



# Strategic Planning: Executive Briefing

Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

*Leaders of academic institutions continuously face a changing environment and demands from stakeholders – changing demographics of students, increasing costs, changes in funding, new technologies, demands for diversity, competition for students and resources, demands for accountability, needs for new curricula, and new ways of delivering higher education, among others.*

*It is often the case that strategic planning is not viewed with favor by university faculty and staff. This is, in part, because many newly assigned leaders begin their tenure by initiating a strategic planning process, ignoring the reality that a similar process likely had been conducted by a predecessor, often the immediate past predecessor. Strategic planning exercises consume significant effort, provoke disagreements over goals and methods, and are often viewed as the new administration's effort to impose an agenda. These factors can contribute to failure to build the consensus necessary for effective implementation of the plan.*

*It is critical to understand that a strategic plan is not a tactical document that prescribes daily financial, business, or marketing decisions; it should be an overarching statement of purpose and an approach for achieving that purpose; it should be practical and realizable, not a wish list or collection of platitudes and clichés.*

*The true value of strategic planning is in the intellectual process, engagement of key constituents in dialogue, and the construction of a consensus for the long term.*

## Laying the Foundations

Before initiating any planning, it is helpful to hold significant discussion with the organization's stakeholders to make the case for and build, to the extent possible, agreement to move forward with the process. A starting point for the conversation could be a quick review of the previous strategic plan and a decision whether a new plan, or merely an updating exercise, is required.

It is also important to recognize that strategic planning is a specialized discipline (with experts in that area of scholarship), and few academic leaders or faculty members are prepared to lead an effective strategic planning exercise. Efforts led by amateurs typically result in confusion, frustration, and, all too often, failure. A wise leader will engage the services of a seasoned strategic planner or facilitator and work with that individual throughout the process.

Once the commitment is made and a facilitator is engaged, a committee of faculty and appropriate staff should be appointed. Individuals with knowledge of budgets, facilities, and other areas may be asked to serve as *ex officio* members. It can be helpful to include external constituents, especially in units where

professional certifications and financial support for programs or service functions, e.g., medical clinics, are involved.

The results of these discussions can be articulated and agreed upon in a number of ways, producing various statements that can be the basis for the strategic plan.

## Vision statement and mission statement

These commonly go together.

*Vision statement:* This focuses on the future; it states a vision of what the organization will look like, what it wants to be, hopes to achieve in the long term. It should be realizable, clear, and general enough to suggest actions to take. This should be short and not more than one sentence.

*Mission statement:* This states the institution's purpose, its reason for being. It answers the questions, Why do we exist? Whom do we serve? What do we produce? How do we operate? The less generic and cliché-ridden and the more concrete, the better. This should be about a paragraph, but no more than one page in length.





“ VISION, MISSION AND VALUES  
SAY WHO THE ORGANIZATION  
IS, WHAT IT IS ABOUT, AND  
WHERE IT WANTS TO GO.

*Core values:* These state the organization’s values; they shape (or reflect) the culture, climate, standards, and guiding principles of the organization. They are what you believe is right or wrong for the organization’s activities.

Vision, mission, and values together say who the organization is, what it is about, and where it wants to go. But they do not say how in an actionable form.

## Strategies

These are broad, far reaching, and long term, and begin to break the vision and mission into manageable elements. Strategies are intermediate between the vision, mission, values, and the *tactics, goals, objectives,* and *actions* that enable you to achieve your vision and succeed in your mission.

## Tactics

Tactics enable you to enact your strategies. These break up the strategies into more manageable actionable plans that are aligned with the organization’s vision, mission, and values. Often, the strategic planning group should involve specific subunits of the organization in forming these tactical and more discrete elements of the strategic plan.

## Goals and objectives

These commonly go together and should align with implementation of tactics. (The two terms are often used synonymously or interchanged.)

*Goals* are general statements that describe what an organization wants to achieve over the long term; there are aligned closely to the vision and mission statements. They are more broad, general, and abstract than objectives.

*Objectives* are short term, narrow, and specific; they are the result of actions undertaken to achieve a goal. , measurable, and achievable. They are SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound). (See also

“Setting Goals—Quick Tips.” Online: <https://ethicscenter.csl.illinois.edu/files/2018/05/Strategic-Planning-Quick-Tips-Letter-2.pdf>

Breaking the tactics into these lower-level elements helps to avoid the “planning fallacy” of not appreciating the complexity of higher-level planning needed to realize the plan’s goals. Often, the strategic planning group will involve specific subunits of the organization in forming these tactical and more discrete elements of the strategic plan. It is a mistake to stop the strategic planning process before this stage, as here is where the planning process encounters the reality of its implementation.

It is very important that tactics, goals, and objectives align with strategies—for example, “The department will hire in the emerging area of . . . so we can . . .” aligns the hiring decision to unit strategy. The goal, “The department will hire Professor Jones from XYZ University,” when Jones researches in the emerging area and can contribute to the mission of the unit, is a goal that aligns with the strategic plan. However, hiring Jones because her research is often cited and XYZ is a prestigious university does not align with strategic planning.

## Actions

Essential to the planning process is identifying and evaluating possible actions. These actions will realize the vision, mission, strategies, and tactics, goals, and objectives of the plan. These are the “what must be done (by whom, when, where, how)” elements. Do they maximize strengths? Address? Eliminate threats? Confront problems? Realize opportunities?

Actions should be measurable to determine if they are being achieved. You should be able to know when an action has succeeded.

## Levels of planning

It is important to emphasize that while there are many ways of naming the parts of a strategic planning process, it is most important to separate the large-scale visions, missions, and strategies from the small-scale tactical goals and objectives. These two levels of the planning process often involve different units of the organization.





Allowing lower-level units to participate in goal formation for the elements of the strategic plan for which they are accountable is a way of obtaining their buy-in and committed participation in the plan. Higher-level people may



*One way to conceptualize the strategic plan is as a pyramid, in which as you move down from the top level, the time-frame shortens and actions become more specific. Each level answers the same questions, in greater or lesser detail, appropriate to that element: Where do we want to be? What are we going to do? Who are we while we are doing it? How are we going to accomplish it?*

not be familiar with the “how to” of executing the plan at that level, lacking expertise and time. As one goes lower in the planning process, the elements become more and more specific, discrete, and actionable. But being too specific in the plan will tie the hands of those charged with execution of the plan.

## Situational Analysis

As part of preparing the strategic plan, the committee should conduct a situational analysis of internal and external environments; this analysis evaluates the organization’s or unit’s present situation – in terms of opportunities, problems, threats, and competitors. It provides input (data) for the strategic planning process and allows the organization to align with a true assessment of the environment.

For *external analysis*: It is important to identify the stakeholders. What are their demographics? What information can we glean from demographic trends already apparent? What services are available? Are alternatives provided? What likely competitors will you face? What new

disruptive innovations (technologies) are emerging? What legal constraints exist?

For *internal analysis*, one identifies core competencies, things that you do better than anyone else, things that are difficult for others to duplicate, things that are of greatest value to stakeholders; as well, honestly assess areas where the organization is not meeting its vision, mission, and strategic outcomes.

For the situational analysis, the planners gather data of all sorts: interviews and focus groups with stakeholders; surveys of faculty, staff, and students; public forums and discussions; questionnaires to key internal leaders; public data gathered from associations, government agencies, consortia, databases, market research, internal performance data, user satisfaction data, and prevailing best practices.

Several common approaches to situational analysis are given in the Appendix.

## Priorities

The actions cannot be done all at once; they must be prioritized and in alignment. Undertaking actions depends on availability of resources, potential risk if not undertaken, support by stakeholders, and degree of impact. Some must be completed before others can be undertaken (for example, building a new high-technology lab before hiring new faculty/researchers).

- Some require immediate action, others distant action.
- Some are easy to achieve, others require long-term time and resources.
- Some have a low or high chance of success.

It must be realized that prioritizing large-scale planning projects is a complex task, which can call for professionally skilled project managers. Widely used to organize, schedule, and coordinate planning are two tools, Gantt charts and PERT (program evaluation review technique) charts.

## The Final Document

The result of the planning process will be a written document can be organized in many ways and contain various elements.



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Statement of strategic intent: This popular concept, suggested by G. Hamel and C.K. Prahalad (1989) is another way of thinking about vision and strategy: A statement of strategic intent gives voice to the organization or unit's overarching ambition. It should be audacious and compelling but credible; it challenges and stretches the organization; it focuses and motivates people, providing the energy for the institution's progress: "We will be ranked in the top 10 in our discipline nationally by . . ." is an example only if the unit is reasonably within reach of that rank, has current faculty, resources, trajectory, and capacity to achieve that rank. A more realistic example of strategic intent could be: "We will increase the diversity of our student population and graduates to reflect the diversity of the population we serve, by using the commonly accepted best practices of our community, as permitted by state and federal law."

Most plans will include:

- Introduction
- Overview/background; need for the plan
- Vision, mission, and values statements
- Statements of strategies
- An implementation plan that includes a system of accountability and for continuous monitoring of the environment

- A means to communicate the plan to stakeholders and gain commitment
- Appendixes (background materials; data; conclusions from SWOT, gap, or PESTLE analyses; resources available; metrics for measuring outcomes of actions)

Although they are likely be revised and rewritten as circumstances change, the plan can also set forth statements outlining

- Tactics
- Goals
- Objectives
- Actions

## What Happens Next

A strategic plan is useful only to the extent that it is truly employed as a guiding document for the unit until changing circumstances or opportunities indicate that the plan is outdated. There is an unfortunate tendency in the academy to view the plan as a completed work that is filed and ignored. It is the responsibility of the unit's leadership to center decisions on priorities and goals established in the plan to the extent possible. Many have found the annual budget review as an opportunity for senior leadership to realistically assess progress because funding allocations generally reflect program directions.

A strategic plan must be realistic, and not ask for too much. If the plan overreaches, you may waste people's time, resources, and effort and impair your ability to advance on other priorities. Don't squander the commitment or buy-in of members of the organization. There should be a real reason for the planning, and a plan for following up on the actions and reporting back on progress at certain points. There should be more results than just the actual exercise. If there is any chance there will be no follow-up at various check-in points, it is best not to start the strategic planning process.

## Useful Resources

Allison, M., & Kaye, J. (2005). *Strategic planning for nonprofit organizations* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.





Grensing-Pophal, L. (2011). *The complete idiot's guide to strategic planning*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Hamel, G., & Prahalad, C. K. (1989, May/June). Strategic intent. *Harvard Business Review*, 63-76.

Hinton, K. E. (2012). *A practical guide to strategic planning in higher education*. Society for College and University Planning. 48 pages. Online: <http://oira.cortland.edu/webpage/planningandassessmentresources/planningresources/SCPGuideonPlanning.pdf>

Matthews, S.A., & Matthews, K.D. (2013). *Crash course in strategic planning*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc.

Sevier, R.A. (2000) *Strategic planning in higher education*. Washington, DC: CASE Books.