

Strategic Planning: A Critical Tool for Higher Education

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Colleges and universities worldwide face unprecedented challenges. Our leaders are being asked to achieve high quality, innovate, operate

with efficiency and effectiveness, graduate increasing numbers of students, and make better use of technology—and to do so in a way that will successfully address work force and civic leadership needs of today and tomorrow. In earlier years the necessary institutional progress could be achieved through modest changes and localized improvement initiatives scattered throughout an institution. Today, the scope and magnitude of institutional needs requires more comprehensive, systematic and transformational approaches to organizational design, planning, and improvement—and perhaps most of all—knowledgeable, dedicated and skilled leaders to guide these efforts.

The key question today has become: In what do we seek to excel, for whom, and how?

Of these many needs, none is more basic than planning. There are any number of approaches and templates available¹. In all such models, sound planning begins with establishing clarity and consensus on organizational purposes, aspirations, goals and strategies. It is also vital to determine how these fit with the directions and vision of the larger institution.

Decisions about purposes and plans cannot be solely driven by the perspectives of faculty and staff, as may once have been possible. Few institutions can afford to be all things to all people. The key question today has become: In what do we seek to excel, for whom, and how? Scarcity of resources, shifting demands, and pressures for greater institutional accountability point to the critical need to take account of organizational and environmental constraints, opportunities, threats, and facilitators, available resources, and also, importantly, stakeholder needs and expectations. An essential foundational step in the planning process, then, is a data-based and thoughtful dialogue within the institu-

tion about what is the most appropriate focus for the organization. In what ways will the institution seek to be distinctive from others, how will this distinctiveness be defined, and what is necessary to realize this vision. Specific questions to consider include:

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- What is the purpose of our organization (institution/department)?
- How is it distinctive when compared to other departments within this institution, or to departments at other institutions?
- Thinking about the department in 4-5 years, what should be its defining characteristics?
- If you were successful in creating the department you envision, what would it look like?
- What is required to fulfill these aspirations?
- What are the 3-5 most important goals that need to be pursued by the department during the next two years in order to advance the department toward its five-year aspirations?
- How can we organize ourselves to most effectively and efficiently pursue these goals?
- How will we measure and monitor our progress, and make ourselves accountable for progress?

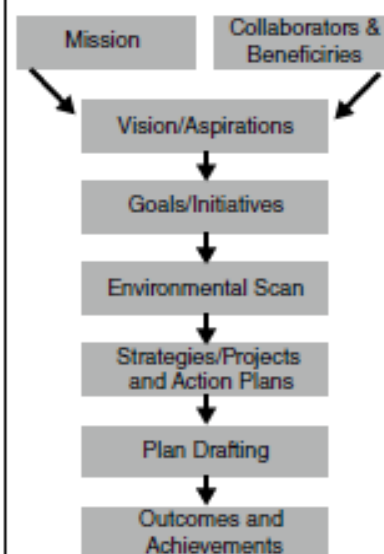
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The answers to the question must be conceptual and practical. They must

engage and energize high-level faculty and staff throughout the institution, and they must identify lofty aspirations on the one hand, and also be a useful guide to the day-to-day activities of all faculty and staff.

Excellence in higher education seldom results by simply collecting talented faculty, staff and students to pursue their own individual goals. Rather, excellence is far more predictable when faculty, staff and students share a common vision of where they are headed, see opportunities that can derive from working together, and become committed to collaboration in pursuit of common aspirations. Achieving these outcomes requires leaders who are adept at engaging their colleagues in envisioning and creating a collective future, who know how to make good use of planning models to facilitate but not overly script or stifle the creative energies of colleagues, who can inspire their colleagues to create institutions, organizations, and programs that become far more than would be possible with only the simple sum of their individual talents.

Elements of Strategic Plan



From: Tromp, S. A., Ruben, B. D. Strategic Planning in Higher Education (SPHE) Washington, DC: National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2010, p. 9.

¹ One such model that has been developed for use within college and university contexts is *Strategic Planning in Higher Education: A Leader's Guide*, by Sherrie Tromp and Brent Ruben, published by the National Association of College and University Business Officers, Washington, D.C., in 2010.