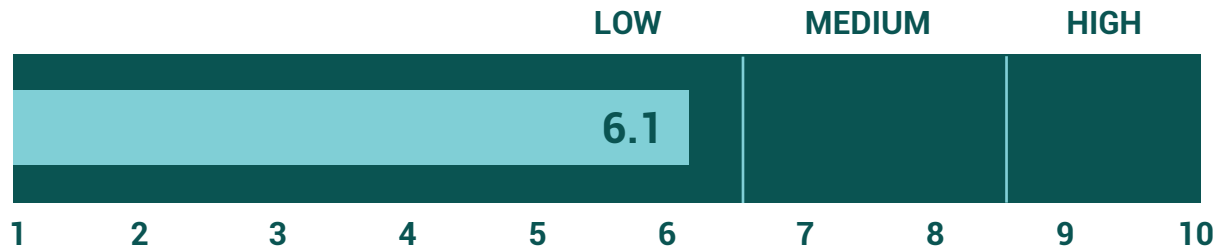
Along a similar vein, some plan because accreditors expect planning. Accrediting agencies increasingly focus on whether institutions are meeting goals identified during strategic planning, according to those who have served on accreditation teams. Although the exact requirements and expectations vary by accreditor, some colleges synchronize their planning processes with accreditation timelines.

Planning in order to meet accreditor expectations can turn into planning only when an accreditor is paying attention, however. Again, it's a recipe for a plan that will be forgotten, at

## Overall planning is rated relatively low by college and university leaders

Overall planning rating, n=1,835  
 Mean, 1-10 scale

Overall planning at your college or university



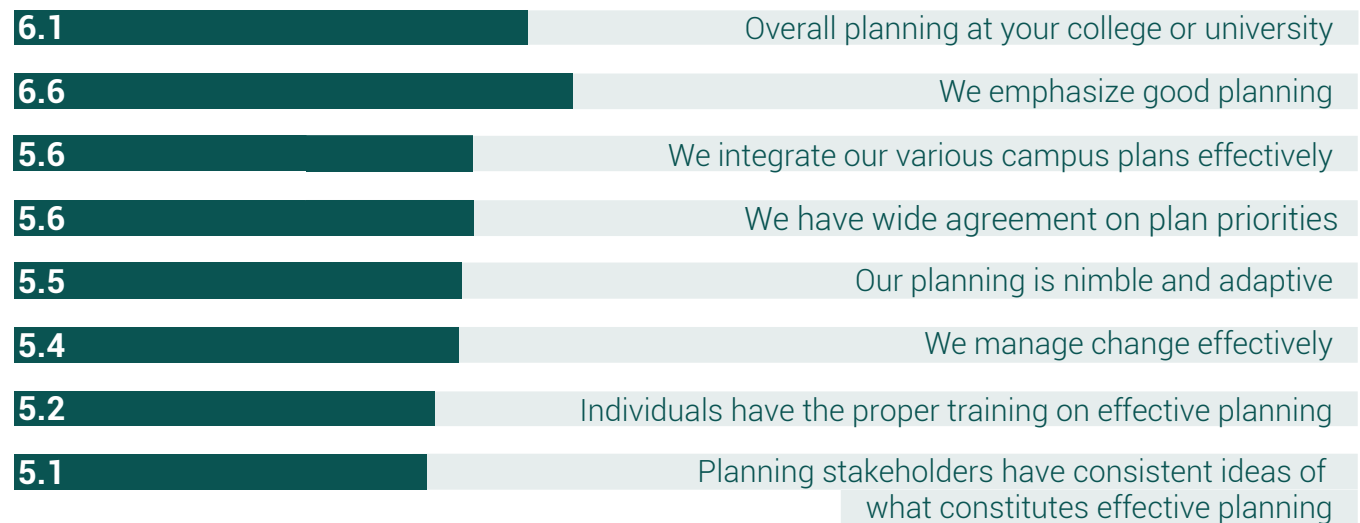
SOURCE: SCUP survey of college and university leaders  
 QUESTION: "Using a 1-10 scale where 1 is 'Poor' and 10 is 'Excellent,' how would you rate the overall planning effectiveness at your college or university?"

\* Confidence interval at 95% is 0.1

Figure 1 - Source: Society for College and University Planning

## Good planning is somewhat emphasized, but there is a lack of training and consistency among stakeholders on what constitutes effective planning

Ratings on the seven factors, n=1,835  
 Mean, 1-10 scale



SOURCE: SCUP survey of college and university leaders  
 QUESTION: "Using a 1-10 scale where 1 is 'Strongly Disagree' and 10 is 'Strongly Agree,' indicate how much you agree with the following statements about your college or university's ongoing planning efforts."

\* Confidence interval at 95% is 0.1

Figure 2 - Source: Society for College and University Planning

least until the accreditor comes calling again in a few years.

“In New England, everybody is required to have a strategic plan,” says Richard Freeland, president emeritus of Northeastern University, former Massachusetts commissioner of higher education and senior consultant with Maguire Associates. “But a lot of them are just exercises.”

Confusion about why strategic planning is important in higher education could translate into problems in the planning process and its end product. If a campus isn't clear why it is planning, how can it produce a clear plan?

Survey data show such problems cropping up on many campuses. College and university leaders view overall planning as “fair at best, with a good deal of room for improvement,” the Society for College and University Planning found after surveying higher ed leaders who plan at colleges and universities in 2015. A total of 1,835 survey respondents asked to rate overall planning effectiveness at their institutions on a 1-10 scale gave a mean response of 6.1, which SCUP called low.

When asked if they could produce a plan that could be carried out and evaluated, surveyed leaders gave an even lower response, 5.4. And their mean response was 5.4 when asked whether they had clarity on the proper structure for planning documents.

Leaders were somewhat more likely to indicate their campuses emphasized good planning. But they weren't as confident that campus stakeholders have a consistent idea

of what that means.

Those are concerning responses for a practice with a decades-long history at colleges and universities. With planning so widely viewed as underwhelming, the question must be asked: Why plan at all?

## Think About How Planning Helps

Clearly, the best answers are not “because everyone is planning” or “because everyone expects it.” Instead, leaders might want to think about the different roles strategic plans can play. Chief among them is the very definition of strategic planning—it is an exercise in setting long-term goals and directions for leaders to use as they make important decisions affecting a college or university's future.

In other words, colleges and universities plan so they can grow, respond and thrive as the environment changes around them. This is easier for some institutions than it is for others, but even powerful universities with well-defined roles can use planning to shift in new directions. No one should have been surprised when the University of California, Berkeley, emphasized academic and research excellence, student opportunity, and its public mission [in strategic plan drafts released in 2018](#). But some may have been surprised to see the elite research institution's drafts mentioning growth in lifelong learning, including through online opportunities for its alumni.

Effective strategic planning can move institutions in new directions in part because it is a process involving multiple constituencies. Members of different groups, including students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, local community members and sometimes trustees can all be involved in various planning committees.

The depth and breadth of that diverse audience can give strategic planning the legitimacy to fill several other roles. Those roles would otherwise be difficult to fill in higher education, with its history of shared governance and wide breadth of stakeholders sharing few interests.

Several of the roles are intertwined: choice making, soul-searching and generating buy-in. All are difficult to fulfill on a college campus where every constituency expects to be heard and resistance to change can be high. And all are required to some degree before strategic planning can fill its primary role of setting a direction for the future.

"It's about finding how the people that know you—or you wish knew you but don't—how they view and value you," says Daniel R. Porterfield, former president of Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania, who is now president and CEO of the Aspen Institute. "What do they see in you? What value do you offer that makes them say they want to be aligned with you?"

Porterfield led a strategic planning process in the 2012-13 academic year, shortly after he started at Franklin & Marshall in 2011. In part, that meant identifying the college's competitive set.

No one said Ivy League institutions were Franklin & Marshall's competitive set, according to Porterfield. No one said the institution's competitors were regional Pennsylvania colleges. Instead, they agreed that Franklin & Marshall competed with top liberal arts colleges in the country.

It was important to make sure key constituencies, like trustees and faculty members, had a chance to provide feedback, Porterfield says. Existing governance systems, like faculty senates or councils, can be incorporated into the process to further that discussion and build legitimacy.

In Franklin & Marshall's case, Porterfield met with faculty members regularly and ultimately asked them to approve the college's strategic priorities. He also asked the college's Board of Trustees to approve [the priorities](#), which included "Recruit extraordinary student talent" and "Fuel knowledge, discovery and artistic creation." Then after faculty members and trustees both voted to approve, in 2013, everyone was accountable for making the plan succeed.

"It can be a mistake to think that the institution can somehow enumerate a set of priorities, and that's how strategy happens," Porterfield says. "Strategy happens in all parts of the institution—within the departments, within the student community, the board community, the alumni, the donors. I think the president has a role to try to harmonize it, make it coherent."

After listening, evaluating their position and setting strategic priorities, institutions can better make a case to their donors for





year after year. Without an overarching vision, the planning of different departments or academic units can quickly diverge to work against each other.

In fact, accreditors are emphasizing integrated planning that has institutions tying together their strategic plans and other types of plans, coordinating how they allocate resources and assess themselves, according to Nicholas Santilli, lead facilitator at SCUP.

Language about integrated or strategic planning can typically be found near accrediting standards related to institutional effectiveness, he says.

So while superficial planning only to meet accreditation requirements isn't a best practice, it is important to know that strategic planning also fills the role of keeping accreditors happy.

Building a plan that's able to accurately identify an institution's identity, set its direction for the future and win buy-in from multiple constituencies is difficult work. It's significantly more complicated than strategic planning in other settings. SCUP has noted that planning practices designed for corporations and non-profits don't necessarily fit the complicated world of college campuses or the specific challenges higher ed institutions face.

"What's going to make your culture happy?" Santilli says. "It's really as much a cultural document and process as anything." ■

### Planning Fills Many Roles

1. Finding Institutional Identity
2. Setting Long-Term Direction
3. Choice Making
4. Generating Faculty and Staff Buy-In
5. Getting the Board on Board
6. Political Cover
7. Marketing
8. Drawing Donor Attention
9. Coordinating Other Plans: Academic, Financial, Facilities, etc.
10. Meeting Accreditation Requirements

# ACCREDITATION

The accreditation timeline drives strategic planning at many colleges and universities. Although aligning the two can keep everyone on the same page while saving time and energy, experts caution against writing a plan solely to keep accreditors happy.

"In two hours we can write a strategic plan that would check the boxes," says Will Miller, assistant vice president of campus adoption at Campus Labs, a higher education data and software company. "But nobody buys in to it."

Nonetheless, good reasons exist to consider aligning the two cycles when possible.

"Ninety percent of the time, the problems that accreditors are dealing with are strategic areas," says Jennifer deCoste, vice president for strategy at the consulting firm Credo. "They're not going to worry if you don't have enough staplers. They're going to worry if you're not meeting the curricular requirements."

Accreditors don't necessarily require institutions to have a specific document called a strategic plan. But they have standards on planning, and experts say that's translating more and more into accreditors examining strategic plans.

Standards for planning are nothing new, says Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. They have been around a long time.

"If folks are feeling the pressure about that, I would speculate that's because life is very challenging for many institutions," Eaton says.

Accreditors are looking at the nuts and bolts of an institution, she says. Mostly they are interested in academics, but nuts and bolts also mean things like facilities.

Is an institution planning within the framework of its mission, or has it strayed? Is it putting together a list of what it wants to do and the way to do it? Does it have the capacity to follow its plan?

"By and large, in a formal sense, the institutional accreditors are not telling you what you have to do," Eaton says. "You need to be planning. You need to have the resources needed to be consistent with your mission."

Accreditors requiring a midterm review will want to see evidence that plans are being implemented.

The requirements don't have to be seen as curtailing flexibility, according to Eaton.

"If you can do a pretty good job of anticipating the near-term and midterm and coordinate that with the accreditation review, you're maximizing your flexibility," she says. ■



# The Art of Timing

An axiom of higher education is that a freshly hired president will step into the job, begin learning about his or her new institution and roll that learning effort into a strategic planning process incorporating detail after detail from departments across campus.

It's a comfortable tradition for new leaders, even if it is a sprawling undertaking for someone who has been newly hired. Strategic planning provides new presidents with structure for picking priorities and hopefully builds momentum for implementing those priorities over coming years.

It is also a model increasingly being squeezed.

Presidential tenures are shortening. Trustees sometimes agitate for new strategic plans to be written regardless of whether a long-term president is in place. Colleges and universities increasingly try to align strategic plans with cyclical events like capital campaigns and accreditation reviews.

Consequently, new presidents don't always have the luxury of beginning comprehensive planning processes on day one.

As higher education moves further into a period of heightened unpredictability, other timing traditions have broken down as well. Plans are written more quickly and cover less time into the future than they have in the past.

"The old-school way we did it back in the 1980s at MIT, doing a process where every department does a plan and they all roll up, and you end up with a big 300-page document that sits on people's shelves, I don't think there's a lot of taste for that anymore," says Donald E. Heller, provost and vice president of academic affairs at the University of San Francisco. "The emphasis seems to be on how we can create an institution that's nimble and changes and pivots quickly when necessary."

## Fewer Years Into the Future

Generally, leaders and consultants are endorsing short, three-year or five-year plans instead of the longer, decade-plus plans that were once the norm. Exceptions exist, as wealthy or ambitious institutions sometimes set longer time horizons or dedicate additional resources toward continuous planning.

Regardless of a plan's time horizon or institution's resource level, experts are recommending leaders find a way to frequently track plans for progress and revise them as necessary. Some events will make clear that it is time for a new plan or major revision. External factors like changes in student demand or a cut in public funding can rock an institution's finances. Or internal considerations like meeting an existing plan's goals can mean it's time to ask what's next.

Even when strategic plans are revamped or replaced, planners say leaders should ask if they can preserve core visions, values and certain strategies. Doing so can build long-term consistency at a time when the pace of change pushes many colleges and their leaders toward different short-term fixes.

It can also prevent planning processes from spending too much energy rewriting statements that don't need to change.

"I have seen campuses where they spent 18 months crafting the world's most beautiful mission statement, and they are so exhausted they can't do anything else," says deCoste, of the consulting firm Credo.

Planners often make a connection between shorter strategic plans and presidential tenure. The average number of years a president had been in his or her job as of 2016 slipped to 6.5, according to the [most recent American College President Study](#) from the American Council on Education. It fell from seven years in 2011 and 8.5 in 2006.

That statistic means many presidencies are shorter than 6.5 years. Shortening presidential tenures squeeze the strategic planning process. Just soliciting ideas, holding committee meetings and drawing up a plan can take the better part of a year, even on a condensed timeline. Then, only five years or so remain for the average president to finalize a plan, put it in place and make sure the institution is moving toward its goals. After that, a new leadership team might be sweeping in to start its own planning.

Such short timelines could undermine new presidents who seek to use strategic planning to make hard choices. When a new leader comes in every few years with a brand-new plan, the old guard on campus might feel emboldened to drag its feet on ideas it doesn't like. The next president will have a new plan, anyway.

In some cases, leaders simply won't have enough time to put a plan's goals into place.

"I think it takes three or four years from the time beginning the planning process before you start to get broad buy-in to where you're heading," says James T. Harris, president of the University of San Diego. Harris became president of the Roman Catholic university in 2015 after previously serving for 13 years as president of Widener University, which has

campuses in Pennsylvania and Delaware, and serving for eight years as president of Defiance College in Ohio.

To be clear, the relationship between shortening presidencies and shortening strategic plans isn't necessarily causal. Both could be influenced by the same pressures pushing down on higher ed.

"I begin with the belief that enough things are happening at such a faster pace in higher education that it's simply not realistic to be able to know 10 years out how an institution should be spending its time, resources and energy," says John Swallow, president of Carthage College in Wisconsin. "I think those same conditions have implications for the length of presidencies and maybe other structures, but I wouldn't start by saying it's the length of presidency that's the issue. It's the rate of changes and the challenges and how quickly they are coming that is really driving this."

## Planning and Presidential Turnover

Setting aside the issue of causality, shortened presidencies and plans mean many presidents start on campuses that are part way through a multiyear plan. If things fall the wrong way, that timing can create an awkward situation, leaving the new leader to decide whether to continue under the existing plan, modify it or quickly sweep it away.

Should some institutions that are committed to existing strategies consider hiring a president to fit a plan, rather than to create one?

As with most things in planning, it depends on context, experts say. Search committees usually seek candidates who can demonstrate that they are leaders with big ideas. They might not be too excited about presidential hopefuls who are eager to carry out someone else's strategic plan.

But boards and other leaders should have some sense of institutional identity and some vision for where they want to go that doesn't change with the president, says Catharine Bond Hill, managing director at Ithaca S+R.

"It's not like all bets are off, and whoever comes in gets to redo the institution in his or her own image," she says. "I think it kind of happens implicitly, but not quite so explicitly. The R1s, they're going to take it as a given that anybody in their pool is somebody who is deeply committed to the research mission of the university."

Carrying some core strategic elements over from one plan to the next strikes many as good governance and stewardship, whether the setting is a top-tier research university or a community college. Keeping some important strategies consistent over time might even solidify an institution's identity and market position in the eyes of those it serves.

The idea won't please egoists who believe the presidency should wrap an institution around its leader's finger, but most agree higher ed institutions should be greater than any one executive leading them. On a personnel level, expecting every new president to be a genius who will sweep in with a beautiful new strategic direction might not be fair. Bringing in a president while a plan is in place for a short time might even be part of a successful

transition plan, if the existing strategy can give the new leader a foundation with core strategies that haven't become outdated.

For example, Saint Michael's College in Vermont titled the plan it released in 2015 "Vision 2020" even though its president, Neuhauser, knew he would be leaving some time before that year. The college had time to work toward the plan's major planks, but its next president would also have some time to lay the groundwork for a new plan.

"I had a pretty good idea of when I would leave, and I felt we could get a lot of this done," Neuhauser says. "I also thought we could hand her a nice package and say, 'Here are 10 things we have now that we didn't have.'"

Saint Michael's new president, Sterritt, used the plan to learn about the college when interviewing for the position.

"Part of doing the homework was reading the strategic plan," she says. "It gave me a very good sense for the kind of institution that Saint Michael's is. When you take on a job like this, you want to make sure you fit philosophically."

Sterritt's first job is to see the existing plan through to the end, she says. But she expects to start a new planning process to create a plan that will begin after the current one runs its course.

Experts emphasize the process of planning and continuous improvement in order to make sure leaders' personalities and whims don't lead to institutions pinballing from unfinished plan to unfinished plan. An institution that is constantly measuring its progress toward priorities and evaluating the ways it

measures that progress is more likely to be able to adapt its plans to external changes or new leadership.

Under such a model, plans themselves are treated as living documents to be updated, not unbending rules set in hard, shiny stone. Leaders then have a better chance of evaluating an existing plan to determine whether it is the right plan for the right time and whether it needs to be updated or replaced.

Existing plans will still sometimes need to be replaced.

When Elizabeth Paul started as the president of Capital University in Ohio in 2016, she was handed a glossy, 27-page strategic plan largely written by a board member. The plan never mentioned the university's home city of Columbus, even though the region is growing and is one of the university's strengths on which it can build strategy, Paul says.

Paul made clear when she interviewed for the university's presidency that she didn't think the plan was realistic.

After taking over as president, she restarted strategic planning, beginning conversations about the university's purpose. The institution refreshed its stated mission, vision, values and strategy as part of a larger integrated planning process. The foundation of what Capital University calls a strategic framework helped its leaders craft a "Good Guarantee" tuition model [announced in 2018](#) that cuts prices in half for undergraduates whose parents work in the nonprofit and public-service sectors, key segments of the Columbus economy.

"This effort was reconnecting us with who

we are, gaining crispness with what our mission and vision and values are, and triggering action to really separate us and not to be what everyone else is being," Paul says. "We don't all need to be the same. We shouldn't all be the same."

The board member who was behind the old plan "has been gracious" about the changes, Paul says.

Clearly, presidential transitions remain a natural time to re-evaluate strategy.

"When you change presidents, when there was major change at the institution or a goal has been achieved, it's time to assess and then write a new plan," says Harris, the president of the University of San Diego. "I think it's wise for every institution to engage in this process."

Experts also warn against writing a new strategic plan at the same time an institution is searching for a new president or being led by an interim.

A presidential transition is the "worst time ever" to be writing a strategic plan, according to Miller, of Campus Labs. If conflict arises between president and plan, the board will almost always back the president, he says. So a planning process done before a president is brought in can easily turn into time wasted or spark frustrations among those on campus who participate in a planning process that is wiped away with a new hire.

Institutions can sometimes be left in limbo for a time. Lou Anna Simon was forced to resign from the Michigan State University presidency in 2018 amid the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal. She hadn't been replaced

on a permanent basis as of November of that year, leaving the university operating under strategic imperatives launched early in her presidency.

"At this point we have an interim president and expect to have a new president as of the end of the academic year," says David Byelich, assistant vice president and director of the office of planning and budgets at Michigan State. "So there has not been a lot of activity in the last year or so on our planning process."

With all the discussion about planning and presidents, leaders need to keep in mind that planning at the right time isn't only for the chief executive's sake.

Carol Christ announced a strategic planning process for the University of California, Berkeley, in November of 2017, about five months after she became chancellor there. A number of developments had made faculty members nervous about the campus's direction, says Lisa Alvarez-Cohen, who was chair of the university's Academic Senate and co-chair of the planning steering committee.

"We had new leadership, we were in the midst of trying to wipe out a deficit in our budget and there was a lot of mistrust around campus, frankly, about how things were being organized," says Alvarez-Cohen, who was later named vice provost for academic planning. "So this strategic planning process came along at a really perfect time to reorient people, to think, 'Let's be reflective about where we want to go and how we can get there. Let's have the campus provide input to the administrators instead of solely in the other direction.'" ■

## NEW PRESIDENTS HANDLE INHERITED PLANS

Kimberly Beatty didn't step into an ideal situation for a planning-minded executive when she became chancellor of Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, Mo., in 2017.

A few years earlier, the five-campus community college had been cited by its accreditor for not having a plan that cascaded through the institution, Beatty says. It had responded with an extensive planning process, gathering input from stakeholders, developing teams and boiling everything down to major themes nearing approval.

"When I walked in the door, they had six or seven themes, which is too many," Beatty says. "Ideally, a strategic plan is three to five, and five is on the heavy side."

Beatty started working on the plan even before her presidency officially began. She worked under a preliminary contract for a few weeks so she could start shaping it. She couldn't overhaul the plan entirely before it went into effect, but she could work with community college employees to put modifications into place.

She trimmed the number of themes down to five by changing one theme, improving teaching and learning, into an objective under another theme, student success. The

final plan's themes are student success; equity, diversity and inclusion; resource development and alignment; culture and environment; and structure and processes. Each theme has several objectives. Under structure and processes, for example, an objective is to align campus, department and committee operating plans with the college's priorities.

The plan includes some things Beatty wouldn't have included on her own, she says. It also emphasizes different ideas—she would have made innovation an anchor theme, but it ended up being worked in under other themes. Beatty felt that she couldn't waste precious political capital by throwing out much of the work that had been done on the plan.

In some cases, keeping the previously drafted plan's emphases worked out for the best. Beatty wouldn't have made culture and environment a theme when she was first joining the college, she says.

"Having been here a year and a half, I can see why culture and environment ended up being such a strong theme," Beatty says. "There are some issues, and they wanted to make sure it is in the strategic plan to address them."

Beatty believes strategic plans are supposed



## NEW PRESIDENTS HANDLE INHERITED PLANS

CONTINUED

to be shared by an institution's chief executive and its board. Metropolitan Community College's current plan cannot fill that role, by virtue of the way it was created.

Still, Beatty says she owns the plan.

"I did not, in the fullest degree, get the opportunity to create a vision—what would be my vision," Beatty says. "But I'm OK with where we are, because I think that I had enough input given the pressure we were under."

John Swallow is another experienced planner working to modify a strategic plan written before he was hired as a college president. Swallow became president of Carthage College, a liberal arts college in Wisconsin, in 2017. He'd previously been curricular leader of a 2007 to 2009 strategic planning process as a faculty member at Davidson College. He also led a planning process at the University of the South from 2011 to 2012, when he was provost there.

Carthage College's current strategic plan has been in place since 2015, Swallow says. He describes it as very long, with many tactics, metrics and levels. The original plan was, however, written to be reviewed and possibly updated in 2019 and 2022—flexibility that Swallow calls a gift from his predecessor.

Swallow expects to try to focus on a few themes and financial planning during the plan review. He will include the members of his executive team and faculty members in the discussions.

"It would be good to have a broader discussion,

mainly to check whether this assumption that we're still aligned around some of these things is true," Swallow says. "The advantage of drawing on the previous work is that there was some alignment. I think it's useful to check."

A more focused plan can be created within a year, Swallow says. It will likely be built on practical financial and operational models for the next two or three years.

When Swallow interviewed for the Carthage presidency, the search committee asked him for his impressions of the strategic plan. He would have told the committee if he thought something was wrong with the plan, he says. At the same time, he recognizes how hard it is for a candidate to fully evaluate a strategic plan at a time when he or she has not been able to meet faculty, staff, students and alumni.

"It would be pretty presumptuous for me to walk in and say I think some of this plan is absolutely wrong," he says.

The story of Carthage's past planning demonstrates why historical context matters. The president in office before Swallow, Gregory S. Woodward, took over the college after F. Gregory Campbell had been president for 25 years. Campbell had known what he wanted, and previous planning was the product of his and his senior staff's work, says Thomas Kline, vice president for institutional advancement at Carthage.

When Woodward started, his team heard

## NEW PRESIDENTS HANDLE INHERITED PLANS

CONTINUED

feedback that faculty members wanted a broad-based plan they could all engage in, Kline says. Consequently, Carthage followed a very open planning process, opting to keep more than it cut when writing the final plan.

"The institution is in a different place now than it was five years ago," Kline says. "Context is key. The collaborative process did yield many positive benefits, get people on board, get people engaged in the process and get some ideas. And then that really resulted in a large plan."

You don't have to look very far outside the college to see how local conditions have changed in Wisconsin since the plan created in 2015. Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn Technology Group is building a multi-billion-dollar factory in Racine County, just north of Carthage's campus. Thousands of jobs are expected.

How much that impacts a local liberal arts college is yet to be seen. But leaders will want to consider how it might change their strategy and implementation plans. ■



# The Planning Process

No planning process will work for every institution. The individual histories and internal politics are too important. Planning literature nonetheless packs in flowcharts and diagrams detailing the different steps an institution should take to write and implement a strategic plan.

Such illustrations can be helpful, provided planners on the ground recognize they will likely need to treat them as high-level frameworks to be adapted instead of rigid structures that must be followed to a T.

“Process can be adapted in some different ways,” says Patrick Sanaghan, a strategic planning consultant. The important thing, he says, is leaders demonstrating they want to hear many voices.

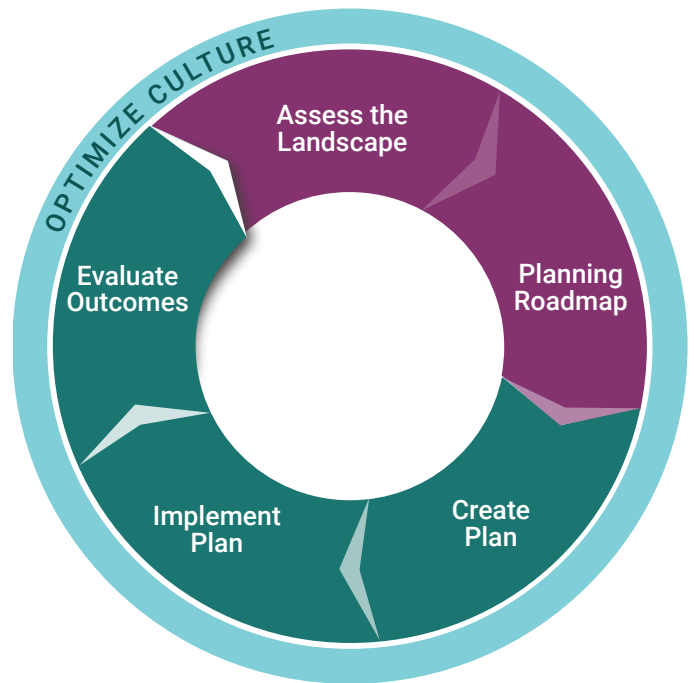


Figure 4 - The SCUP Integrated Planning Model is one example of the high-level planning steps leaders can follow. Source: Society for College and University Planning

Different planners recommend steps largely boiling down to a variation of the following cycle:

- Preplanning
- Information gathering
- Drafting
- Execution
- Measurement and evaluation

The following is a high-level look at what can be accomplished in each step, along with key considerations planners will want to keep in mind as they outline more specific processes to fit their institutions. Keep in mind that some specific tasks can be moved between steps as appropriate, and some planning processes might end up looking very different from this one.

## Preplanning

Leaders lay the groundwork during preplanning by making key decisions that will shape the way the rest of the planning process will unfold. Before they can do so, they would be wise to assess the existing internal and external landscape, evaluate the organizational mandates placed on their institutions and consider the stakeholders that will need to be part of the planning process.

**Assessing the landscape** requires a look at both internal and external factors to see how they have been interacting. What goals have been met from the previous strategic plan? What lessons can be learned from what was

or was not accomplished? What has changed within the college or university since then? What burning issues does it face today, and what issues is it likely to face in the future?

**Organizational mandates** to be considered come from accreditors, governments, trustees or even an institution's founding documents. Accreditors may be asking an institution to improve on some key areas, like student achievement. A state government may have set up performance-based funding that emphasizes certain metrics, like graduation rates, or the state or system office may have certain expectations about whether an institution is primarily an open-access college or a research university. Trustees may have made certain financial expectations clear, and bylaws often require that they sign off on any plan to be put in place. Consequently, leaders often engage the board early so they are comfortable with the planning process that will unfold.

Other organizational elements to consider are an institution's unique history, its culture and its founding documents, all of which can make some strategies unfeasible. If a college was founded to train teachers, for example, eliminating the elementary education program may be a tough sell, culturally.

**A stakeholder analysis** is a critical step if a plan is to have any hope of success, according to experts. College and university leaders must evaluate the different groups that feel ownership of a college and will need to be part of the formal planning process. The groups can include administrators, staff members, students, faculty members, alumni, donors

and, in some cases, trustees. Increasingly, they also include representatives of regional employers, local residents and other major community organizations—essential constituencies for community colleges or public institutions with a local base.

Evaluating the different factors will allow leaders and planners to make informed decisions about the process the rest of the plan will follow. Planners sometimes develop matrices to spell out exactly which bodies will hold decision-making authority. Toward the top, many strategic planning processes will be led by a task force or planning committee, which in turn is led by co-chairs.

Some consultants recommend a well-respected faculty member serve as one co-chair and a high-level administrator, like a provost or chief financial officer, serve as the other. Choosing the members of this committee is key. Picking the right mix of people—those who are plugged in, those who are respected and those who are willing critics but not cynics—can go a long way toward building a plan that everyone in the institution can respect. The exact mix of stakeholders on the planning committee will depend on institutional dynamics, and some institutions also form planning advisory councils for external stakeholders like local businesspeople.

Leaders can decide to give the strategic planning committee more or less control over the process that will unfold, and they can set a target timeline to make sure planning moves at an acceptable pace. In many cases, leaders should determine decision-making processes and a project plan with milestones

and timelines, experts say. They warn against planning taking less than six months or more than 18 months. Too short, and the process is unlikely to win support. Too long, and it could lose momentum.

Finally, presidents or other leaders will often start a process by asking the planning committee to look at certain topics. Sometimes those are posed as strategic questions, and sometimes they are laid out as important issues a college or university faces. New topics to be addressed can still come out organically later. Giving stakeholders enough space to bring up topics is important, because it can allow emerging issues to surface before leaders would ever have a chance to identify them.

## Information Gathering

Some institutions have firm, long-standing missions, visions and values. Others may need to rethink those core components of their identity as times change. In such cases, institutions can hold separate mission and values conferences to hear from stakeholders and examine those components in depth. Regardless of whether that's necessary, mission, vision and values are often addressed early on in a planning process in some way so the planning committee can use that work to inform the rest of its efforts.

Some planners caution that spending too much time and energy on mission, vision or values can derail the planning process, however. They advocate for finding a way to make stakeholders focus on generating new ideas

and ways to innovate, perhaps by adopting a design-thinking approach to help prevent groups from becoming stuck on specific ideas too early on. In some cases, that process may even help an institution realize its new vision.

No matter where vision is addressed, the strategic planning committee will need to take time to thoroughly evaluate the institution's internal and external situation. Planners disagree on which particular tools to use—some support strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analyses known as SWOTs, for instance, while others think SWOTs tend to focus groups too much on the status quo. Ultimately, leaders and planners will have to pick the best tools for their particular situations.

A broader point about paying attention to focus is salient, though. Some groups will naturally resist change or gravitate toward conducting only internal evaluations focused on a college's organizational structure or spending habits. While internal evaluations are important, and change for change's sake shouldn't be endorsed, leaders must gently steer groups away from those tendencies. External evaluation and adaptation are key components of strategic planning in a fast-changing world.

The strategic planning committee might form subcommittees or call upon leaders of departments to help it examine certain elements of an institution. If, for example, a president charged a committee with asking how a university can increase its research activity, the committee might create a subcommittee made up of the heads of different

departments that conduct research. Other forms of information gathering, like town hall meetings, focus groups, meetings with engaged stakeholders or online feedback forms, can be incorporated.

Some planners feel strongly that town hall or open campus meetings are a critical part of the process, both because they can help unexpected issues surface and because they are an important prerequisite to building buy-in later. They recommend an emphasis on strategic questions during these sessions, which can help keep attendees focused on the big picture and prevent the discussion from devolving into everyone's gripes about his or her individual department.

Choosing the exact format for committee meetings and fact-finding will depend on institutional context. Generally, consultants recommend a process that is open, transparent and encourages participants to dream about possibilities. In many cases they recommend a neutral third party be present and able to present ideas from participants who want to provide sensitive information anonymously. This can prevent students from being intimidated by a well-known faculty member in the room or empower employees worried about speaking out if trustees are present.

The information gathered must eventually be synthesized into a set of strategic issues or strategic priorities.

## Drafting

Once strategic issues have been determined, it is time to write the plan itself. The structure

and size of plans varies drastically, and many are accompanied by supporting documents. Most planners recommend building the plan document itself around a vision and series of goals. The vision provides a sense of where a college is collectively headed and is in turn supported by the priorities.

Some plans will include strategies for reaching those priorities, along with more specific goals and key performance indicators that will be used to measure whether an institution is progressing toward them. Others will save the performance indicators and strategies for an implementation plan. Still other institutions will draft one outward-facing strategic plan that includes top-level priorities for the public to see and another, more detailed plan or set of plans for their employees to use to see how they are directly affected.

Drafting the plan—or any component of strategic planning—shouldn't be done in a vacuum, leaders say. The strategic plan and the many other plans institutions maintain should feed each other. Institutions must incorporate financial planning, academic planning and the strategic plans of individual schools or departments, just as all those plans must take the institution's strategic planning into account.

After a plan has been prepared, many recommend posting a public draft, setting up some mechanism for feedback and actively soliciting that feedback, including in face-to-face sessions. Constituencies are more likely to buy in to a plan if they've had a chance to see it and suggest modifications before it is finalized, they say. Administrators drafting the plan may also save themselves some

headaches in the event they've overlooked something.

Wise leaders keep governing boards regularly informed about progress toward the strategic plan. Doing so keeps the board from reacting to unexpected surprises surfacing at the end of the process. After all feedback has been incorporated into the draft, it's finally time to bring the plan before the board for approval.

## Execution

Administrators might be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief once the strategic plan has been finalized and approved by the board. But the hard work is just beginning.

Strategic plans need an implementation process. If the approved plan didn't include tactics and key performance indicators, they will need to be developed.

Leaders must be selected to make sure key elements of the plan are put in place. Some top-level leadership will be required, but making sure employees on the ground are owning implementation—whether that be faculty members in the classroom, admissions officers on the road or others in the rank and file—is also critical.

Another part of execution is dedicating resources toward making the strategic plan happen. If an institution sets a strategic goal of recruiting more diverse freshman classes, it likely needs to spend more time and money to send admissions officers to recruit in new high schools. If it aims to increase need-based aid, the president may need to spend more time with supportive donors, or leaders

need to be prepared to redirect aid dollars from non-need-based aid.

## Measurement and Evaluation

Presidents will want to develop a schedule for checking on the progress toward key performance indicators and presenting the results to the board. Some try to do so quarterly, others annually. Less frequently than that and experts worry the plan will lose momentum. Other stakeholders should also be told of progress toward performance indicators on a regular basis, likely yearly.

Experts recommend that plans evolve over time as key performance indicators are measured, times change and opportunities arise. Top-level plan components, like vision and strategic themes, can be kept in place while the way the plan is executed changes as new information becomes available, they say.

When the plan has run its natural course—or when events have conspired to mean it's time for a new plan—ongoing measurement and evaluation can feed the preplanning phase of a new planning cycle. ■



## FAST-TRACK PLANNING

Neville Pinto wasted little time finishing a strategic planning process after he left the University of Louisville to become the University of Cincinnati's president. He took office in February 2017, and a year later, Cincinnati was officially launching "Next Lives Here," a strategic plan leaders there call a "strategic direction."

Whipping up a strategy in one year was a quick turnaround for a new president, but Pinto brought some unique factors to the table. His case demonstrates how context is critical in strategic planning.

Administrators felt empowered to rapidly put a new plan in place under Pinto in part because the new president wasn't quite so new to Cincinnati—he'd spent 26 years at the university before departing for Louisville. He'd risen from assistant professor in 1985 all the way to vice provost and dean of the graduate school in 2006. Then in 2011 he left to become dean of the school of engineering at Louisville, where he would eventually serve a stint as acting president.

Pinto's biography gave him unique insight into the University of Cincinnati, says Ryan Hays, his chief of staff and executive vice president. Pinto had been away long enough to have a new perspective, but not so long that he didn't know Cincinnati anymore.

"When he came back, he definitely was looking at the institution with a fresh set of eyes, which was extremely helpful," Hays says. "But he already knew the culture and the context. He knew, kind of, the DNA of the place, and so I think it would have been much harder for a president who didn't know the city, didn't know the campus, didn't know just the spirit and the vibe of the place to come in and do a really accelerated timeline."

Since faculty members knew Pinto as one of their own, he likely had extra political capital with them. Political capital was important, because the speedy process the University of Cincinnati used was more top-down than some other strategic planning processes might have been.

The university still built in numerous opportunities for feedback from various constituencies. Pinto held meetings across all four University of Cincinnati campuses, met with the university's Faculty Senate and met with its student government during a period of information gathering, according to Sally Moomaw, an associate professor of early childhood education who was faculty chair while the strategic direction was being created. Then his team started to craft the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

## FAST-TRACK PLANNING

CONTINUED

strategic vision, and the president went on to give monthly updates to the Faculty Senate while continuing to take comments. Next, he presented the final strategic direction to the Faculty Senate and at an all-university faculty meeting. Faculty leaders took part in workshops about innovation and implementation.

That's not quite the bottom-up, organic process some faculty members might have wanted. Still, the process didn't bog down, and some of the plan's effects have already materialized. A staff enrichment center and innovation hub, both discussed in the university's strategy documents, opened within months of the new plan's launch, according to Moomaw.

"I believe the strategic direction is meant to be an evolving document that can change as the needs of the university evolve," she wrote in an email. "It is startling how quickly outcomes have emerged."

Another factor in favor of the quick turnaround was that the new strategic direction hits on some of the same themes woven into Cincinnati's past strategic planning, namely its urban identity. The identity had been emphasized in planning conducted under past University of Cincinnati president Nancy Zimpher, who led the institution from 2003 to 2009.

"I was very clear about the synergy between urban universities and cities," says Zimpher, who left Cincinnati to become chancellor at the State University of New York. She says

the new University of Cincinnati strategic direction underscores "the direction that I believe will be critical for the city and the university."

Using the term "strategic direction" instead of "strategic plan" is intended to change the way people think about the ideas and act on them. Documents and a website outlining the direction are narrowly focused and designed to give the impression of motion: they offer a few lines on a mission, vision, three platforms and some pathways organized under each platform.

Focusing was important, Hays says.

"When you have a document that tries to be all things to all people, one, it becomes unruly because of the sheer size of it," Hays says. "If you're not making a few strategic bets, you're spreading the peanut butter so thin that you're not going to see much impact."

When the strategic plan officially launched in [February 2018](#), Pinto emphasized speed.

"Change itself is changing," he said at the time, adding that change is moving "faster and farther than ever before." ■

## WHO HAS A SEAT AT THE PLANNING TABLE?

The people involved can make or break planning processes. Choosing the right mix of faculty members, staff members, students, local residents, alumni, donors and even trustees will determine how the strategic plan takes shape and whether constituencies buy in to it.

A best practice is to make sure every group with an interest in a college is represented and heard from in some way, according to experts. This ensures planners hear a diverse set of ideas and keeps them from ignoring anyone's perspective. It also helps rally constituencies behind a plan, even if that plan is controversial—if hard decisions have to be made, leaders can point to an inclusive process and make a better case for how they arrived at their choices.

Finding representatives from each group isn't always a challenge, as leaders can make use of existing governance structures to choose representatives for a planning process. Officers from the Faculty Senate might be asked to sit on a strategic planning steering committee, for example. Student government leaders might be included on a work group focused on improving the quality of student life on campus, and other organizations, like alumni associations, can be tapped as necessary.

But those with formal leadership roles aren't the only ones to consider. Planners must think more deeply about the individuals given a seat at the table, their level of expertise, how much respect they command on campus and how they are likely to affect the planning process. A professor greatly admired on campus for her research or teaching might normally avoid faculty governance commitments, but she could be ideal for the role. Her participation alone would send a signal about the importance of the process and add legitimacy to it.

"You strategically figure out who are the influential people on campus," says Sanaghan, a strategic planning consultant. "Who are the smart people who speak truth to power? A lot of them have official titles. A lot of them don't."

Everyone participating in committees and work groups needs to be thinking about the institution first, not his or her own particular interests, says John Stevens, a consultant whose firm, Stevens Strategy, specializes in strategic change. That doesn't mean they should all be predisposed to toe the company line, however.

"We spend a lot of time with the president and her senior team thinking about who is

## WHO HAS A SEAT AT THE PLANNING TABLE?

CONTINUED

going to be on the steering committee, who is going to be on the work groups, how they will work together,” Stevens says. “We make sure we have some critics that will serve on the various work groups and steering committees so their ideas get brought forward and dealt with.”

The need for inclusion has many planning experts recommending a process led by a steering committee made up of several dozen key stakeholders. Often, they recommend the committee be co-chaired by a faculty member and high-level administrator, covering both the academic and operational side of the institution. Picking an administrator familiar with the financial side of the institution, such as a chief financial officer, can make sure the committee remembers that money is an important factor.

Whether to include students is sometimes controversial. Miller, of Campus Labs, advocates for student participation.

“If you’re not listening to your consumer, which is what they are, you are going to struggle in terms of having a strategic future that includes them,” Miller says. Not having students on committees means a collection of older people sits around wasting time discussing what they think students think, he adds. In Miller’s view, it’s better to simply ask the students directly.

Another controversial question is how closely trustees should be involved in a planning process. Boards are clearly the ones with the

authority to approve a plan or vote it down once it’s drafted. It’s also widely accepted practice for presidents to keep trustees appraised as the strategic planning process progresses. Yet some planners disagree about whether several trustees should sit on planning committees.

On the one hand, trustees who are on planning committees can help a president convince the larger Board of Trustees that the process is progressing in the right direction. They can support the president’s role as intermediary between a college’s operations and its board, which can be important at a time when trustee activism is rising.

Trustees can also provide firsthand insight and resources that wouldn’t otherwise be immediately available to planning committees. If an idea comes up that is exciting but a stretch financially, trustees might be willing to commit to raising money toward it, for instance. If the board previously turned down an idea that’s being debated again, a trustee might be able to directly explain the board’s reasoning.

On the other hand, planners worry about faculty members, staff members and students grandstanding or holding their tongues in front of trustees. Concern also runs high that trustees will be tempted to exceed their authority by dictating details about the planning process, and that they will want to drive a faster strategic planning process than is possible in an environment where shared governance is respected.

## WHO HAS A SEAT AT THE PLANNING TABLE?

CONTINUED

Many trustees maintain that a balance is possible between being active and respecting boundaries.

"I think we are surprised when people say things to us like, 'You are a trustee, should I behave myself in front of you?'" says Susan L. Washburn, chair of the Board of Trustees at Franklin & Marshall College. "I don't think we view ourselves in that way, but I understand that others do."

Franklin & Marshall's board is engaged in its strategic planning, Washburn says. It regularly touches base with an existing plan from 2012-13, and its members were anticipating being involved in forming a new strategic plan—although exactly how they will be involved was still an open question as of fall 2018.

"I think the days of board members not taking responsibility for planning are over," Washburn says.

In a way, the Franklin & Marshall board exerted an influence on the college's future strategic plan as it was conducting a recent presidential search. When the college needed to hire a new president after Daniel R. Porterfield left to lead the Aspen Institute in 2018, Franklin & Marshall's board took strategic planning into consideration. Instead of calling for an entirely new direction, it discussed building upon the college's existing plan and its commitment to high-ability, low-income students, Washburn says. The board made that decision clear to presidential candidates.

A board can be more highly involved in planning if other constituencies trust it, Washburn says. Consensus building and trust are important, but they don't mean trustees avoid hard choices that are necessary. Rather, trustees need to respect a planning process preventing decisions from being made arbitrarily.

"If you are a board that does not hold trust with your other constituencies, then of course people are going to say no," Washburn says.

Trustees can provide perspective guarding against colleges' natural tendency toward naming too many priorities. Prioritizing everything a college is already doing will leave it doing nothing differently after strategic planning is completed, says Rob Connelly, a trustee and former board chair at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio.

"Plans typically fall apart for a couple reasons," Connelly says. "One, everybody gets their handprint on it and then you've got this big book and it means nothing. The other is people just do it, and then they move back to their day-to-day."

Connelly is also the president and CEO of the Henny Penny Corp., an Ohio-based manufacturer of food-service equipment. He believes strategic planning is a powerful tool, noting that the practice is widely accepted in the business world.

He's not particularly worried about a well-run board hijacking a strategic planning process at a college. A college's board and president

## WHO HAS A SEAT AT THE PLANNING TABLE?

CONTINUED

should be tightly aligned, he says. The most important thing is that a board support a planning process that can make a big impact.

Sinclair Community College recently completed a roughly six-month planning process culminating in its board approving a new strategic plan [in June 2018](#). Trustees made an imprint on that plan without sitting in on every committee meeting, according to Connelly, whose term as board chair also ended in June. He was more involved than some other trustees because of his interest in strategic planning, but ultimately the plan was done by the college, he says. It wasn't imposed by the board.

"This was driven by the president and his cabinet and their groups," Connelly says. "I believe it's a process where you're getting the organization to look at itself and then to look at the community and react to what would be best for the community."

Sinclair designed a process to gather a high level of input from the external community, according to Steven L. Johnson, the community college's president and CEO. In January, the college invited to a board retreat elected officials, community leaders, business leaders, civic leaders, faculty members and staff members. They explored where Dayton's economy was headed, how its community was changing and what challenges and opportunities it faced. They examined how Sinclair could be better aligned with those trends. Then Sinclair held follow-up meetings with faculty groups, student groups and

community leaders.

The process yielded 500 different ideas, which leaders whittled down to a top 10. They also drew up three primary strategic priorities: alignment with southwestern Ohio and its economy; growth in student numbers and student success; and equity by enrolling a student body reflecting the region's diversity and by eliminating achievement gaps. The new plan is intended to last three to five years.

Different stakeholders need to feel a bond so they can work together, Johnson says.

"We're in agreement about what we should be doing, why and for whom," he says. "If that was up for grabs, it could be ugly." ■

## MAKING METRICS MEASURE UP

Few argue against the idea of measuring progress toward a plan's strategic goals. The challenge is in finding the right way to measure.

One broad question is what happens when every college or university decides to be a top-10 institution—by definition, hundreds or thousands of universities can't all hold a limited number of ranking slots. But another, more insidious issue grows when institutions use rankings as the sole way to gauge success or failure. The issue also arises when states try to construct performance-based funding formulas offering colleges public money in exchange for improving in certain areas.

Things that can be measured on a college or university campus are often at best stand-ins for harder-to-gauge characteristics leaders truly want to improve. Metrics are frequently chosen because they are already available or because measurements can be taken without too much trouble—not because they are the ideal marker of progress.

And when metrics are only an approximation of the characteristics under scrutiny, institutions and the people who make them up can behave in unexpected or undesirable ways. They can act to improve the metric but forget about the original characteristic.

Take, for example, an institution that sets the strategic goal of improving its academic strength. Since no single measure of academic strength exists, it must turn to measurements that are available, like the number of faculty members with doctorates, year-to-year student retention rates, student graduation rates or application acceptance rates.

Unfortunately, each of those measurements brings potential problems. Doctorates themselves vary widely in quality and are more common—and useful—in some disciplines than in others. Does academic quality actually improve if more faculty members are hired from less intensive doctorate programs at the expense of experienced practitioners? Is a journalism program stronger if it shuns professionals with newsroom experience in lieu of those who have spent their lives studying the field?

What if an institution decides to try to improve its retention or graduation rates by shrinking the pool of students admitted to a wealthy group that is statistically more likely to complete their degrees? Does that build the overall academic quality of the institution, or does it simply narrow its breadth by excluding students who have been dropping out for nonacademic reasons, like financial or

## MAKING METRICS MEASURE UP

CONTINUED

family constraints?

"It's a good example of a perverse incentive, because if graduation rates are in play, the way you get better is to not admit risky students," says Alexander C. McCormick, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University in Bloomington and the director of the National Survey of Student Engagement. "Nobody is designing these systems to say we want you to be more selective and not take as many gambles in the admissions process, but that's a very rational response by institutions."

Academics refer to the issue as the proxy problem. Measurements can misdirect feedback and cause institutions to focus on improving upon metrics instead of their original priorities.

"As you attach high stakes to these kinds of measures, that incentivizes focusing on the measure, not the bigger, fuzzier, messier thing that one measure is supposed to represent,"

McCormick says.

The proxy problem has been a frequent point of discussion of late because the national focus on college accountability has grown. Numerous states have put in place performance-based funding models. Technology and new transparency tools have also allowed more metrics to be distributed more widely, making it easier for college leaders, politicians and other advocates to pick data points they want to improve—with or without needed context.

Better measurements can provide solutions, but not always.

"This is mostly stuff I say about accountability, but I think it connects to strategic planning," McCormick says. "It's a huge mistake to think this is just a technical problem of getting the right measures. It's all about behavior and what kind of behavior we want to incentivize."

The proxy problem doesn't mean institutions

---

### How the proxy problem misdirects feedback

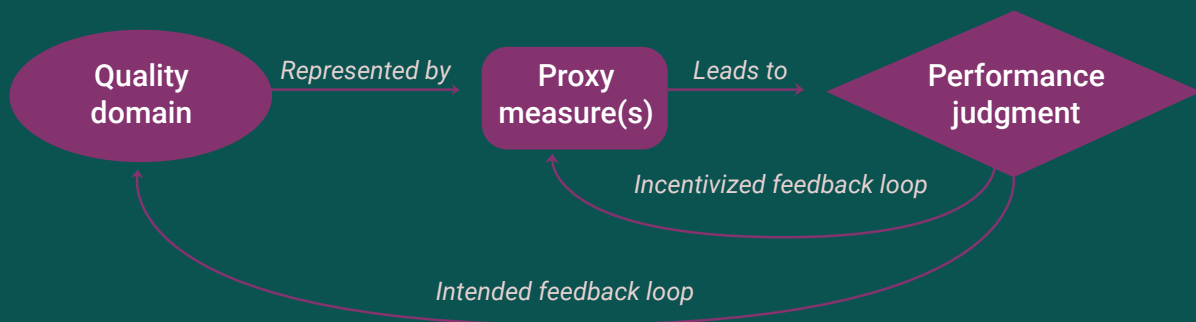


Figure 5 - Source: Alexander C. McCormick, "Understanding the influence and impact of rankings on higher education, policy and society," in *Global Rankings and the Geopolitics of Higher Education*, ed. Ellen Hazelkorn (London: Routledge, 2017), 212.



## MAKING METRICS MEASURE UP

CONTINUED

should avoid measuring their progress toward strategic goals. Loosely defined promises and vague ambitions that aren't measured are also problematic.

"Either extreme is wrong," McCormick says.

Get agreement on what metrics will be used, recommends Dennis Jones, president emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Without doing so, institutions will find departments struggling to translate strategic concepts into on-the-ground action.

"You find words like 'student success,'" Jones says. "Everyone will interpret them differently."

Don't give any one measure too much power or mystique, planners caution. When setting a goal for a truly hard-to-quantify characteristic, consider a group of metrics instead of just one, in order to build a fuller understanding of what's changing and how. Or look at different ways a metric can be sliced—see, for example, how it plays out across different groups of students in order to evaluate how an institution is educating those from different backgrounds. Also, be ready to tweak what's being measured and how if a setup is causing unintended consequences or not fulfilling its purpose.

"The metrics can become a curse," says Freeland, president emeritus of Northeastern University and former higher education commissioner of Massachusetts. "You try to measure everything, have a dashboard for

everything, and you can very quickly lose track of the big picture."

The failure or success of any strategic plan is also influenced by one thing that can't be boiled down to numbers: campus culture.

"You can't measure the commitment of your people to alignment with institutional goals," Freeland says. "Things that you have to care about and pay attention to are not going to show up." ■

## PLANNING FOR EQUITY

It's relatively common for college and university leaders to say they prioritize diversity, inclusion and equity. Many seek to enroll greater numbers of students from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities, and economic classes. They often speak of diversifying the faculty and top administrative ranks, and they frequently pledge to close achievement gaps.

Although strategic plans commonly articulate such priorities as institutional goals, some leaders say that's not enough. They advocate for the idea of equity to be built into the strategic planning structure itself.

Doing so can make sure planners are always thinking about the different groups being affected by planning, advocates argue—groups that have traditionally been overlooked. It forces planners to ask key questions and consider different perspectives.

Who is helped or harmed by the elements of a strategic plan? Which marginalized groups aren't being included in discussions? Which groups are being ignored completely?

Portland State University put such a planning structure in place in 2014, while it was drawing up [a strategic plan](#) that would be approved by trustees in December 2015. That planning process was detailed in [a paper published in 2018](#) by the journal *Metropolitan*

*Universities*. The paper, titled "Strategic Planning to Advance Equity on Campus: A Case Study at Portland State University," was written by Marisa Zapata, associate professor of land use planning at Portland State; Stephen Percy, dean of the College of Urban and Public Affairs at the university; and Sona Karentz Andrews, who was provost at Portland State from 2012 to 2017.

The university's strategic planning came in the midst of significant changes. Portland State was functioning under a newly appointed Board of Trustees after state legislation passed in 2013 creating independent governing boards for public universities in Oregon. Portland State had also been diversifying quickly. The number of students who identified with an ethnic minority jumped 33 percent between 2010 and 2014 to 7,643 students, according to the case study.

Portland State was coming off of budget reductions and collective bargaining struggles between faculty members and administrators.

Leaders built a planning process that started out with a 30-member strategic planning development team led by a dean and stocked with faculty members, staff members, union representatives, graduate students, undergraduates, administrators, a trustee and alumni. Outreach and listening sessions helped planners identify eight key themes for

## PLANNING FOR EQUITY

### CONTINUED

a group of topic teams to tackle. Then a writing team made up of the strategic planning development team chair, two faculty members, two staff members and three students created a draft plan that was shared for comment before being finalized.

During outreach activities, planners recorded a total of 3,802 comments from students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, community members and others. They also heard from a faculty member in the School of Social Work, Charlotte Goodluck, who asked if planners intended to use an equity lens. Portland State's School of Social Work used the lens in its planning, and university strategic planners eventually decided to do so as well.

Portland State planners used several avenues to build an equity lens into their work. They decided to create two parallel equity lens teams. One focused on race. The other focused on "marginalization of people based upon gender, ability, LGBT, veteran status and tribal sovereignty."

An 11-member team of campus and community representative drew up [a guide for the equity lens](#). It included guiding principles, such as that Portland State "has a commitment to erase racial disparities in society and advance social justice." It also included questions to be considered during planning, such as "How are our processes supporting the empowerment of communities historically most affected by inequities?"

The strategic planning development team

was given instruction on the lens and expected to use it. The eight topic teams were told to provide recommendations including equity-based considerations. One of the eight topic teams was charged with looking at equity, opportunity and access. And the two equity lens teams reviewed the work of the strategic planning development team and topic teams as they were crafting recommendations for the strategic plan.

"The teams, therefore, represented a second-level equity lens consideration of decisions and recommendations created during the planning process," the case study's authors wrote.

Portland State's process had its tensions.

"Nearly all the members of the two teams were from historically marginalized communities, and knew well the possibilities of tokenization," the case study says. Equity team members also worried about being seen as equity police who reviewed work to see whether it met their expectations.

Some were frustrated that the equity lens was created "well into the development of the plan," the case study authors wrote. The equity teams also had to push for a timeline delay so that equity work could be integrated better. The writing team ended up pausing decisions about specific initiatives until the equity team could review documents.

"While unintentional, these process failures raised substantial concerns among equity team members who became concerned that our intention was not authentic and whether

## PLANNING FOR EQUITY

CONTINUED

work was truly valued in the process," the case study says. "While we overcame most of these concerns, they could have been avoided if we had been more attuned to including the equity teams consistently and explicitly throughout the process."

The case study authors concluded that the equity lens advanced awareness of equity and attention to it during strategic planning. A statement of commitment to equity is part of the strategic plan that passed in 2015. The plan also includes equity as a core value and a goal.

Each of the plan's five goals has its own equity lens section. For example, under an "Elevate Student Success" goal, the plan calls for the university to "recognize that disparities in the retention and graduation rates of underrepresented students necessitate an investment in culturally-responsive advising."

An important lesson to be learned from Portland State's experience is that equity should be brought into play at the start of the planning process, the case study's authors wrote. They also recommended being transparent about the planning process, being careful to weave the equity lens review into different steps of the planning process, involving the right people, being willing to hold difficult conversations and listening and reflecting.

The authors went on to note that the equity lens cannot conclude with one strategic plan if it is to lead to change.

"Our next step, one to which we are committed

but which will require sustained energy, is utilizing an equity lens on an ongoing basis to inform decisions and policy making at our university," they wrote.

Portland State is far from the only institution thinking about equity, inclusion and diversity in planning. For example, the University of California, Berkeley, [has tool kits available](#) to help academic and administrative units with such planning.

Shirley M. Collado, president of Ithaca College, says planning processes should be rooted in inclusion for all.

"Don't put this stuff at the margins," she says. "Put it at the center." ■

## FORM AND FUNCTION

A quick look at any handful of colleges' strategic plan documents will reveal a range of formats.

Some colleges continue to draft long, text-heavy pages assembling extensive discussions of their history, mission, values, vision statement, goals, strategies and objectives. Others, like the University of Cincinnati, have stripped outward-facing plan documents down to a few pages and words on their priorities. A few colleges don't even print all strategic plan documents, instead deciding the plan details should live online, where updates can be done frequently to match the constant pace of change. Carthage College took that route with the plan it put in place in 2015.

Plan documents can also be split into different versions for various stakeholders. A college might produce one plan for general public consumption that functions like a brand statement and another for trustees that is packed with metrics to be measured. It may create still more documents that dictate how the plan should be implemented in individual divisions or departments.

"You always have to ask what's a glossy brochure for?" says Persis Drell, provost at Stanford University. "At some point, there will be a glossy brochure, because there will be an audience for which that is the right way

of communicating what we're doing, particularly if one wants to generate philanthropy around some of the ideas. Other, more internal things, I think are much less of a glossy brochure and more about what are going to be the steps to change what we're doing now into what we want to be doing looking forward."

A few colleges have even rejected use of the term "strategic plan." Instead, they print up what they call a "strategic direction" or a "strategic framework." In doing so, they seek to grab attention, differentiate the latest strategy from previous plans or jolt constituencies into thinking about strategy differently.

On the whole, it all means there is no right way to draft a strategic plan.

There are, however, some trends and common practices drafting committees might want to keep in mind: when it comes to the public-facing plan document, keep it short and simple.

The advice applies to the number of pages in a plan document, the number of strategic priorities it outlines and the level of detail to include.

"The document itself is really a document that says, 'Here are the things we are trying to accomplish' with a little bit of information that documents why it is important," says Jones, president emeritus of the National Center

## FORM AND FUNCTION

### CONTINUED

for Higher Education Management Systems. "If it's more than 20 pages long, it's too long, probably."

Experts don't agree on the exact number of strategic priorities that should be included. Most give a number somewhere between three and 10. Any more than that, and an institution might be trying to focus on too many things at once.

Many plans slot in goals and objectives underneath the strategic priorities. In some cases, they could provide helpful information or ideas about pursuing a priority. Other ideas seem to be included simply so everyone's suggestion gets mentioned in the final document.

Limiting the number of priorities, goals and other bullet points is a popular recommendation. James Herbert, the president of the University of New England, suggests thinking about six high-level priorities, each with three to six goals. Initiatives can be listed underneath each goal.

"But even at that level, they are not super-specific," he says. "They don't say, 'increase enrollment 20 percent in the College of Arts and Sciences.' They are more like, 'increase enrollment, develop new programs in these areas.'"

More specificity should be built into a separate implementation plan, Herbert says. Once the strategic plan is done, it should remain unchanged for a few years, he says.

"You need it to be general enough that it

can serve a guiding function," he says. "The implementation initiatives, you may put one on there and decide that was a dumb idea. You just cross it off and have another one. Or you reach it, accomplish it and check it off. Add another one."

Experts warn against setting goals that clearly won't be realized within a strategic plan's timeline, because they can undermine implementation by making it seem impossible. The long view is best addressed in the vision statement, or intermediary goals can be written that build toward a longer-term goal.

Other pitfalls to avoid include spending too much energy on one part of a plan and trying to shoehorn too much into a plan.

A list of 400 items that are not prioritized is problematic, says Jennifer deCoste, vice president for strategy at the consulting firm Credo, describing the pitfall of placing too much in a plan and not making any choices.

Another point of debate is whether to write metrics or key performance indicators into a plan document itself. In some cases, planners say it is an important way for an institution to hold itself accountable.

Yet having more key performance indicators in a plan means less flexibility. Many recommend saving the key performance indicators for an implementation plan that will be updated frequently.

South Piedmont Community College in North Carolina put a new plan in place in 2018,

## FORM AND FUNCTION

CONTINUED

the same year an earlier plan was ending. Leaders never settled on key performance indicators under the old plan, says Jill Millard, associate vice president of planning and institutional effectiveness.

"You couldn't really measure yourself," Millard says. "This time, we made it a priority. As soon as we got the final plan in place, we would start working on developing key performance indicators."

Millard reviewed other institutions' plans for South Piedmont's most recent planning process and found them to be briefer and broader than those of five or 10 years ago. They also seem to set priorities that can more easily be measured, she says.

"In the past it reminded me of kumbaya," Millard says. "There were a lot of things you couldn't really measure, and you don't know how applicable they were. The plans nowadays are short, succinct and more spot-on with what you're trying to do." ■



# Rich and Poor, Public and Private Institutions

The basic concepts important in strategic planning don't necessarily change with an institution's wealth level or type.

It doesn't matter whether your institution is a top private research university trying to decide how to spend an embarrassment of riches or a public community college without any real endowment. Planning remains about responding to changes in external conditions, listening to different constituencies and charting a path toward a stronger tomorrow. All institutions also have to get the basic blocking and tackling right: figuring out how to align resources with goals, learning from measurements and knowing institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Where institution type matters most is in many of the nuances that combine to make a particular strategic planning process an effective exercise or a waste of time. Leaders

would be wise to remember where their college or university slots into the higher ed ecosystem.

"For me, the most valuable part of strategic plans in some places is when institutions take the time to write a SWOT analysis or an environmental scan, something where they contextualize," says Miller, of Campus Labs. "I feel like we learn a lot from how they view where they fit into the higher education world."

## Rich and Poor

The gap between wealthy and poor institutions shouldn't be ignored when it comes to strategic planning's possibilities. Well-resourced institutions enjoy vastly more flexibility and control than do their poorer counterparts.



Colleges and universities on the financial brink may not even be in a position to create a strategic plan. If crisis looms, leaders may have to dedicate their attention to more immediate matters.

The president might have to spend more time on the road begging donors for money in order to keep the doors open. The chief financial officer may be consumed renegotiating debt terms.

In other words, it's hard to tack into the wind when you're bailing out the boat.

"Schools that are struggling financially, the hardest part is strategic planning is at least a six-month process if you're doing it quickly," Miller says. "Trying to keep the same senior staff in place for six months is a challenge, and every time that personality changes on the strategic planning committee, everything can be derailed."

Financially struggling institutions lack key strategic planning advantages even if they aren't staving off an immediate crisis. They remain less likely than their better-off brethren to have the resources necessary to complete comprehensive planning. Some experts think they are more likely to latch on to the latest popular idea without thinking it through.

Optimists point out that strategic planning doesn't have to cost a tremendous amount of money. While that may be true, planning does take staff time—something financially challenged institutions often lack because budgets have constrained hiring.

Many institutions successfully craft plans on a shoestring budget and after staving off an immediate crisis, of course. Even then, they're

less likely to have resources for ambitious changes, monitoring and adjustment after the ink on the plan is dry.

"Wealthier schools, they're looking at this stuff all the time," says Hill, managing director at Ithaca S+R. "They are thinking intensively about where they are and where they want to be pretty much all the time."

Well-resourced institutions can afford to spend more time gathering data and bringing additional voices into the planning process. They can make bigger bets on the future. Some also seem more comfortable planning further into the future.

Wealth can bring problems if a large university is unable to coalesce around a common set of ideas. Larger, richer universities sometimes find themselves pulled in more directions by a wider array of students, faculty members, donors and other groups. An extravagant planning process weighing reams of data can turn into paralysis by analysis.

Additionally, wealthy institutions rarely feel wealthy when they perform environmental scans. Another college or university almost always looms further up the food chain with a larger endowment, better operating results or a more impressive freshman class. The number of good ideas demanding resources consistently seems to outnumber the level of resources actually available at any given time.

In other words, even top institutions feel the risk of losing their position if they make enough wrong choices.

"We don't feel like we have money falling out of our pockets," says Marie Lynn Miranda, provost at Rice University. "All of our endowment

distributions are accounted for. I would argue when you are more resource-constrained, it is that much more important to be thinking about what your priorities are and how they stack up and how you are thinking about how to advance them."

Rice is easily among the wealthiest institutions in the United States and Canada. It reported a \$5.8 billion endowment in the 2017 fiscal year, the 20th largest in an [annual study](#) of more than 800 colleges and universities conducted by the National Association of College and University Business Officers.

Rice's endowment was more than 44 times larger than the median endowment in the survey. Just 18 institutions reported larger endowments per student than Rice's \$872,778. Rice's endowment clocked in at more than 27 times larger than the median endowment on a per-student basis.

Yet Rice's leaders can point out that the university's wealth pales in comparison to Harvard University's \$36 billion endowment. It is outpaced by Princeton University's per-student endowment of nearly \$3 million.

Rice formally introduced a new strategic plan in February 2018, about a year after its president, David Leebron, kicked off the planning process. Rice had been operating for more than a decade under a strategic vision endorsed by its trustees at the end of 2005. The previous plan was called V2C, or Vision for the Second Century of Rice's Existence. [The new plan](#) is being referred to as V2C2, or Vision for the Second Century, Second Decade, reflecting some changes but also continuity between plans.

Although the new plan didn't take a

particularly long time to build, parts of the V2C2 process show how extra time and resources can strengthen a planning process when used effectively. Planners asked faculty members what big endeavors Rice should undertake in its educational and research enterprises. Any group of at least three faculty members could submit an answer in a brief proposal. The ideas weren't filtered by a committee. They advanced to a symposium, where faculty members gave three-minute presentations to Rice's academic leaders and trustees.

Faculty presented a total of 61 different ideas, Miranda says.

"The auditorium was full, and there was just so much excitement," she says. "Many of those ideas either got picked up in the university strategic plan or in the schools' strategic plans."

The process led to Rice making investments in several areas, including neuroengineering, synthetic biology and physical biology research, Miranda says.

Rice leaders also endorsed the practice of releasing a draft plan to help them gather feedback before the strategic plan is finalized.

"I think, candidly, a lot of faculty and others would enter these processes with some skepticism," Leebron says. "The question is, 'Can you win them over?' And I think the most important part of winning them over is they feel they have impact."

Rice credits the latest strategic planning process with bringing the theme of student affordability to the forefront. The theme helped the university craft the Rice Investment, a financial aid program [launched](#)

in September 2018. The program provides full-tuition scholarships to degree-seeking undergraduates whose families make \$65,000 to \$130,000 and at least half-tuition scholarships for students with family incomes of \$130,000 to \$200,000. Aid also covers tuition, fees and room and board for students with family incomes of less than \$65,000.

The Rice Investment can be seen as a strategic move at a time when elite private institutions sometimes face fiercer competition for middle-class students than they would like. Admissions leaders at prestigious institutions sometimes speak of recruiting classes shaped like dumbbells, with plenty of aid dedicated to students from low-income families and students from wealthy families who are able to attend regardless of tuition. Where they often have more trouble is enrolling middle-income students, who are often put off by the price tags at elite universities, attracted by the low sticker prices at state flagship universities or enticed by large non-need-based aid awards from private colleges further down the food chain.

At Rice, the relationship between the strategy and the plan didn't run in one direction—it wasn't just the new initiatives building on the plan. The new initiatives helped add excitement and legitimacy to the plan, demonstrating early on that Rice was on the move and addressing an important issue, leaders say.

Rice's new strategic plan is expected to last anywhere between five and 10 years. Leebron sees plans as tied to presidential tenures, and he likely won't extend his presidency for another decade, he says. Still, he endorses

longer strategic planning horizons than many others in higher education.

"It's not worth doing for less than five," Leebron says, noting that the strategic plan will be tied to fund-raising through a capital campaign. "When you think a campaign is about eight years, on average now, and you kind of want to do the strategic plan at the beginning of the silent phase or before the silent phase, and you add all those things together, I think what you're looking at are seven- to 10-year strategic plans."

An institution needs to set strategy no matter what its financial position, Leebron says.

"If you have money to spend, it's nice that you can say yes to more questions," he says. "But you still want to know where some of your priorities are and where your spending is. If you have limited resources, you still want to use the limited flexibility you have to make strategic investments."

Can institutions of different resource levels learn anything from each other's experiences?

The question proves more likely to draw a long pause from experts than a quick answer. The uneasy consensus seems to be that planners should review what institutions of all types and resource bases are doing. It can help them think of new ways to set up their own strategic planning processes or find strategies to adapt on their own campuses.

## Public Institutions

Public colleges and universities must listen to many voices, planning for the needs of all the usual higher ed constituencies, plus

those who are involved because of an institution's public nature: state higher ed agencies, system offices, publicly elected or appointed board members, voters, foundation officials, local residents and, of course, politicians. They also must find a way to support the public good of the states that sponsor them.

Unsurprisingly, those who have served in leadership positions in both public and private higher education say planning is much harder on the public side. Public institutions often deal with new conditions imposed upon them from the outside.

"I don't think strategic planning is any less important in the public sector than in the private sector, but I think it's far harder to stick to a well-conceived plan," says Freeland, who is president emeritus of Northeastern University and former higher education commissioner of Massachusetts. "You've just got to be more nimble and more skillful at absorbing whatever the new blows or new opportunities are coming at you from one side or the other and within that framework try to stay on course as best you can."

Take the State University of New York's University at Albany, which encountered plenty of obstacles on the way to creating a new strategic plan. The university was well on its way to writing a new plan after former president Robert Jones left to lead the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2016. The extent of planning done before a new president was named caused some friction.

A [draft plan distributed after about a year of planning at a May 2017 meeting](#) of the University at Albany Council, an oversight body that does not have the governance

powers of the SUNY Board of Trustees, was to run from 2017 to 2020. It contained three strategic imperatives: "Foster Our Culture of Excellence," "Innovate Our Programs" and "Strengthen Our Research." It also included a vision statement: "The University at Albany will define the publicly engaged research university. As a result, we will be a valued driver and partner for academic excellence, regional and global innovation, and economic opportunity."

Some members of the University Council, an oversight board appointed by the state's governor, praised planners for their work. Others [raised concerns](#) because the university was only weeks away from naming a new president who would likely want input into the university's strategy.

In June 2017, the university announced that Havidán Rodríguez would be its new president. He quickly transformed the planning process, eventually shaping [a five-year plan](#) for 2018 to 2023. That plan lists five priorities of student success, research excellence, diversity and inclusion, internationalization, and engagement and service. The plan includes a different vision statement as well: "To be the nation's leading diverse public research university—providing the leaders, the knowledge, and the innovations to create a better world."

Meanwhile, Albany and the SUNY system were in the midst of externally imposed change. In 2017, Governor Andrew Cuomo suddenly pushed into existence the Excelsior Scholarship, a statewide program providing free tuition to students from middle- and in some cases upper-middle-class families who attend New York's public colleges and

universities. The scholarships are reshaping the higher ed landscape in New York, with some private colleges reporting more difficulty attracting students and public colleges suddenly relying on the state for a larger portion of their budgets—and sometimes struggling to counsel families on the scholarship's complicated requirements.

Albany's case demonstrates why strategic plans and planning processes must be flexible, especially in a public setting. Not only did the university need to navigate leadership changes throughout its planning process, it had to adapt to a massive new program created in the political arena.

Excelsior fit under a general piece of the University at Albany's identity, says Jason Lane, an associate professor and interim dean of the School of Education who was part of the university's strategic planning process.

"One of the thrusts at Albany and the SUNY system has always been access," says Lane, who has previously been senior associate vice chancellor at the SUNY system office. "The governor's announcement of expanding access and providing more funding for higher ed certainly aligned with where we were going, with making access to higher education a strategic priority."

Albany's strategic plan must function in the context of a SUNY system that has its own strategy. SUNY's strategy is in the midst of its own changes, as longtime chancellor Nancy Zimpher resigned in 2017 and was succeeded by Kristina Johnson that year.

"We fully acknowledge we're one of 64 campuses in the SUNY system," says Michael Christakis, vice president for student affairs

and a public service professor at Albany who co-chaired the planning process that led to the university's 2018 to 2023 strategic plan. "Kristina Johnson was new as chancellor, and so there was a plan that Chancellor Zimpher put in place. We were trying to acknowledge our plan, but also acknowledge whatever new vision and priorities Chancellor Johnson was bringing."

Acknowledging the university's role within the system and the system's importance to the university can help avoid any conflict between different plans, Christakis says.

Zimpher's SUNY tenure is a good example of the powers and limits of system strategy. Planners sometimes mention her 2010 plan, called "The Power of SUNY," because it found a way to tie together a sprawling, difficult-to-govern system. Zimpher credits the plan with prompting the system to improve transfers, applied learning, online learning, remediation and shared services at and between its 64 institutions.

But the plan didn't allow the SUNY system administration to push through all of its priorities. SUNY tried to consolidate presidencies at several of its institutions, with the goal of keeping the campuses running in a more cost-effective manner at a time when populations are shrinking in many parts of New York State. Legislators balked, and the system eventually went back to having one president per campus.

The merger saga shows system offices and strategy can't do everything. Zimpher believes some ideas cannot be addressed below the level of state government.

SUNY's 2010 strategic plan allowed different ideas to grow, Zimpher says. For instance,

her leadership is now often associated with the concept of “systemness,” or systems providing value. Systemness wasn’t even a neologism when the 2010 plan rolled off the printing press.

“If you looked at this glossy thing we produced in 2010, we didn’t use the word ‘systemness,’” Zimpher says. “We acquired it and we learned it.”

SUNY proves how hard it can be to plan strategy for university systems in all of their complexity. Every institution brings its own set of local planning challenges, which interact with politics and interorganizational dynamics to create unpredictability. With so many stakeholders, institutional momentum remains hard to change.

Even public university systems spanning far fewer institutions than SUNY grapple with the challenge of fitting together system plans and plans for individual institutions.

The University of Illinois System used its most recent strategic planning process, which produced a strategic framework for 2016 to 2026, to solidify its concept of itself as a system with three universities. It was an important moment for a system that has sometimes grappled with whether it should define itself as a single university with three campuses instead of a system with three individual universities, says its president, Timothy L. Killeen.

“It is the collective voice of the system,” Killeen says of the strategic framework. “It allows the universities to sort of have their oats, if you like, and a lease on life and distinctiveness within a framework of a system that allows for growth and aspiration.”

Leaders can’t necessarily expect any tool to reliably bring about quick change in such an environment—strategic planning included.

“These are really complicated organizations with many moving parts,” says Aims McGuinness, senior fellow at NCHEMS. “You’ll move it a little bit, but it’s a really complicated process.”

One way to address the challenge is to have systems focus on the future of the state, rather than on the system as a sum of its constituent universities, McGuinness says. In the end, the individual universities can’t be micromanaged—but they can be nudged to move in the same general direction within their own unique contexts.

[Some research](#) has indicated that public universities may indeed be writing plans with an eye toward the future of their states or regions. Their plans and mission statements often emphasize their role in the state or local economy. In theory, doing so can help keep politicians and voters happy, at the very least.

Another way to keep key constituencies happy is to report on the implementation of strategic plans. University of Illinois System leaders believe regular reporting helps keep their plan on track.

“With every board meeting, I and colleagues would stand up and talk about progress against one of the pillars,” Killeen says. “That really helped the whole thing cohere, I think.”

Zimpher stresses continuous improvement in planning. Institutions and systems need to ask themselves what they are doing well and what they need to improve upon. Then they must dissect problems “in a rapid cycle

of improvement," she says.

In previous stops as a university leader outside the system office, Zimpher has built upon a campus's existing identity and ties to the public when forming strategic plans. As chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee from 1998 to 2003, she modified the concept of the Wisconsin Idea—a long-standing idea that a public university should be committed to public service. She adapted the concept to local conditions, creating the Milwaukee Idea and calling for the university to build partnerships with the community to enhance quality of life.

Then at the University of Cincinnati, where she was president from 2003 to 2009, Zimpher hit upon some of the same themes. She built around the idea of urbanity, the concept that the university's success is tied to the city's.

Individual public universities can leverage their plans for assistance from system offices that oversee them. Georgia State University has used its strategic plan to successfully argue to the University System of Georgia that it needed more academic advisers on campus, says Risa Palm, Georgia State's provost.

In doing so, Georgia State had to know how advisers were deployed, trained and evaluated, she says. The university went on to become more data driven and created other ideas, many of which have spread throughout the system. For instance, Georgia State found students were unable to enroll or were dropping out because they lacked relatively small sums of money, like \$500. So leaders created a new program to give microgrants to students at risk of dropping out because of small shortfalls.

Palm also traces a practice of cluster hiring at Georgia State back to strategic planning, saying the university found a way to reallocate some of its funding to pay for the practice.

"What we wanted to do is add groups of faculty in research areas where they would add a great deal to our graduate programs and be involved in cutting-edge research," she says. "Groups of people could apply for these funds, and we hired incredible faculty and also created a new institute of biomedical sciences."

Some administrators caution leaders at public universities against falling into the trap of focusing too much on government-imposed constraints. At certain institutions, every single meeting seems to circle back to the topic of the government not providing enough funding, says Bruce McPheron, executive vice president and provost at Ohio State University.

McPheron endorses a different way of thinking he says is on display at Ohio State. He calls it a "willingness to take measured risk" that can provide resources above the baseline of government funding. Strategic planning can help universities take the right risks, finding creative ways to bring in new revenue and fund programs.

Of course, state institutions with better name recognition may be more likely to see returns on their risks.

Two-year colleges, regional four-year colleges and flagship universities all face different sets of planning decisions. Two-year colleges are often asking whether they should be dipping their toes into the four-year market and how they can balance serving the

traditional 18- to 22-year-old student with the older adult student. Regional four-year institutions are often trying to find their way in a world of intense cost pressures at a time when student interests are shifting. Flagship universities seem to be increasingly focused on prestige.

Leaders at flagships recognize their advantages but also stress that downsides exist.

The University of California, Berkeley, enjoys a secure position when planning, says its chancellor, Carol Christ. The public flagship knows the UC system will always be a major target of state investment, so it doesn't face the existential threats many other colleges, like small private institutions, are attempting to navigate.

Public backing just comes with strings attached.

"Some of the parameters that are controlled by private colleges and their boards, for example enrollment strategy, are not within Berkeley's sole control," Christ says. "A lot of the parameters of the financial structure of the campus are set by either the Office of the President or by the regents or by the state, so the kinds of things that private colleges and universities themselves decide, like tuition, are not decided by individual campuses."

## Private Institutions

Private colleges and universities don't have quite the breadth of stakeholders to keep in mind as do public institutions, but they face some similar challenges trying to please different interest groups.

Christ has valuable insight into planning at

private institutions and how it compares to public institutions because she has served in an executive role at both. She led the creation of two strategic plans as president of Smith College, and then she embarked on a strategic planning process at Berkeley after she became chancellor there in 2017.

As president at Smith, Christ oversaw two different strategic plans. The planning processes contrasted with each other as much as planning at Smith contrasted with planning at Berkeley, she says.

Christ's first plan at Smith used a ground-up model considered by some to be more traditional in higher education: ask everyone on campus for their ideas, use a high-level committee to sift through those ideas and choose some of them to go into the strategic plan. Her second plan at Smith [came after the U.S. financial crisis](#) and used many other techniques that have become common today. It started with an environmental scan and asked planning participants to answer a set of strategic questions, narrowing their initial focus. The resulting plan was shorter and more responsive to the external environment, Christ says.

She structured the second planning process differently because the financial crisis created conflict at Smith.

"We had trustees and faculty really pointing fingers at each other," Christ says. "I thought to use the conventional model of asking everybody for their ideas would create huge cognitive dissonance on campus."

Larger private institutions—and wealthier ones—tend to have to navigate plans between more stakeholders. They tend to have larger boards, more colleges and more



engaged alumni.

More stakeholders can cut the other way. Yes, it means more personalities to manage, but it also means more potential sources of fund-raising and more expertise to harness.

Smaller private institutions often have fewer trustees on their boards and a smaller number of engaged constituents, which makes it easier to build an inclusive planning process. Unfortunately, fewer people actively engaged can reinforce private colleges' predisposition toward being internally focused.

Some private liberal arts colleges have a long history of viewing themselves as places where students can step back from day-to-day demands in order to take classes, think, develop their passions and form their identities. While that may be an admirable ideal, it can create a culture that struggles to recognize the need to react to a fast-changing world. Such colleges have also long focused on producing well-rounded graduates, making them prone to drawn-out arguments over which parts of the curriculum can be safely modified—a largely subjective debate.

At the same time, presidents at private colleges report some trustees seek to accelerate the pace of change and strategic planning on campus. Business-literate trustees sometimes seem to think a chief financial officer should be able to sit down and quickly write a strategic plan on his or her own.

But at private institutions, where the concept of shared governance is fiercely defended, no one party can own the strategic planning process.

"In a university, you can't tell anyone what to do—it's like herding stray cats," says Herbert, the president of the University of New England. "If you're going to have a successful plan, you have to have buy-in, particularly from the faculty."

Private institutions that aren't fabulously wealthy can be tempted to write strategic plans that try to do too much or that engage in wishful thinking. Writing a plan with something for everyone is tempting, as it will make most people happy in the short run. Inevitably, though, there won't be enough resources to accomplish all priorities.

Establishing priority areas or strategic questions early in a plan doesn't necessarily prevent the problem. The University of New England went through a strategic planning process shortly after Herbert became president in 2017. Working groups made up of faculty plus some professional staff members and students examined certain priority areas. Herbert still had to tell a group examining research that they needed to retool their efforts.

Although the University of New England is not a research-focused university, it has several areas of research strength, Herbert says. Some of its best researchers were looking at the topic of research, and perhaps unsurprisingly, they endorsed strong growth there.

"The problem was they came back with a vision to become a research university," Herbert says. "I had to say, 'Wait a minute, back up, cowboys. We're not going to become a research university. The things you are talking about, the investment it would take, would be every penny we have.' We couldn't invest in anything, because we would have to

put it all into developing our research enterprise. And even if we did that, even if we made it our sole focus, it would be 20 years before we were competing as a research university. That's just not going to happen."

Herbert asked them to retool under a vision that valued all forms of scholarship but emphasized certain focal areas. The group members didn't react defensively, he says. They brought back a better plan.

The university's [strategic plan](#), which covers 2018 to 2023, is built around the university serving and teaching students. It also carves out a focus on the health of people, communities and the natural environment.

"You have to find your niche as both an institution and also in each and every department," Herbert says. "We don't shy away from saying we're going to grow in areas [where] we're needed. We're not going to develop programs in medieval French literature, quite frankly. As a private university that's pretty nimble, we can embrace that without catching too much heat from faculty."

Planners need to be ready for faculty members who might raise objections if they think a strategic planning process is leading an institution toward a redeployment of resources. In the current climate, a redeployment of resources might be attractive for a faculty member representing a popular field, like computer science. It doesn't look as good for a Victorian literature professor.

Hard choices are still necessary.

"You can't please everyone," Herbert says.

Leaders of private institutions also must be honest about the external competition they face. Many small private colleges are

struggling to stay open as donor pools tilt toward a smaller number of wealthy individuals and as the number of traditional college-age students is predicted to drop in many parts of the country, particularly after 2025.

Pretending colleges aren't competing with other private and public institutions for the same pools of students and donors isn't going to change reality. They are.

Nonetheless, private colleges aren't constrained by the same regulatory requirements as public institutions. They can be more flexible and create new niches.

When Elizabeth Paul arrived as the president of Capital University in Ohio, finding a 27-page strategic plan with board fingerprints all over it, the institution had been inwardly focused for a long time, she says. She used a business models canvas to plan and asked what it would take to make the university successful in the future. Did the university have a market? Did new ideas match the institution's identity?

The "Good Guarantee" that emerged under Capital's new strategic framework, cutting sticker prices in half for students whose parents work in the nonprofit and public-service sectors, is a competitive play. It functions both as a branding statement and a deliberate scholarship strategy to make middle-class students think about private higher education.

"This notion of competition doesn't feel right, but we have to be dealing with it," Paul says. "How do you help people understand that a really good strategic framework helps you win?" ■



## PLANNING A MAJOR CHANGE IN IDENTITY

The Sage Colleges date back to 1916, when suffragist Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage founded a college to provide women with both a liberal arts education and preparation for professional careers in order to advance their independence.

Sage had undergone change after change over the years, many of which expanded educational offerings for men. Still, it kept a core connection to its origins as a women's college.

As of 2018, Sage's website advertised programs "at the coeducational Sage College of Albany in New York's capital city," at "the historic Russell Sage College for women in downtown Troy," at the graduate level and online. Although the Troy location—less than a dozen miles from the Albany campus—had been opened to men attending classes, it did not host male residents, with the exception of those in theater.

The arrangement left Sage in an awkward spot. Leaders worried prospective students were confused about where men were permitted to live and take classes and where they were not.

Adding to the difficulty, Sage found itself under increasing financial pressure. Like many women's colleges and small private colleges, it had been feeling the sting of

changing times and evolving student preferences. In March 2018, Moody's Investors Service downgraded the college's debt, which had already been well within junk territory. The ratings agency cited "very poor strategic positioning, with small scale, volatile enrollment and lack of pricing power in a highly competitive environment." Total full-time equivalent enrollment had dropped to just 2,125 in 2017, Moody's noted. That was down almost 300 students over four years.

Then in early November 2018, Sage announced a strategic planning process had led it toward a change cutting to the heart of its longtime identity as a women's college: it was moving toward restructuring itself into a single undergraduate and graduate college with two coeducational campuses in Albany and Troy. Doing so would mean the end of Troy's identity as a single-sex residential campus.

Sage's decision, the way the college reached it and the way leaders announced it were all notable for how closely they were tied to a strategic planning process. Leaders hadn't entered the planning process with the intent of ending single-sex education, but the process had led them there.

As a result, the case stands as an example of how leaders can use strategic planning to

## PLANNING A MAJOR CHANGE IN IDENTITY

CONTINUED

make major decisions that have been staring them in the face—and how those major decisions will inevitably shape a planning process.

Sage had started strategic planning about six months after Christopher Ames took over as president in 2017. It soon became clear that planning discussions were being consumed by the issue of Sage's identity, Ames says.

"When I went into it, I didn't think that eliminating the single-sex Russell Sage needed to be part of it," Ames says. "It's only when I got into the details that I saw the two-college structure was making it harder for students to understand who we were."

A committee with faculty, student, administrative and trustee representatives was selected to lead the planning process. From there, the idea of changing the single-sex campus grew organically, with virtually no opposition, Ames says.

The lack of opposition might have been due in part to who was on the committee—the idea of making the Troy campus coed certainly caused controversy later, after it was announced. But Ames also suspects Sage's financial position and struggles with identity were making it clear to those who were most involved in the college that a change needed to be considered.

Deciding how to communicate about the discussions proved to be a challenge. A March planning update Sage posted online didn't directly address the issue of single-sex

residency on the Troy campus, although some savvy observers could probably read between the lines in order to predict it would be discussed. The March update noted discussions about how Sage could make its two campuses into a competitive advantage and what would be the right way to market the Troy campus as a women's college, given the fact it hosted coed programs.

As discussion of the issue advanced, leaders had to balance the need to give planners space to explore ideas against the need to announce a controversial decision in a way that wouldn't be seen as having been reached behind closed doors.

They decided to announce the change when it was still being written into a draft strategic plan. Sage made the idea public after its Board of Trustees endorsed two coed campuses being part of the plan, but before the board approved the plan. Trustees were expected to approve the plan months later, in early 2019. After that, they would still need to approve the actual change to the college's structure at some point down the line.

"It's tricky, because the reality is it's not an approved plan yet, so anything that gets said comes into the mix and the discussion," Ames says. "We didn't want to have those conversations that would agitate alums if the board didn't want to go in this direction."

Because the change being considered was so momentous, trustees were more involved in the planning process than they might

## PLANNING A MAJOR CHANGE IN IDENTITY

CONTINUED

otherwise have been. They spent about six hours discussing the idea before approving its inclusion in the draft strategic plan at an October board meeting. And a Board of Trustees strategy task force acted as a liaison between the planning committee and the board as ideas were being considered.

The task force allowed the board to push back, request more data and ask if planners had considered key factors, Ames says. Keeping the board involved also helped planners gain support of the full board when it came time for the coed idea to come up for a vote.

It may have been tempting to keep the topic of single-sex education out of the strategic plan entirely. The idea was bound to overshadow other initiatives in any final plan, after all.

Instead, planners allowed the issue to rise organically and even changed their process when it became clear the single-sex campus would indeed be addressed. Sage had developed planning task forces under the strategic planning committee to look at different issues, but it went in a different direction when it realized everyone involved in planning would want to be part of the discussion about single-sex education.

Planners' priorities also changed as a result of the issue. The idea of developing an institute focused on women's empowerment and leadership rose in priority because the single-sex campus was being eliminated.

Ames offers a few tips based on his

experience. When planning leads to a major change such as the one Sage considered, take time to talk to key constituents like alumnae one on one. When a decision is about to be announced, prepare a communications plan so you are ready to deal with the inevitable media deluge and effectively broadcast nuanced points.

Another lesson might be that leaders can't run away from major issues while strategic planning. If the time is right, the issues will likely come up on their own, no matter if anyone expected to address them. ■

## PLANNING AFTER A MERGER

Taking stock and planning after a sudden massive change—whether it's internally driven or externally imposed—is a difficult task. Leaders must contend with fallout from the change itself and decide whether it is large enough to necessitate new strategic planning. If it is, they're tasked with deciding when and how to go about that planning.

Recent university mergers offer insight into administrators' thought processes in such situations. When Georgia State University created a strategic plan in 2011, it didn't anticipate any college or university mergers.

Then Hank Huckaby, who was at the time chancellor of the University System of Georgia, announced a consolidation push at the end of 2011. Sure enough, in 2015, the system's regents approved a plan to consolidate Georgia Perimeter College, an associate degree-granting institution with five campuses around Atlanta, into Georgia State. The merger would be finalized in 2016.

Yet when Georgia State revised its strategic plan in 2016, it did so while focusing on its own original Atlanta campus, says its provost, Risa Palm.

"The research part, the graduate part, is really not appropriate for Perimeter College," Palm

says. "That's not their mission. That part of the plan was for a research institution. The student success part of the plan is something we are integrating into Perimeter College."

As of 2018, she anticipated doing a full-scale revision of the strategic plan to address the integration of Perimeter College. The strategic plan is, after all, the centerpiece for how the university budgets, operates and drives cultural change, Palm says.

The private Thomas Jefferson University and Philadelphia University didn't have a state system driving their merger activity. But they agreed to a deal in which Jefferson acquired Philadelphia in 2017. The combination puzzled some inside and outside the universities because they were drastically different enterprises.

Jefferson had been growing rapidly but was still oriented around health sciences. Collectively, it and the hospitals it owned were a \$1.3 billion operation with roughly 3,750 students in 2012, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#). Philadelphia University's budget totaled \$135 million, with 3,750 students who were mostly undergraduates. Now, after the acquisition and some other hospital deals, Jefferson spans 14 hospitals, a

## PLANNING AFTER A MERGER

CONTINUED

\$5.1 billion budget, two campuses and 17 NCAA athletic teams.

All of the change is risky, says Dr. Stephen Klasko, Jefferson's president.

"It's something of a high-risk event because you could blow the merger before you start," says Klasko, an obstetrician who also has an M.B.A. "Strategic plans, even when you've been together for a long time, are hard, because you are making decisions about what you are and are not going to do."

The idea of the merger was to create what leaders call "a 21st-century professional university," a university focused on professions. On its own, that concept likely won't be enough to keep the institution's mammoth hospital operations from overshadowing the university side. So leaders set about creating what they call a strategic academic framework.

They started by bringing together faculty members and senior administrators in think tanks, says Dr. Mark Tykocinski, provost, executive vice president for academic affairs and dean of Jefferson's medical college. Efforts started even before the merger was complete.

"They started to feel part of something," Tykocinski says. "When they were in rooms together, there was a bit of organic sprouting of collaborative possibilities, which started to frame some of the tactical and even strategic things we might do."

Leaders then started a formal planning process, bringing in a consultant and creating the framework. It has four top components, Tykocinski says: teaching the fields of tomorrow; curated, personalized education; faculty and a dynamic academic community; and being an outward-looking enterprise.

The framework is in a relatively slim slide deck. It's not the end of planning, according to Tykocinski.

"Strategic planning never ends," he says. "We don't need a big document of hundreds of pages. It's enough to have a deck and let us know what our architecture is and start to give light to it." ■



# Best Practices

## Integrated Planning

Successful strategic plans won't exist in a vacuum. They'll inform the way institutions spend money, build academic programs, construct buildings, appeal to donors and work to maintain their accreditation, among other activities. Therefore, one of the best practices planners can adopt is to think about all of the other elements their plans will touch.

This so-called integrated planning approach doesn't just improve strategic planning. It can save valuable time and energy.

For instance, the Rhode Island School of Design was in line for its accreditation review in 2016—the same time it was nearing the end of a 2012 to 2017 strategic plan. Both of those efforts are huge undertakings for a small private institution with only about 2,500 students. And the same administrator would have been working on them: Mara Hermano, vice president of integrated planning.

"Since all of this falls under my portfolio, I couldn't write an institutional self-study and a new strategic plan at the same time," she says. "It was actually a good way to focus on the self-study, complete accreditation and use what we were learning from the self-study and the recommendations from our visitors to seed the basis of the next strategic plan."

Accreditation teams flagged areas of focus, like better financial aid for graduate students. Financial aid then became a key priority in the design school's next strategic plan, which had been shared as a draft document as of late 2018 and was moving toward an expected Board of Trustees vote in early 2019.

Other areas of accreditor focus went into other planning efforts. After the accreditor emphasized faculty and staff diversity, the design school developed a Social Equity Inclusion Action Plan in 2017.

The Rhode Island School of Design tried to



practice integrated planning under its previous efforts. One of the goals under its 2012 to 2017 strategic plan was to do a campus master plan, which the school completed in 2015, Hermano says.

“We just broke ground on a new residential facility, which we knew was key to renovating our residence hall structure,” she says. “Without that analysis of our buildings—the age of our buildings, the condition, the deferred maintenance—that came out of the campus master plan, we wouldn’t have been able to prioritize.”

Finance and academics are also important elements to consider, Hermano stresses. What is the price tag if an institution does everything it wants to do under a strategic plan? Are efforts revenue neutral or revenue positive? How will those factors affect the time it will take to implement priorities?

While fiscal implications are important, experts warn against treating them as the only indicator. When that happens, good ideas that can be pursued in small steps can be buried, or strategic plans turn into operational plans.

Also, don’t lose sight of the institution’s mission or academic plan.

“The core is the academic plan,” Hermano says. “That’s all now feeding into this strategic plan.”

## Honesty

An honest assessment of where an institution stands and where it can realistically go is critical. If college or university stakeholders lie to themselves about an institution’s wealth or

competitive position, they can’t realistically expect to develop a plan to improve either of those characteristics—or to improve in other areas.

Honesty can also keep plans from looking like every other strategic plan that’s ever been printed.

“One of the things our president was saying was, ‘I don’t want to see a plan where you can just take our name off it and put on someone else’s name,’” Hermano says. “What is the plan that talks about our unique capacities, our unique history and tradition?”

Also important is not losing sight of the very real challenges all institutions—and the broader higher ed sector—face. Writing a plan that ignores challenges such as rising costs, high tuition, equity for first-generation and minority students, changing demographics, and the current intense focus on jobs for graduates won’t win any accolades.

“Authentic is not simply talking about your pride points,” says Thomas A. Parham, president of California State University, Dominguez Hills.

In that light, experts warn against writing plans with countless big ideas and detailed objectives but few goals that can actually be accomplished. Some stretch goals are fine, they say, but make sure efforts are also directed toward steps that can be accomplished within a plan’s timeline—even if they are incremental, they can build toward bigger goals and show those on campus that accomplishments are taking place.

“I’ve been through many strategic mission and vision-setting exercises over the years,” says Webster Thompson, executive vice

president of business development at the consulting firm Watermark. "It's very, very difficult, I think, to draw the line in understanding what you want to be and what you are, or what you want to state what you are, versus what you actually are."

Writing reasonable goals doesn't necessarily rule out taking risks, either.

"I don't want to say universities should be bigger risk takers," says Rice's provost, Miranda. "They have to be careful stewards of their resources, but I think a little bit of money spread everywhere probably has less impact than making strategic choices and then investing in those choices."

## Inclusive Planning

Be sure to include key parties in writing different elements of a plan. If a plan is skewed heavily toward giving or enrollment, for example, many employees from the enrollment or advancement offices should be part of planning, as should parents, students and donors.

But they still shouldn't be the only ones represented.

"The more people you have engaged, the better it will be," Thompson says. "And the better the results will be."

That sentiment probably can't be applied to an infinite degree. At some point, a planning process can get too large and unwieldy. The exact point of diminishing returns will be different at every institution, though, and most recommend erring toward inclusivity.

Remember also that plans aren't just about

finding ways for a college or university to attract students, win research dollars and lure donors. They are about where those donors choose to give, where foundations spend money, who will be competing for research dollars, what research will be prioritized and where faculty members decide to work. Hearing from all of those constituencies strengthens the decision-making process and, ultimately, strategy.

## Think Action

Many experts recommend writing strategic plans in a way that will motivate a campus to change. They endorse a clear narrative and big ideas. They also suggest steering clear of too many details, which can cut into enthusiasm.

"This is 35,000 feet," says Anthony Knerr, managing director of the consulting firm AKA Strategy. "There is a storyline, if you will, about the institution. Who is it? Where is it going? Why is it going there?"

Some level of detail is necessary, of course. How much will depend on institutional history, expectations and context. But an action-oriented plan should be informed by data, says deCoste, vice president for strategy at the consulting firm Credo. Collaborate across multiple constituencies, and track data points during implementation, she says.

One way to pull off the balancing act between too much and not enough detail is to remember that not all goals and key performance indicators have to be made public—at least not at all universities. This can make private universities that don't want

to give away their key strategy points feel more comfortable.

The public should nonetheless be able to access some version of a plan document that will make readers feel confident that hard goals exist somewhere. If an employee or member of the public hears that the plan is to grow enrollment, he or she should be able to find a plan and come away from reading it with a sense of the degree to which enrollment will grow and how students will be added. The public shouldn't get the impression that the goal is just a pie-in-the-sky wish.

Even after specific goals are in place, leaders can call audibles if things don't develop as initially expected.

"Let's say I think I'm going to grow by 1,000 students and I'm going to grow them all in the adult and graduate market online," deCoste says. "I pilot my first test of this adult and graduate market, and it's a colossal failure. I realize I can't get into the online market and this is the wrong timing, but we found this other pocket, this degree-completion program, and we're going to do it for folks who work for a corporation. There's this corporate partnership. That's where you want the flexibility: in how you operationalize the goal."

## Leaders Own Plans

A number of different administrators are sometimes tasked with overseeing implementation after a plan is finished: planners, institutional research offices, provosts and presidents.

It's hard to see how any plan can thrive

without presidential cheerleading, though.

"The bigger the place, the more the president seems to be removed from the strategic planning," says Herbert, of the University of New England. "That's not something I'm sure is a great idea. The president really needs to own the plan."

Once the plan is in place, it needs to be referred to constantly, leaders stress. It should serve as the basis for every decision made and make an appearance in virtually every speech, some say.

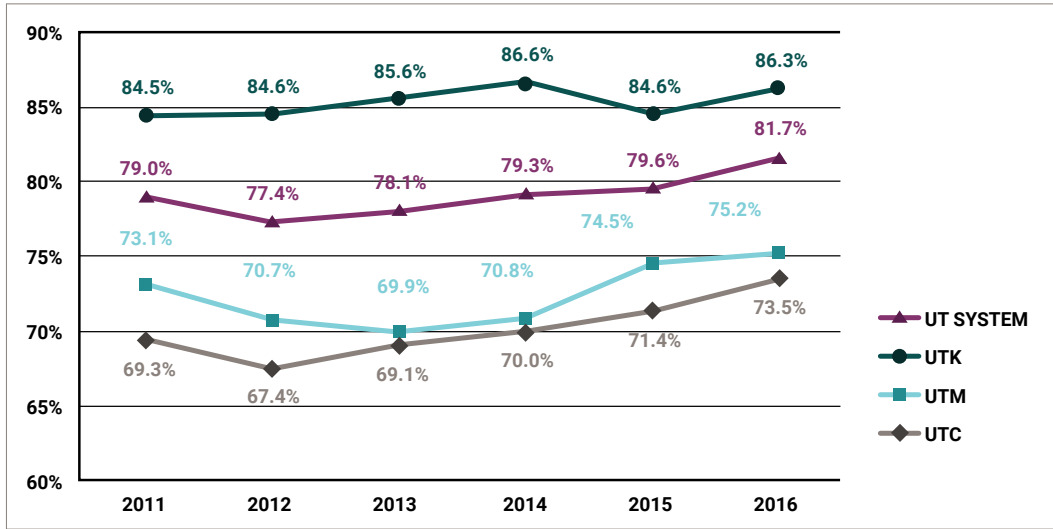
"Always refer back to the plan," says Harris, president of the University of San Diego. "We have these great initiatives, and sometimes we have to keep reminding people the reason we're doing these things is we have to accomplish an overall goal by a certain date or time frame."

Of course, leaders can't be the only ones talking about a plan. The right support from the right middle managers will go a long way toward making sure the rank-and-file employees who matter most to implementation will move in the right direction. Vice presidents and deans are often assigned responsibility for meeting certain goals. The most aggressive institutions tie administrators' annual reviews to their responsibilities under the strategic plan.

Dashboard software might make it easier to keep track of how things are progressing than it was when strategic planning first broke through into higher education. Such software can also allow institutions to post that progress to the general public. Public posting builds accountability and can be important for state-affiliated institutions or

### First-Year Freshman Retention Rate

Freshman retention rates have risen significantly at UT Martin and UT Chattanooga since 2011. Systemwide, the freshman retention rate has increased almost three percentage points.



- Goal 1: Enhancing Educational Excellence

---

- Goal 2: Expanding Research Capacities

---

- Goal 3: Fostering Outreach and Engagement

---

- Goal 4: Ensuring Effectiveness and Efficiency

---

- Goal 5: Advocating for the University of Tennessee System

---

- Complete College Tennessee Act

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
UT System	79.0%	77.4%	78.1%	79.3%	79.6%	81.7%
UT Knoxville	84.5%	84.6%	85.6%	86.6%	84.6%	86.3%
UT Chattanooga	69.3%	67.4%	69.1%	70.0%	71.4%	73.5%
UT Martin	73.1%	70.7%	69.9%	70.8%	74.5%	75.2%

Definition	Data Source
Percent of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking college freshmen who continue to their second year (fall retention rate). Fall freshman cohort includes those who started in the Summer term.	Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) Survey

Figure 6 - The University of Tennessee posts a dashboard online showing progress toward its strategic plan. Reproduced with permission from the University of Tennessee. Source: <https://tennessee.edu/static/strategicplan/dashboard/>

community colleges, which are expected to be transparent.

Some presidents endorse drawing up reports that color-code progress. One color means a plan objective has been met, another means progress is under way and a third means progress is lacking. It can be a useful method for taking stock of progress at a

quick glance, but it's also reductive. Different levels of reporting or review will be necessary to make sure that hard-to-measure goals aren't being marked as completed when little has changed in reality—or that a goal wasn't missed because of changes in the external environment instead of an institutional failure.

Ultimately, the leadership, not the tools, matters the most.

"It's not the expensive software," says Thompson, of Watermark. "It's not the top down. It's not the stick the accreditor is going to use and ruin everyone's lives. It's getting people to talk to each other and providing an environment and time for people to have conversations."

## Remember Culture

Planning experts frequently quote management guru Peter Drucker, who famously said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

Even the best strategic plan will bog down if the faculty members, staff members, donors and tuition-paying families who drive college and university operations aren't on board with it. If they don't believe in a plan's key tenets, or if they don't feel motivated to change their ways, no strategy can be implemented.

This is why constructing the right planning process for a particular institution is so critical. It's why leading a planning process must be coupled with listening. It's why constituencies need to see their feedback reflected in a plan.

"What you're really talking about is shaping the culture of the enterprise," says Jones, president emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. "Every decision you make, every day, whether it's a hiring decision, a programmatic decision, any of those things that don't get the board involved at all, are decisions that implement the plan if everybody in the organization understands the bigger ends." ■



# Worst Practices

## Completely Bottom-Up or Top-Down Planning

Two extreme planning models receive near-universal derision: the bottom-up plan and the top-down plan.

In the bottom-up plan, a college or university takes a census approach. It gathers ideas from every college or school, combines them and dumps them into a planning document without any priority. The resulting product is too much for anyone to handle, and it all fades into noise.

The top-down plan, on the other hand, is driven entirely by trustees or administrators. Even if they have a vision of where the institution needs to go, any plan produced under such a model is likely dead on arrival. Higher education's long tradition of shared governance means faculty members and other constituencies expect to have input into major decisions.

Planners must strike a balance between the two extremes. The exact sweet spot differs from institution to institution. Generally, experts recommend leaders find a way to steer the process, homing in on a few strategic priorities or ideas. At the same time, they need to listen to different constituencies, incorporating new ideas and tweaking conclusions as appropriate.

## Plan for the Status Quo

Perhaps the worst practice an institution can follow is to plan as if nothing is changing in higher education. It's a tempting path for leaders, though, as it probably generates less conflict on campus on a day-to-day basis.

"Honestly, it would be an easier life for me as a senior administrator to focus on the day-to-day and keep the ship moving in the direction it is," says Harris, of the University of San Diego. "People would probably be pretty happy."

But, Harris asks, who else on campus is going to drive long-term strategy? Although a few board members or some faculty members might step in, someone with clear authority would still have to take the lead on the process for it to work.

Even engaged leaders can put in place planning processes that don't push toward a better future, that ignore changes in the education market or that fail to make their colleges distinctive in any way.

Consultants frequently tell horror stories about presidents who brought strategic plans from their last institutions to their new ones. Or they'll criticize cookie-cutter planning approaches that draw small groups of participants into rigid processes. Unsurprisingly, such efforts tend to result in similar plans that fail to gain traction.

"Take away the institutional identifiers, and a lot of the strategic plans I see could be any institution," says Miller, of Campus Labs. "We're seeing the same common themes of, 'we want to diversify our enrollment, we want to diversify revenue streams so we're not 100 percent dependent on tuition if we're a small liberal arts college. We want to keep affordability at a premium so we're competitive with our peer institutions when we talk to students. We want to have an enriched student experience of some type.'"

Granted, similar institutions may need to adopt some of the same themes and strategies. Problems can arise when everything they do is following the pack, and they ignore new and creative ways to attack their goals.

Some institutions plan for the status quo because key constituencies or leaders fear failure. Experts say this is a mistake, because

finding a strategy that doesn't work can be valuable. The trick is balancing risk, potential reward and a willingness to give strategies time to develop before pulling the plug.

## Don't Listen to Data

Ignoring data or misreading it can also be a critical error.

For instance, birth rates have led demographers to predict traditional four-year colleges' 18- to 22-year-old enrollment will crater after 2025. The doom-and-gloom crowd thinks this could lead to an uptick in college and university closings.

Will institutions decide not to plan past 2025 because they are hostage to the data and think developments will be too unpredictable? Or will they start to lay the groundwork for a different future?

Can they try to bolster enrollment by welcoming more students from disadvantaged backgrounds and more students from racial and ethnic groups who historically have been underrepresented in higher education? Will they consider entirely new offerings, like alternative credentials or new programs aimed at adults? Will they consider partnerships or mergers to keep their operations viable in a world of drastically increased competition?

Institutions that don't feel penned in by the data still sometimes misinterpret it.

Miller remembers a liberal arts institution that admitted a large number of students who instead chose to go to a nearby community college. Faculty assumed students were choosing the community college because it was cheaper. But surveys eventually showed

those students had often been rejected from a public four-year university and chose to go to the community college for two years, after which they would be granted admission to the public university.

“They wanted guaranteed admission to their first-choice school and recognized that was a cheap, palatable way to do their gen ed and then get there for the last two years,” Miller says.

The finding had real ramifications for whether the liberal arts college wanted to try to win more of those students, and whether doing so based on pricing was a good idea.

## Waste Energy

Campuses sometimes get distracted by all of the parts of a strategic plan that have nothing to do with strategy itself.

Often, institutions spend too much energy crafting mission, vision and value statements, says deCoste, of the consulting firm Credo. She doesn't think vision work should be done until after the rest of the strategic planning work has been completed, because doing it too early leads to planning fatigue before anyone can come up with new ideas.

Regardless of whether institutions follow those recommendations, it's clear some campuses get too caught up on language. Are they drafting a strategic plan or a framework? Will it have objectives, goals or strategic pillars?

In the end, none of it matters as much as understanding an institution's current condition, deciding where it needs to go, and picking some ways to get there.

“I don't care what you call them,” Miller says. “You can make up a word and we'll go with it, as long as you guys believe in it and understand it. That's what we need.”

## Base It All on the Budget

While financial realities need to figure into the strategic planning process, planners caution against allowing current financial conditions to completely dictate what can be in the strategic plan.

Doing so can prevent big, important goals from being pursued. Instead, experts say, planning should be conducted with an honest eye toward financial constraints and how they could change over time. Can short-term strategies raise additional revenue that could then pay for expensive longer-term strategies? Is it realistic to seek a donor for an audacious new idea?

Chasing dollars from donors or other sources can lead colleges to stray from their original mission, however. Launching new programs only to appeal to perceived student demand can lead to painful conflict down the road if everyone isn't on board. Many a liberal arts college, from [the University of Dallas](#) to [Earlham College](#) in Indiana, have faced crises of identity as they seek to expand with business, technology, engineering or adult-oriented programs—only to have faculty and alumni balk.

Meanwhile, public institutions can find themselves in a uniquely painful situation if they are failing to capture a significant share of state performance-based funding.



If performance-based funding is set up in a way that effectively penalizes open-access institutions—as has been alleged in some states like Florida—can a college resist changing? Can it tell its constituents that it needs to miss out on millions of dollars of public funding because it is staying true to its identity?

## Take Implementation Shortcuts

When it comes time to act on the strategic plan and report on its progress, not everyone sticks to the script. Some institutions never follow through on implementation plans. Others might overlook key performance indicators in order to tell a favorable story.

The temptation is clear: instead of looking at what the college has done to meet its strategic goals, look first at what it's done and then shoehorn anything that can be found into the strategic goals.

"There are definitely annual reports written against the strategic plan," deCoste says.

In the worst cases, accomplishments reported might have no real correlation to the plan itself.

"Adding vegetarian items to the dining services menu—we would not correlate that to increased retention of vegetarians," deCoste says. "It could be, but we don't have the data for that."

No matter how good the accomplishments listed, such a process is unlikely to gel into a strategy. Such a scattershot approach would signal a leader unable or unwilling to

implement a plan.

Sometimes a case like this might unfold because of an honest mistake—it's sometimes unclear who is responsible for a strategic plan's implementation after the plan is complete. But few will accept that excuse when it comes time to report to the board. An implementation plan should have been crafted, and someone should have been placed in charge.

At the same time, consultants worry about implementation efforts with rigid assignments. Goals in silos assigned to specific administrators—each dean in charge of one strategic priority—could prevent important collaboration between different parts of a university. At its worst, the situation starts looking less like one plan being put in place across the institution and more like different strategic plans being installed in different departments.

Experts also caution against implementation efforts that are driven solely from the top.

"Bad practice is using the analogy of getting everybody on the bus," says Jones, of NCHEMS. "That presumes somebody is in charge and everybody goes along. A much better metaphor is everybody is in the canoe rowing generally in the same direction." ■

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

Colleges and universities aren't shy about saying in their strategic plans that they want to be the best at their particular missions. Sometimes they aren't shy about wanting to climb the rankings, either.

"We embraced being a top-20 public," says McPheron, executive vice president and provost at Ohio State University. University leaders looked at the different quartiles of the top 20 and tried to find a way to measure their peers quantitatively, then used what they found to help develop areas of focus.

Ohio State's [strategic plan](#), which trustees [endorsed](#) in August 2017, has five pillars: teaching and learning; access, affordability and excellence; research and creative expression; academic health care; and operational excellence and resource stewardship. Focusing on those areas should allow the institution to improve relative to its peers, leaders say.

The idea was to make sure Ohio State is in a prominent enough position that others are asking what it is doing in any particular area, McPheron says. That's not quite the same thing as blatantly gunning for a higher ranking. But university administrators are also honest about keeping an eye on published rankings.

"People are skeptical about talking about *U.S. News & World Report* as a comparative measure, but the process that was undertaken

here at Ohio State was about important metrics that matter to our students and our faculty and our land-grant mission," says Gail Marsh, Ohio State's chief strategy officer. "It wasn't so much about a particular ranking here or ranking there. But we of course pay attention to it like everyone else does."

Talk of rankings always raises questions about mission drift and what happens when many colleges or universities focus on elevating themselves over their competition at all costs. It's a key discussion for institutions as they work on new strategic plans, because planners are often tempted to abandon priorities and pledge to be the best at everything.

The best-resourced institutions in the world may be able to get away with that type of thinking. For most others, it's likely a recipe for unsustainable spending, especially since research from former University of Rochester provost and current University of Redlands president Ralph Kuncl [has indicated](#) sustained improvements in rankings would be extremely expensive and almost impossible for most institutions. The type of thinking can also lead to prioritizing the addition of new revenue streams above all else in order to pay for new facilities and ever-growing operations.

Worse—at least from some students' perspective—colleges that become single-mindedly focused on rankings could try

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

CONTINUED

to drop admission rates, become more exclusive and recruit classes with stronger test scores. Doing so might mean offering more non-need-based aid to academically strong students who come from wealthy families, arguably at the cost of need-based aid for less-well-off students posting slightly lower test scores. What would happen to average or below-average students from poor families when all wealthy institutions are focused solely on exclusivity? Would those students be shut out of the very institutions that have the resource bases necessary to serve them well?

Concerned parties like students and faculty members might be able to raise questions about planning that seems to be overly focused on rankings. Or they might be as enamored as everyone else. Similarly, board members or chief financial officers might be able to rein in planning decisions that could lead to runaway spending. Or they might be convinced that spending more to rise in the rankings will return more investment from happy donors.

It's best to bring up all of those considerations early in the planning process, experts say. Any party trying to stop a plan at the last minute risks being seen as obstructionist instead of conscientious—especially trustees.

Few institutions are safe from the temptations of mission drift and climbing the prestige ladder. Two-year colleges sometimes wade into four-year degrees. Four-year colleges seek

to become universities. Universities seek to become ever more elite.

Planning experts caution leaders to avoid the arms race and instead emphasize strategies that serve students, faculty members and other constituencies. Growth itself isn't necessarily bad, they say. Just make sure an institution is planning to grow in the right places and for the right reasons.

"My view on rankings is they are a derivative—they are not a goal," says Knerr, of AKA Strategy. "If you get it right in terms of 'This is who we are, this is where we want to go,' and this is communicated effectively, then by and large, the rankings will take care of themselves."

Researchers looked at the aspirations of 19 large public research universities in North America and Europe in a 2018 article published in the journal *Studies in Higher Education*. Christopher C. Morphew, Tatiana Fumasoli and Bjørn Stensaker examined the ways the research universities were reacting to external pressures and demands [in the article](#) "Changing missions? How the strategic plans of research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North America balance competing identities."

They found a strong tendency to emphasize organizational mobility and ambition to reach the top. Plans often referenced institutions as belonging among the best universities. They also typically mentioned hopes of improving on rankings.

European universities were more likely than

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

CONTINUED

their North American counterparts to cite specific ranking goals, the authors found.

“Rankings are used as a barometer of current success and, to some extent, an explicit goal,” they wrote. “If there is a difference in how rankings are cited, it manifests in how the North American universities tend to focus on their current status, rather than a specific ranking goal.”

Authors still found a “clear trend among sampled universities that organizational mobility is key to the strategic plans of both North American and Northern European universities.”

North American universities were more likely to cite indicators of achievement in other areas, like service to society. North American strategic plans placed a stronger emphasis on “the educational provision—and students,” authors found. A more competitive North American market where institutions rely more on attracting paying students could be behind the difference.

The findings suggest evidence of “a common global race for excellence” incorporating public and private identities at the universities, the authors found. Yet universities are also emphasizing different functions, like service to society, in different ways.

In that light, it might not be completely fair to criticize all institutions for trying to climb the rankings ladder. Falling behind in a world of intense competition can be dangerous, yet public research universities are often still

finding ways to emphasize service to society.

Authors also came up with another interesting tidbit: universities expressing a desire to improve their rankings were actually ranked more highly than those that were expressing such goals less frequently.

That could be because the institutions setting goals were more successful. Or it could be the other way around.

“You know the thing with rankings: you love them when they serve you well and disparage them when it’s not the story you want to tell,” says McPheron, of Ohio State. ■

## Q&A FROM ACROSS THE POND

Much of the most interesting discussion about strategic planning centers on how practices have changed over time. Peter McCaffery, a professor emeritus at London Metropolitan University and an education leadership consultant, can provide some insight into that area, as well as a view from across the pond.

McCaffery wrote *The Higher Education Manager's Handbook* ([Routledge Taylor & Francis Group](#), third edition, 2018), which includes a section on strategic planning. He agreed to an email question-and-answer session. The following exchange has been edited for style and length.

**Q: Have you observed changes in the way colleges and universities approach strategic planning in recent years?**

**McCaffery:** Yes. There is an increasing tendency to focus on shorter time spans—three years rather than five. Strategic planning documents themselves are shorter, too, with less detailed forecasting than in the past. The focus is more on setting out a direction of travel for the institution along with a set of high-level guiding principles and objectives.

There is greater recognition, too, that higher education leadership is about “managing contradictions,” i.e., running a multifaceted

business with real markets and real customers while still attempting to ensure academic freedom, institutional autonomy and learning communities are not compromised.

While nearly all universities continue to develop a planned strategy (as in how we are going to get from A to B), given future unpredictability, they are also increasingly developing other strategic approaches simultaneously—e.g., “emergent” strategies that recognize in a changing environment staff can shift the institution incrementally in their day-to-day decision making (staff are expected to deliver added value within existing constraints), and “realized” strategies with a “tight-loose” framework in which the purpose and direction are set but staff have considerable discretion over how to get there.

The strategic planning function within universities and colleges has itself become far more substantial. It is now a profession with national networks.

Benchmarking and league table ranking are also far more prevalent than ever before.

**Q: Why have these changes unfolded?**

**McCaffery:** These changes are essentially a reflection of the complexity, marketization

## Q&A FROM ACROSS THE POND

CONTINUED

and increasing unpredictability of the environment in which universities and colleges operate. The role of government (as defender of the public interest) indeed has emerged as the single most unpredictable variable in recent years, when perversely the less it funds, the more it interferes!

Globalization and populism, new learning technologies, marketization, social media, economic nationalism (and Brexit), governmental intervention, and student expectations of value for money all presage a new environment to which universities will have to adapt.

**Q: We often see presidents who are new to a university embark on a strategic planning process. Is there a right time in a president's tenure to draw up an entirely new strategic plan?**

**McCaffery:** While new university presidents are obviously keen to make their mark, it all depends on the situation they inherit. Organizational context is king here! What are the circumstances in which the president comes to office? Is it to sustain success? Address a crisis? To turn around the organization? To transform the institution? To start a new enterprise?

Typically, a new president will take a little time to diagnose their institution:

Where it stands against the five C's: customers (students, funding bodies); collaborators; competitors; conditions (the internal and external environment); capabilities (human, financial, operational, technical, key assets).

Is there organizational alignment, too, within

the university between strategy, structure and systems (processes)?

What all university presidents can do is to use their appointment and arrival to instigate a review of the existing university strategy without having to commit themselves one way or the other at that stage.

**Q: How can senior management make sure they have consulted enough with key constituencies?**

**McCaffery:** It's very easy as a group or team to develop a false consciousness—that your worldview is held by others beyond the senior management team—to fall into the trap of groupthink.

To avoid it you really have to pay close attention by monitoring carefully both the quality and the quantity of the feedback you receive during the consultation process: the attendance at forums and the level of engagement (was it a monologue or a dialogue?), the depth and quality of written submissions, etc. You need to take the time (even if it is pressing) to secure staff involvement. You need to remember that a value is only a value if it is voluntarily chosen and that staff compliance is no substitute for genuine staff engagement.

**Q: Do you support developing a strategic plan in concert with plans for other key parts of the enterprise, like finances or facilities? How can leaders best make those plans fit together?**

**McCaffery:** Yes, absolutely. It is critical that supporting strategies (for finance, human

## Q&A FROM ACROSS THE POND

CONTINUED

resources, estates, learning, teaching and research, learning support, library, student services, etc.) are developed in tandem with the overall, overarching institutional strategy.

To achieve strategic fit and coherence here, it is best to conceive of the strategic creation process as a three-stage cycle:

- Defining institutional priorities
- Developing supporting strategies that link the priorities and aims to implementation
- The active engagement of stakeholders in consultation

In practice, year-on-year support functions (estates, finance, library, etc.) typically develop annual operating statements, which provide a health check on their performance against their own and the university's strategic plan.

**Q: What else do you think is noteworthy in this space right now?**

**McCaffery:** Setting desired ranking positions in league tables as a strategic target should come with a health warning.

The criteria that league tables use (e.g., a singular focus on research) can change and may not align with a university's core purpose (e.g., teaching, community engagement, widening participation). Universities could set themselves up to fail through misalignment or be distracted from their core function that they care most passionately about. ■

## HOW PLANS HAVE CHANGED

In the late 1970s, the Rhode Island School of Design was struggling and seeking a way to move forward in the coming decades. John Stevens, who was a vice president at the institution at the time, started work on his first strategic plan.

The plan, called RISD 2000, covered the next two decades of the institution's life and laid out a goal of growing from enrollment in the mid-1,000s to 2,000 students.

"It was all about how you improve programming, become more effective and efficient, and get economies of scale by getting to 2,000 students," says Stevens.

Today, Stevens is the founder and president of his own consulting firm specializing in managing strategic changes at colleges, universities and schools. He and his firm have done about 40 strategic plans for a variety of institutions, most of them small to midsize institutions.

RISD did make it to 2,000 students, he notes—the school reports a total enrollment of nearly 2,500 today. But Stevens learned from his first plan, conducted at a time when strategic planning was first breaking into higher education.

"The president, the senior staff and the trustees were flabbergasted in a very positive way by it," Stevens says. "What I found was

that the faculty and some staff felt left out. I didn't engage them in the process as I should have."

Therefore, it took a while to convince different constituencies on campus to support the plan trustees had backed, according to Stevens. When planning today, he makes sure to have strong systems in place to build engagement across campuses so that faculty members, staff members, administrators and trustees all feel ownership of the plans produced.

Many institutions still make the same mistakes Stevens did four decades ago.

"They don't effectively account for leadership from the president and the board and engagement from the full campus community," Stevens says. "If you don't do both of those things, it will often not work. If there is no leadership, then the institution will kind of just go off in all kinds of directions and the process will never get completed. And if you have just direction and no engagement, there's no ownership of the process in the end."

The Rhode Island School of Design has been through multiple presidents since the RISD 2000 plan was put in place—its current president, Rosanne Somerson, was appointed in 2015 after serving as interim president for more than a year. The institution was



## HOW PLANS HAVE CHANGED

CONTINUED

coming off of a 2012-to-2017 strategic plan and expected to finalize a new strategic plan in early 2019.

Its library still has a copy of the typewritten RISD 2000 plan, however. A look at the plan, emblazoned with the handwritten date of 1981, is remarkable because it reveals planning practices that have and have not changed—and how some of the key challenges colleges and universities face today are the same ones they grappled with 40 years ago.

The plan begins with a five-page introduction arguing for the school of design enrolling 2,000 students by 2000, increasing housing for students, renovating facilities and also noting an academic affairs reorganization. It then includes 38 pages breaking down data and projections on the student market, RISD budget, capital needs and program needs, plus a special report on a computer system being installed complete with tape drive, disc drive and several cathode-ray-tube video terminals.

RISD 2000 lacks the layers of vision statements, mission statements, strategic objectives, goals and metrics that have become the shared fabric of today's strategic planning documents. But in some ways, it is a more cleanly packaged document, narrating a path for the school of design to follow and providing pages of data to build the case for that path.

Data have changed substantially since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Stevens says.

Outside sources of data have grown much more sophisticated, and institutions can draw on more support to help them predict enrollment, develop financial models, conduct market research and evaluate programs.

Such increasing complexity could be one reason why strategic plans' packaging has changed.

"If we were to use a document like this today, the campus community's eyes would glaze over," Stevens says of the plan from four decades ago. "One of the things we do with our clients is help them put together a fact book, which has all that demographic data that you can rely on, and when you're making presentations at the higher levels of the institution, you can bring up that information as supportive of the process."

Today, strategic plans—what an institution is going to do—are often separated from operational plans—how the institution is going to do it.

Take, for example, the Rhode Island School of Design's 2012-17 strategic plan. Under it, the university worked to hire 10 new faculty lines, says Hermano, vice president of integrated planning. But the plan summary didn't spell out the goal that specifically. Instead, it called for the institution to "strategically increase faculty in academic areas" and "ensure baseline teaching and operating resources—including additional full-time faculty—to support departmental and institutional strategic objectives."

"The external-facing, more public document

## HOW PLANS HAVE CHANGED

CONTINUED

should have a set of very high-level metrics," Hermano says. "There is a set that's high level, and then there are more granular key performance indicators attached to each goal."

Such changes can be effective. Still, they bring their own challenges and elicit caution from experts. A summary document with just a few words to support each goal may be brief and compelling, but at some point brevity makes it hard to convince different constituencies that a plan is sound.

And many institutions struggle to balance accountability and flexibility in their operational planning.

"They'll set goals but they won't develop timelines, responsive parties, operating budgets, capital budgets and metrics for success," Stevens says. "If you don't realize you're living in a dynamic environment and you need to change the operational plan periodically, you're going to fail."

The higher ed landscape changed many times from 1980 to 2000, and then again from 2000 to 2018. Yet some passages from the RISD 2000 plan are notable for just how much they echo challenges institutions face today.

"RISD students must be given skills, experiences, and habits of mind which will enable them to compete effectively in the professional worlds of art and design," reads one passage that seems to mirror the discussion around career readiness percolating today.

"Any increase in a student population goes

against demographic trends and projections," reads another passage, which could be pulled from a write-up of the current student population estimates. "We know that all institutions will not survive. We know, too, that smaller institutions are especially vulnerable."

Comparing the RISD plan to the plans of today also makes it clear just how much shorter time horizons are. The old plan's two-decades-into-the-future goal seems like forever in comparison to today's three- and five-year timelines.

Aside from the case of the Rhode Island School of Design, experts pick out some other developments that have taken shape in strategic planning, many over the last 10 or 20 years.

Today, plans tend to be less aspirational than they were two decades ago, says Christopher Morphew, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Education.

"Most institutions were using them as these sort of aspirational documents," he says. "We're going to move to this Carnegie classification, or we're going to become a top-five university when we're No. 63 right now—sort of delusional aspirational documents."

Morphew co-authored research finding relatively fewer examples of such aspiration in North American research universities' recent strategic plans as compared to plans in Europe.

Strategic plans are also broader today than

## HOW PLANS HAVE CHANGED

CONTINUED

they have been in the past, he says. Earlier, strategic plans would sometimes lay out specific targets, like graduating a certain number of students in specific programs.

“Now what you see more is, ‘This is the kind of thing we’re going to do, this is our strategy as a broader sort of metadocument,’” he says.

Anecdotally, experts say planning often focuses more directly on finances today than it did a decade or two ago. The stakes also seem higher.

The fixation on solving financial problems through revenue generation has grown, says McGuinness, senior fellow at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. So has a need for more innovation and a dedication to diversity and inclusion.

Not everyone agrees on whether the field has experienced fundamental changes, evolution or is simply putting a different wrapper on old practices.

“I don’t detect anything that would say there is great evolution in the idea of strategic planning,” says Jones, NCHEMS president emeritus. “There are not a lot of folks who do it well, but I don’t think that it’s a field that has technically or philosophically evolved very much.”

At institutions with a long history of dysfunction, it remains incredibly difficult to convince people to work together effectively.

“Some institutions just want our help to get the process focused on data, rather than

politics,” Stevens says. “If you don’t have good leadership from the institution, you haven’t explained the governance structure, you’re going to divert to political negotiations.” ■



# Is Strategic Planning Worth the Effort?

It would be virtually impossible to read a random assortment of strategic plans and emerge without criticism.

The same amorphous concepts surface with alarming regularity: excellence, global education, experiential learning. Even when the terms are well defined by specific goals, they appear frequently enough to bring up the question of how their inclusion is anything other than blindly following the pack.

"A lot of the plans that we see are things we would categorize neither as strategic nor as plans," says Strauss, principal at Art & Science Group.

Often, plans amount to a simple idea, Strauss says. By the year 2025 or 2030, a college will be healthy, wealthy and wise.

"Often, they are missing strategies entirely for what is going to make us healthy, wealthy and wise," Strauss says. "It's just an objective."

Ask faculty members about strategic planning, and the criticisms only grow.

"If they have a bad name, it's because so many strategic planning exercises have been transparently a waste of time," says Morpew. "They're either a waste of time because there clearly is no chance for the faculty or staff—or name a stakeholder group—to provide input, or clearly there is no expectation that the leaders of the organization will actually use the document."

Much of the cynicism about plans is warranted, Morpew says. College presidents like to use their strategic plans to support decisions they make. So do deans. But academics observe that plans are often written to allow those leaders to justify many different decisions.

"They're useful when you want to use them for substantiating some kind of decision you made," Morpew says.

More than one observer has noted that many colleges' strategic plans read like wish lists, convoluted statements of values or compilations of jargon. They rarely if ever spell out hard decisions like cuts to operations or academics in order to fund new, important areas. All they do is call for additive growth.

The result is plans that attempt to fund all priorities at the expense of prioritizing anything.

Viewing strategic plans through such a negative lens can be alarming, because planning is an expensive and time-consuming process. Institutions frequently bring in consultants for assistance, and they dedicate huge chunks of time and energy from numerous departments. Imagine if those resources could be redirected from arguing over a direction toward actually moving in that direction.

Critics of strategic planning often cite Robert Birnbaum's 2000 book, *Management Fads in Higher Education*. A clear pattern has been established, they say. An idea lives in the business world for 30 or more years, the business world starts to abandon it and then higher ed adopts it.

Most of the criticisms contain much more than a kernel of truth. But they also fail to take the entire picture into account.

Remember the context in which planning takes place. Simply put, it would be catastrophic for most college presidents to say their institutions do not have a strategic plan. Not only would they be remarkably out of step with expectations, they would likely be inviting scrutiny from accreditors.

Colleges and universities are essentially required to do strategic planning. They may as well make the best of it.

And in reality, higher education is not the only sector that continues to pursue strategic planning. Businesses still do their own versions.

Strategic planning processes are arguably more important in the higher education sector than in the top-down world of corporate America. Higher education has its tradition of shared governance, which requires some sort of mechanism for listening to different stakeholders and building consensus.

In many cases, the real value of a strategic plan for a college or university isn't the document itself. It's the process used to develop the document, all of the mechanisms that grow up to support it, and the shared ideals it represents.

Morphew's perspective on strategic planning has changed since he became a dean, he says. People feel more comfortable, even safer, working in organizations where they can clearly see a plan for the future and develop an idea of how their efforts contribute to that plan.

"From a symbolic perspective and a human resources perspective, it is an opportunity to explain your message and feed your strategy in parts of the organization you haven't before," Morphew says. "I think those can be powerful things if done right."

Further, criticizing plans for being too similar might be unfair in some cases. Should two regional public colleges in different states produce plans that are drastically different if both fill a similar niche as urban universities in states with larger, better-recognized flagship universities? Can multiple liberal arts colleges find success by pursuing common strategies like emphasizing careers and

adding signature experiences to attract students—even if those strategies come to be adopted widely enough that they can accurately be described as fads?

The answer may be yes in many cases. The American higher education sector is experiencing downward pressure, but it remains large, with enough space for multiple institutions to fill some niches.

Inevitably, though, problems will arise if too many institutions roll out cookie-cutter strategies. Colleges and universities have to take a hard look in the mirror, decide what they value and find a way to match their internal hopes with external expectations.

“Because of the shifting financial dynamics and investment dynamics and demographics, these institutions really need to have focus moving forward,” says RJ Valentino, president of the Napa Group, a consulting firm working with education, business and nonprofit organizations. “They really need to be thinking about the expectations from their markets, which need to be their students and their parents and their external partners.”

The critical challenge for any college or university is building a planning process enabling it to address both its own unique challenges and the changes sweeping across higher education more broadly. The right process can appeal to higher education's tradition of shared governance, nudge disparate constituencies to take action and strengthen a college or university for the future. ■

## Sources

Lisa Alvarez-Cohen, vice provost for academic planning, University of California, Berkeley

Christopher Ames, president, Sage Colleges

Kimberly Beatty, chancellor, Metropolitan Community College

Neeli Bendapudi, president, University of Louisville

David Byelich, assistant vice president and director of the office of planning and budgets, Michigan State University

Carol Christ, chancellor, University of California, Berkeley

Michael Christakis, vice president for student affairs, public service professor, State University of New York University at Albany

Shirley M. Collado, president, Ithaca College

Rob Connelly, trustee, Sinclair Community College

Jennifer deCoste, vice president for strategy, Credo

Persis Drell, provost, Stanford University

Judith S. Eaton, president, Council for Higher Education Accreditation

Joanna Ellis-Monaghan, chair of the mathematics and statistics department, professor of mathematics and statistics, Saint Michael's College

Thomas F. Flynn, president, Alvernia University

Richard Freeland, president emeritus, Northeastern University; former Massachusetts higher education commissioner; senior consultant, Maguire Associates

James T. Harris, president, University of San Diego

Ryan Hays, executive vice president and president's chief of staff, University of Cincinnati

Donald E. Heller, provost and vice president of academic affairs, University of San Francisco

James Herbert, president, University of New England

Catharine Bond Hill, managing director, Ithaca S+R

Steven L. Johnson, president and CEO, Sinclair Community College

Dennis Jones, president emeritus, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

Timothy L. Killeen, president, University of Illinois System

Dr. Stephen Klasko, president, Thomas Jefferson University; CEO, Jefferson Health

Thomas Kline, vice president for institutional advancement, Carthage College

Anthony Knerr, managing director, AKA Strategy

Martin Kurzweil, director of the educational transformation program, Ithaca S+R

Jason Lane, associate professor and interim dean of the School of Education, State University of New York University at Albany

David Leebron, president, Rice University

Mark Lubkowitz, professor of biology, Saint Michael's College

Gail Marsh, chief strategy officer, Ohio State University

# Sources

Peter McCaffery, professor emeritus at London Metropolitan University; education leadership consultant

Alexander C. McCormick, associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies, Indiana University in Bloomington; director of the National Survey of Student Engagement

Aims McGuinness, senior fellow, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

Bruce McPheron, executive vice president and provost, Ohio State University

Mara Hermano, vice president, integrated planning, Rhode Island School of Design

Jill Millard, associate vice president, planning and institutional effectiveness, South Piedmont Community College

Will Miller, assistant vice president of campus adoption, Campus Labs

Marie Lynn Miranda, provost, Rice University

Sally Moomaw, associate professor of early childhood education and former faculty chair, University of Cincinnati

Christopher Morpew, dean, Johns Hopkins School of Education

John J. Neuhauser, former president, Saint Michael's College

Risa Palm, provost, Georgia State University

Thomas A. Parham, president, California State University, Dominguez Hills

Elizabeth Paul, president, Capital University

Daniel R. Porterfield, president and CEO, Aspen Institute; former president, Franklin & Marshall College

Staci Provezis, associate provost for academic effectiveness, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Patrick Sanaghan, president, the Sanaghan Group

Nicholas Santilli, lead facilitator, the Society for College and University Planning

Lorraine Sterritt, president, Saint Michael's College

John Stevens, founder and president, Stevens Strategy

David Strauss, principal, Art & Science Group

John Swallow, president, Carthage College

Webster Thompson, executive vice president, business development, Watermark

Dr. Mark Tykocinski, provost, executive vice president of academic affairs, medical college dean, Thomas Jefferson University

RJ Valentino, president, Napa Group

Susan L. Washburn, chair of the Board of Trustees, Franklin & Marshall College

Walter Wendler, president, West Texas A&M University

Jennifer Widom, dean of the School of Engineering, professor in computer science, professor of electrical engineering, Stanford University

Nancy Zimpher, former chancellor, State University of New York; former president, University of Cincinnati



## Additional Reading

- Addie, Jean-Paul D., "Urban(izing) University Strategic Planning: An Analysis of London and New York City," *Urban Affairs Review* (January 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087417753080>.
- Aleong, Chandra, "Strategy: What Universities Can Learn From Corporate Success Stories," *Contemporary Issues in Education Research (CIER)* 11, no. 2 (March 2018): 55–64. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1175166.pdf>.
- Bell, Judith, Bernard T. Harrison, eds., *Vision and Values in Managing Education: Successful Leadership Principles and Practice*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351041508>.
- Blackwell, Mark, Jean McGivney-Burelle, Guy Colarulli, James Shattuck and Caryn Christensen, "One University's Approach to Engaged Learning across the Curriculum." *Liberal Education* 104, no. 1 (Winter 2018). <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2018/winter/blackwell>.
- Bryson, John M., *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, 4th ed. Bryson on Strategic Planning 1 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- Bryson, John M., Lauren Hamilton Edwards and David M. Van Slyke, "Getting Strategic about Strategic Planning Research." *Public Management Review* 20, no. 3 (March 2018): 317–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1285111>.
- Felix, Eric R., and Marlon Fernandez Castro, "Planning as Strategy for Improving Black and Latinx Student Equity: Lessons from Nine California Community Colleges," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 26 (April 2018): 56. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3223>.
- Fisher, N. I., "Stakeholder Value as an Organizing Principle for Strategic Planning," *Journal of Creating Value* 4, no. 1 (May 2018): 168–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2394964318771251>.
- Gagliardi, Jonathan, Lorelle Espinosa, Jonathan Turk and Morgan Taylor, "American College President Study 2017," American Council on Education, June 20, 2017.
- Hazelkorn, Ellen, ed. "Understanding the Influence and Impact of Rankings on Higher Education, Policy and Society," in *Global Rankings and the Geopolitics of Higher Education*. (London, New York: Routledge, 2017).
- Hodges, Dawn Z. "The Reflective Leader: The Role of Assessment in Strategic Planning." *Dean and Provost* 19, no. 10 (June 2018): 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dap.30460>.
- Keller, George, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
- Levy, Joseph, Richard Hess, and Amanda Thomas, "Student Affairs Assessment & Accreditation: History, Expectations, and Implications." *The Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (August 2018): 4284.
- Marshall, Stephen James, "Strategic Planning as Sense-Making," in *Shaping the University of the Future: Using Technology to Catalyse Change in University Learning and Teaching*, edited by Stephen James Marshall. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018): 413–36. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7620-6\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7620-6_19).

## Additional Reading

- Mintzberg, Henry, "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning," *Harvard Business Review*, February 1994.
- Mintzberg, Henry. *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning: Reconceiving Roles for Planning, Plans, Planners*. (New York, Toronto: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada, 1994.)
- Morphew, C. C., Fumasoli, T. & Stensaker, B., "Changing missions? How the strategic plans of research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North America balance competing identities." *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 6. Published ahead of print, August 11, 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1214697>.
- Morrill, Richard L., *Strategic Leadership: Integrating Strategy and Leadership in Colleges and Universities*. ACE/Praeger Series on Higher Education. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007.)
- Moss, Mike, James Young, Susan Rogers, David Baker and Margaret Baker, "Succeeding at Planning: Results from the 2015 Survey of Higher Ed Leaders," Society for College and University Planning, October 2015. <https://www.scup.org/page/resources/survey/2015>.
- "NACUBO-Commonfund Study of Endowments 2017," National Association of College and University Business Officers, January 25, 2018. <https://www.nacubo.org/research/2018/nacubo-commonfund-study-of-endowments>.
- Perry, Daniel, and Barbara Breier, "Planning for a Change: Transforming the Fundraising Capacity of the University in Partnership with the Development Foundation," *Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing* 2, no. 4 (Spring 2018).
- Sharpe, Rhona, "Aligning Corporate and Financial Plans in Teaching Intensive Universities," *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (April 2018): 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2017.1386245>.
- Temple, P., "Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education, by George Keller (1983)," *Higher Education Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (April 2018): 170–177. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12160>.
- "The Power of Strategic Thinking." AGB, April 3, 2012. <https://www.agb.org/trusteeship/2012/3/power-strategic-thinking>.
- Usoh, E. J., D. Ratu, A. Manongko, J. Taroreh and G. Preston, "Strategic Planning towards a World-Class University." *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering* 306 (February 2018): 012035. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/306/1/012035>.
- Zapata, Marisa, Stephen Percy and Sona Karentz Andrews. "Strategic Planning to Advance Equity on Campus: A Case Study at Portland State University." *Metropolitan Universities* 29, no. 1 (February 15, 2018): 28–45. <https://doi.org/10.18060/22179>.

# About the Author

Rick Seltzer, reporter, covers business and management for *Inside Higher Ed*. He joined the publication in 2016 after working as a money and general-assignment reporter for *The Baltimore Business Journal*. Previously, he was a business reporter for *The Bloomington Herald-Times*, and he covered small business and health care for the *Central New York Business Journal*. Rick, a native of south central Pennsylvania, started his career as a local beat reporter for *The Harrisburg Patriot-News*. He graduated from Syracuse University in 2008 after interning at the *Patriot-News* and *The Syracuse Post-Standard*.



## About *Inside Higher Ed*

*Inside Higher Ed* is the leading digital media company serving the higher education space. Since our founding in 2004, our publication has become the trusted, go-to source of online news, thought leadership and opinion over the last decade.

Our mission is to serve the entire higher education ecosystem—individuals, institutions, corporations and nonprofits—with the best editorial and marketing solutions in our space. As a truly mission-driven organization, we are proud to have earned the trust and loyalty of our readers by speaking as a fiercely independent voice on the pressing issues of the day.

To learn more about Inside Higher Ed, please visit [insidehighered.com](https://www.insidehighered.com).

**INSIDE**  
HIGHER ED



Inside Higher Ed

1150 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20036

[insidehighered.com](http://insidehighered.com)

Copyright © 2018 Inside Higher Ed. All rights reserved.

To purchase reprints, visit [insidehighered.com/store](http://insidehighered.com/store)