

What a President Needs to Know: 10 Keys to Effective Strategic Planning in Higher Education

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Over many years of consulting to colleges and universities, we have facilitated or participated in more than 50 successful strategic planning efforts, but have also seen many instances of strategic plans being produced without ever being implemented. Too often, the plans are written up and published in attractive documents that produce oohs and ahs across the campus. Yet because these plans are not implemented, they don't really lead to improved results.

Now more than ever, higher education needs to be intentional about planning. University leaders must take steps to approach planning in a way that ensures implementation. After reviewing the dialogues we've had with presidents over the years, we have identified the key factors that led to successful implementation of their strategic plans. Here are ten ideas that can help you arrive at a strategic plan that can be successfully translated into action.

Create a highly credible planning task force. It all starts with the group assigned responsibility for carrying out the planning process. We believe the president needs to establish a highly credible planning task force representing the diversity of the institution. It should include faculty, staff, and administrators. The size of the task force is also key. For smaller institutions, the right number is around 15 to 20 -- large enough to distribute the workload but not so large as to make the task force unwieldy. For larger institutions, however, more participants will likely be needed in order to obtain the desired representation and diversity. For instance, a large research university could easily need 30 to 40 members to adequately represent all constituencies.

You need to select individuals who have strong reputations in the campus community, and who are known for their integrity and ability to adopt an institutional perspective. This is extremely important. They must be strong peer influencers, thoroughly familiar with the workings of their institution. We strongly discourage relying on just the usual suspects—those individuals who are always the ones asked to take on important assignments. Make sure that others are included and that the group is diverse demographically (age, race, experience, gender). To ensure balance and perspective, identify both informal leaders and a few critics.

Example: Inviting an Informal Leader

We recently assisted a major university with their planning process. The president had been on board for two years and was ready to embark on a campus-wide planning process—one that would be inclusive and open. However, on this campus there was significant distrust between the administration and the faculty, and little interest among the campus' stakeholders in participating in the planning process.

We posed the following question to key individuals throughout the campus: Who is the most trusted and admired person on campus? Almost to a person they named the provost emeritus, almost 80 years old yet still teaching one class each semester. We met with him and asked him to consider co-chairing the planning task force with the chief business officer serving as the other co-chair. Within a week, 25 highly respected and credible faculty members volunteered to serve on the task force. They

believed that if the provost emeritus was willing to put his reputation on the line, the planning process was going to be worth their effort.

As in this example, we recommend that there be two co-chairs, one respected faculty member and one high-level administrator. This meaningfully symbolizes a collaborative approach from the beginning of the process.

Selecting Task Force Members

It is critical that the process for selecting the members of the planning task force is aligned with the institution's culture. The selected individuals will be responsible for creating the strategic planning process, working with consultants if appropriate or needed, soliciting input from stakeholders, and gathering external information to ensure a well-informed planning process. It is important that campus stakeholders see that their own people are moving the process forward. We rarely encourage the president to make these important decisions without input from others. Look to the cabinet for useful insights about individuals worth considering.

Also, if the institution has standing bodies to represent different constituencies, it usually is desirable to ask for nominations from among those groups. Be clear about how many will be appointed, but ask for more names than are actually needed. This will assist with ensuring appropriate diversity. One cautionary note to consider: If the institution's protocol is to allow the constituent groups to appoint their representatives, it would be unwise to violate that protocol for the planning effort. But make sure that you provide clear criteria for the desired individuals, so that the constituents can make informed selections.

How Board Members Should Be Involved

We used to believe it was advisable to have board representation on the planning task force. It looked good on paper and seemed to give the effort an increased level of importance. In fact it proved to be a disaster. The presence of a board member changes the chemistry of the task force in dramatic ways. There were times when task force members lobbied for the board members' attention to gain support for their program or department. There were other times when the board members dominated the group, sharing their opinions too frequently or too strongly. The other impact that we hadn't anticipated was the way in which the board members' presence altered the tone of the discussion. Too often, staff and faculty participants were reluctant to express their views on sensitive issues in front of board members. Board members need to be involved in the process but not through direct participation as members of the planning task force.

Engage the board strategically. We recall one case at a prestigious university in which the faculty, led by the provost, undertook a planning process. There was some limited involvement of other stakeholders, but it was primarily a faculty plan. We were called in by the board, who shared concerns about the plan – they didn't approve of it, and in fact they wanted to start over! To do this would have been a disaster; it would have been an insult to the faculty who had worked hard to produce the plan and could potentially have raised questions about violating academic freedom.

This situation was a failure on the part of the president. He had not kept the board informed about the planning process. Nor had he discussed with them the emerging themes or the implications of the plan. By the time the board saw the plan, it was too late.

It is critical to keep the board informed throughout the planning process. There should be no surprises. Engage board members early; their perspectives are needed – not to dictate, but to educate campus stakeholders. The planning task force needs to consider what’s important to the board, how the board sees the future of the institution, and the board’s assessment of organizational strengths and weaknesses. It also should be explicitly communicated that, at the end of the day, the board must approve the plan. Therefore, their involvement is critical to the plan’s success.

Also, when the board appears at events facilitated by the planning task force, that sends a very positive message – it both signals the importance of the planning effort, and allows the task force to invite board input in appropriate ways. The board should participate in the various data-gathering activities conducted to collect input from the community. In some cases, it will make sense to tailor specific events for board participation; in others, invite the board to participate with other stakeholders in planning activities.

Include the cabinet. Most chief financial officers are deeply interested in planning because they recognize the importance of creating the future rather than reacting to it. Involve the CFO from the outset to ensure that financial information is appropriately considered before important decisions are made. Too often, CFOs are invited to participate near the end of the planning process, once enthusiasm has already been built up about the various possibilities that have been explored. The problem with involving the CFO so late in the process is that this enthusiasm will dissipate quickly when the CFO enters the room and shares the financial realities for the institution.

Because it’s important to encourage broad participation in the planning task force, it’s likely that the task force will include individuals who do not possess a deep understanding of the institution’s finances. Nearly everyone wants another beautiful building on the campus, but not everyone will be familiar with the institution’s debt capacity, its current deferred maintenance backlog, sustainability considerations related to the facility, or how much the facility will cost to maintain and operate. When you involve the CFO from the beginning, they are in the best position to educate the other members of the task force about the financial realities and the implications of potential decisions.

The other reason it’s important to engage key members of the cabinet throughout the process is that they will be the ones responsible for implementing the plan. The last thing you want to do is have an institutional planning group create a plan that is then “handed over” to the cabinet for implementation. When there is minimal buy-in from the cabinet, the plan will produce minimal results. It doesn’t make sense to create plans for other people to implement; those responsible for implementation need to feel connected to the plan and be able to influence (though not control) its final shape.

Limit strategic priorities. A common mistake is for an institution to attempt to be all things to all people, both internally and externally. In the first case, a plan may be written so broadly that it provides no guidance for resource allocation. In some cases, presidents encourage this because they believe it will make them popular with the various campus constituencies. Or they believe it will give them maximum flexibility to pursue any initiative because whatever initiative they pursue will support some objective in the strategic plan. However, when an institution fails to limit strategic priorities and gives everything equal weight—research excellence, undergraduate experience, community development, athletics success, administrative efficiency, campus beautification, information technology, graduate

education, etc.,—this may ensure that all constituents will be pleased with the plan, but it will also ensure that the plan cannot be adequately resourced.

5. Arrive at a focused mission. Apart from focusing on pleasing everyone internally, some institutions establish a mission that encourages them to be all things to all people, externally. As in the previous example, this results in a mission that offers no guidance toward which opportunities to pursue or not pursue, or how to allocate resources. Admittedly, some public institutions have a very broad mission assigned to them, but even the largest research universities must make choices. For example, no institution offers degrees in every discipline; not every institution seeks athletic excellence at the Division I level; and not every institution offers every degree program online. Successful institutions have made careful choices about what initiatives they will and won't undertake. This selectivity is especially critical in today's economic environment, in which the cost of being all things to all people is prohibitive.

Example 1: An Unhelpful Mission Statement

Here is an example of a mission statement that lacks clarity and fails to provide sufficient guidance to the institution:

“We are a diverse community of learners committed to student success. Anonymous University is accredited as a comprehensive university offering quality higher education opportunities in a collegial and open environment. Anonymous University pursues academic excellence, research, community engagement and life-long learning. Anonymous University is dedicated to improving the quality of life while preserving and promoting the unique cultural heritage of the region.”

Given its vagueness, this mission statement could apply to almost any comprehensive university. There is nothing in the statement that makes the mission unique to this particular institution. This lack of clarity also means that nearly any initiative can be rationalized as supporting the institution's mission. In a time when resources are limited, this mission statement will not support the establishment of clear priorities.

Example 2: A Targeted Mission Statement

Here is an example of a mission statement (in this case, from the University of Idaho- Idaho Falls) that can provide clear direction to an institution:

“The University of Idaho in Idaho Falls delivers advanced education and research programs addressing state and national energy needs in partnership with the Idaho National Laboratory, industry, and other universities.”

Though succinct, this mission clearly conveys what the institution is about and how it will achieve its objectives.

If You Inherit a Broad Mission

If a broad mission has been imposed on an institution, it would be desirable to craft a more meaningful mission statement specifically to guide the planning effort. This should be undertaken as part of the overall planning process and, because of its critical importance in influencing the plans, both the president and the board must have direct involvement in this effort.

- **Demonstrate your personal commitment to the process.** The president need to be seen as supporting but not controlling the planning process – and this support needs to be visible (e.g., participating in planning meetings on campus, talking about the importance of the process to stakeholders, alumni, community leaders, etc.). The president’s direct participation can also help resolve difficult issues and facilitate keeping the planning process on track. We saw the benefit of this firsthand during a recent engagement.

Due to the size of the institution and its multi-campus structure, we saw an unusually large planning task force. Approximately 70 individuals, representing the main campus and the various satellite locations, were conducting the strategic planning process with periodic assistance from us. During one of the early task force meetings, a faculty member raised a very sensitive issue regarding the relative independence of the satellite operations. This had been a longstanding thorny issue that never had been addressed to the satisfaction of the respective parties. When it surfaced during the meeting, the president—who was relatively new to the institution—took the floor and tackled the issue head on. He spoke clearly and directly about the challenge, the difficulties it had created, and the need to address it to ensure that it did not derail the planning effort. He took ownership of the issue and accepted responsibility for resolving it by working directly with the satellite campus leaders—all of whom were present. That demonstration of leadership proved crucial to the planning effort. Although the matter was not resolved at that moment, no one present doubted that it would be appropriately addressed. Once the president returned to his seat, the meeting resumed and produced excellent outcomes. It’s unlikely that this would have been accomplished had he not been attending the meeting.

Presidents should meet with the planning task force co-chairs periodically to ensure that they remain informed of progress and also to gain a sense of the pulse of the group. Without this sort of engagement, several things can happen. First, the president will not have firsthand information with which to inform the board of progress. Additionally, though presidents shouldn't seek to control the process, it's appropriate for them to have input to the process. The only reasonable way to accomplish this is through direct participation. Sending messages through others can lead to confusion and cause individuals to question whether the views expressed really are those of the president and not the messenger. The president's direct involvement also models participation and inclusiveness.

• **Pay attention to operational planning.** In order to serve as the road map to the achievement of the institution's vision, the strategic plan must guide the way in which resources are allocated and utilized. This cannot be accomplished unless there is explicit attention to ensuring that operational plans support the strategic plan. Not every dollar spent on a campus can be tied directly to the strategic plan, but effective institutions ensure that the operational investments being made link at least indirectly to strategic priorities. In no case would it ever be appropriate to consume resources in activities that contradict the strategic plan. For example, if a residential liberal arts college establishes that the place-bound educational experience is of paramount importance, no department should be expending resources to develop online educational opportunities.

The importance of the connection between strategic and operational planning was reinforced for one of the authors when he was employed by a research university. The university had invested a huge amount of time and effort to develop a five-year strategic plan. The plan was announced to the community with much fanfare and there was a lot of enthusiasm to move forward. However, the enthusiasm quickly turned to frustration when the state imposed a double-digit budget cut midway through the first year of the plan.

The president called a campus-wide meeting at which he planned to address the situation and advise the community as to how the institution would respond to the budget cut. Almost before he could begin speaking a faculty member verbalized his frustration about all the effort that had gone into the development of a plan that they now could not afford to implement. The president acknowledged his own frustration regarding the reduced resources but challenged the suggestion that they could not afford to implement the plan.

He explained that the planning process had intentionally ranked every program and activity in order of importance to the institution. This was done to highlight the priority areas for additional resources and identify those areas that would experience resource cuts or closure to provide resources for redeployment. He also pointed out that results of the planning effort would be used to direct even deeper cuts from the programs at the bottom of the list. This was necessary to ensure that the university could protect and support the priority areas.

The president explained how operational plans would have to be revised to ensure that progress could be made on the priorities established in the strategic plan. Because the planning process had included considering how the strategic plan would be put into operation, the goals established in the plan were still achieved, though this did take longer than the intended five years.

It is crucial to have processes in place to consider operational plans and ensure that they tie directly or indirectly to the strategic plan.

• **Utilize external consultants effectively.** We are strong supporters of the use of consultants; it's how we make a living. However, selecting a consultant requires care and due diligence. The consultant must represent a good fit with the institution's culture. Both the president and the co-chairs of the planning task force should be involved in the selection, and all parties should be comfortable with the individuals selected. In all likelihood, the president will not have frequent contact with the consultant. Instead, it will be the planning task force co-chairs who work regularly with the consultant. Therefore, they need to feel comfortable reaching out to the consultant between visits. They also need to be able to rely on the consultant responding in a timely manner when issues surface.

In addition to fit and responsiveness, the consultants must demonstrate their willingness to invest the effort to gain a deep understanding of the institution and its particular culture. Which are the most important constituents? How has the mission evolved over time? What difficult issues are being faced today? The answers to these and other questions should shape the approach the consultant takes while assisting the institution. Make sure that the consultant is ready to adapt their process to your institution, rather than expecting your institution to adapt to their process.

Finally, define an appropriate role for the consultant. Consultants should guide the process and assist with the planning effort; they should not control it nor be viewed as the owners of the process. The ownership of the planning process clearly should rest with the designated campus leaders and the team supporting them. Nor should the consultants serve as the face of the planning effort, with progress suspended once they depart campus. The appropriate role for consultants is building organizational capacity. They should teach the planning task force how to engage the community, and then step out of the way to enable the task force members to conduct the various planning activities. They should re-engage at specific points in the process while also providing background support. Unless you are prepared to employ the consultants on a permanent basis—or are willing to live with a plan that doesn't get implemented—the champion for the planning effort needs to be someone internal.

• **Maintain a commitment to transparency.** When an institution has a high level of trust, it can do many things even with limited resources. In an environment of trust, stakeholders are more willing to take intelligent risks, put their personal agendas on hold in service of the institution, share decision-making appropriately, and assume the best intentions of others. Trust is essential to the successful implementation of the strategic plan.

Institutional trust can be built through a collaborative and open planning process. A key goal in the strategic planning process should be to meaningfully involve stakeholders so that they own the implementation of the plan. When we work with an institution, one of the first things we do is an informal assessment of the level of trust on the campus. This is rather easy to do through informal conversations and, in some situations, a brief survey. This assessment tells us how difficult the planning process will be, even before the process begins.

Air Difficult Issues

A robust planning process will unearth some institutional challenges and problems. Sometimes the data that are uncovered represent sensitive issues. For example, the organization may operate in silos with little meaningful collaboration. There could be poor communication between faculty and cabinet. Or adjuncts may feel disconnected from the campus community. The president must ensure that the difficult data that are collected see the light of day. Having the courage to name these challenges

is the first step toward solving them.

Transparency is critical. In most cases, people already know what the challenges are. Unfortunately, the conversation about these issues is mostly underground where it can take on a life of its own. A president must surface these real issues and work with others to address them.

Annual Progress Reports

Once the goals have been established and implementation is underway, it's important to have annual progress reports. We have seen cases in which the president was reluctant to report the progress towards articulated goals because there wasn't much accomplished in a given year. This reluctance is not productive. In simple terms, the president must tell the truth. Let people know what happened and what has not yet been achieved. Indicate what will be done to make up lost ground, if possible, or how things will be adjusted if necessary. Highlight what is being learned about the plan's implementation.

For example, one strategic goal might be improved campus communication. After the first year, a survey might indicate that communication remains a problem. Don't hide that data. Instead, share the results with stakeholders and use that as an opportunity to discuss ideas on how to further improve communication.

• **Assign responsibility for measurable goals.** One of the things that causes plans to fail in implementation is a lack of accountability. Over the years we've come to believe that shared responsibility is no responsibility. If an individual champion is not identified for each goal, it will be too easy for individuals to assume that someone else is taking care of it. Each goal needs to be part of someone's assigned portfolio—usually a cabinet member's. It is up to that person to pay attention to the goal and ensure that progress is being made. The president's responsibility is to be aware of each goal and to establish an expectation of progress reports from the appropriate cabinet member.

We're currently working with an institution that is about to begin developing a five-year strategic plan. One of the first steps we've undertaken is an examination of the outcomes of the previous plan. In reviewing the plan, which is well written and has an appropriate number of strategic themes with corresponding goals, we noticed that only two goal areas had established metrics: enrollment and study abroad participation. Not surprisingly, these were the only goals that actually had been achieved. Everyone voiced confidence that significant progress had been made on the other goals, but no one was able to prove that this was the case. The only time you can be certain that strategic goals have been achieved is when those goals have predefined metrics.

Progress cannot be assessed unless the goal is stated in measurable terms.

Consider these two goals:

- To be among the strongest research universities in the country.
- To be among the top 25 research universities, as measured by the National Science Foundation's research and development rankings.

Both of these goals are likely to drive the same behavior on campus, but only one of these offers a way to measure its success. With the type of specificity shown in the second example, the institution can track its progress over time as the strategic plan is implemented. Most importantly, if assessment demonstrates that progress is lagging, then attention can be paid to the initiative to bring it back on track.

Planning is difficult work and, when done well, it takes time and effort. But a successful effort can transform a campus and positively affect the lives of students, faculty, and staff, as well as the community. Use the 10 keys in this paper to increase the likelihood of a successful effort and to ensure that your planning process produces a strategic plan that will not just sit on a shelf but that will drive meaningful, impactful, and measurable action on your campus.