# A Ten-Step Approach to Refreshing Strategic Plans Within Higher Education

## James Kirby Easterling, Eastern Kentucky University
## Kristen B. Wilson, Eastern Kentucky University

## Abstract

Academic institutions, ranging from for-profit companies to non-profit organizations like hospitals and public universities, periodically engage in crafting strategic plans. These plans guide organizations towards their long-term objectives and typically have a duration of one to five years. This research paper primarily focuses on strategic planning for academic units within comprehensive university systems but is applicable to any academic or staff unit in higher education.

The paper emphasizes the importance of alignment with the university's overall strategic plan, which ensures that academic units pursue goals consistent with the institution's vision. A diverse strategic planning committee, comprising faculty and staff from different sub-departments and experience levels, is recommended to facilitate comprehensive input and collaboration. Further, integration is the key to success, requiring alignment with organizational plans, systems, and culture. The strategic elements should be visible and integrated into various processes, such as hiring, classroom instruction, and campus events.

While strategic planning is a vital endeavor for organizations, there is limited research on its impact and best practices in academic institutions. This paper fills a gap in the literature and provides a comprehensive ten-step approach applicable to most colleges and universities of all sizes and missions. By following this framework, academic units can develop effective strategic plans that align with their institution's vision, engage stakeholders, and drive success in achieving long-term objectives.

## Introduction

Organizations of every size, including those that make physical (tangible) goods, to service (intangible) providers, from for-profit companies to non-profit institutions (e.g., hospitals, museums, professional associations, public universities), periodically engage in crafting a strategic plan. While plans vary in duration, with operational and tactical plans typically focusing within the next year, strategic plans have a longer-term focus encompassing one to five years into the future. As such, one can think of strategic planning as a process of guiding an organization toward reaching its long-term plans.

Comprehensive university systems are much like corporations with multiple strategic business units in that comprehensive university systems, for example, are often comprised of multiple academic elements.  These might include schools of business,

education, arts, sciences, medicine, diplomacy, and international commerce, as well as staff units including admissions, student life, library services, alumni affairs, and development. Each of these should, in essence, have their own respective strategic plan which aligns, enables, and supports the overall university strategic plan. While this research paper largely focuses on strategic planning for academic units within a comprehensive university system, the overall process applies to any academic or staff unit at any institution of higher learning. As such, this research paper has wide generalizability across colleges and universities of all sizes, both public and private, as well as those with varying missions (e.g., Tier-1 major research universities as compared to regional university systems).
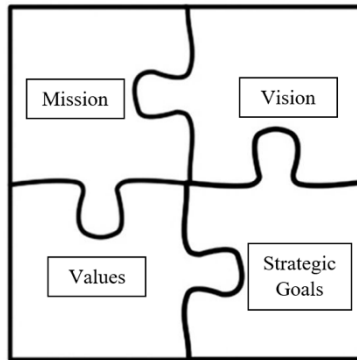
## Foundation and Literature Review

University systems are facing extraordinary new pressures and the strategic planning process can greatly assist in crafting a focused mission and vision for achieving ongoing success (Shah, 2013). Pressures include less funding from state governments (for public colleges & universities), increased focus on performance-funding (e.g., state government funding based on retention and/or graduation rates), increased use of educational technologies in the classroom (both physical and virtual), a growing percentage of on-line students (in various forms), changing expectations of students (e.g., job possibilities associated with concerns over mounting debt), and aging physical infrastructures.  Evidence of academic failures can largely be attributed to the lack of strategic planning.

Some accrediting bodies, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (see AACSB, 2023) require periodic strategic plan refreshes. However, strategic planning shouldn't be done only because it is required. Rather, it should be done because it adds significant value through the collective and collaborative processes of gathering input(s) from various stakeholders such as students, faculty, staff, graduates, and advisory boards, and devising specific outputs and action plans to guide the academic unit deep into the future. Leaders of public and nonprofit organizations must be effective strategists in order to fulfill their missions, satisfy their constituents, and create perceived value, while developing strategies to meet an ever-changing environment (Bryson, 2018). Further, academic leaders should also focus on deliberate and disciplined engagement and sustainability across the organization while crafting strategic plans (Bieler & McKenzie, 2017). Per Hinton (2012), the strategic planning process in academia generally focuses on key areas: mission, vision, values, and strategic goals. However, these four areas should not be unrelated and independent, but rather integrated and interconnected, much like a jigsaw puzzle as shown in Figure 1.

A compelling mission statement delineates the distinctive and essential purpose that distinguishes a business from others in its category, outlining the extent of the business's activities in terms of products and markets (Pearce II, 1982; Pearce & David, 1987). Mission statements in academic settings should include three core elements at minimum: the distinct market(s) the mission is attempting to serve (who), the value proposition (what), and lastly, the means in which the mission will be achieved (how). For example, a school of business as part of regional public university serving a rural Appalachian region with many first-generation college students might have a distinct

mission statement such as, "We are a School of Opportunity [who] with a student-centered commitment to developing leaders [what] through applied interdisciplinary instruction, research and collaboration [how]."  Mission statements should largely be limited to one or two sentences with great emphasis placed on intentional wording and essential messaging.  Conciseness and brevity are essential.

**Figure 1: Strategic Plan Highlighting Interconnectivity of Major Components**



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Having a vision is crucial for leadership, strategy development, implementation, and facilitating change (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010). Vision plans differ from mission statements in that they are aspirationally-focused toward the future. With vision plans, in particular, word choice is essential.  While less emphasis is placed on number of words (length) and more emphasis is placed on intentional words (context), the vision statement still must be succinct. Many academic units are now emphasizing transformative education, which signifies teaching students how to think critically in order to solve problems that may not currently exist, compared to transactional education, which largely infers a unique set of tasks or actions to solve a singular problem (Kitchenham, 2008). As such, a concise vision statement with intentional wording and generally not longer than one sentence is recommended, such as "Leading transformative education while preparing innovative professionals for impactful careers." Conciseness and boldness in vision statements are essential.

Strategic goals are an essential component of the overall strategic plan. To tackle the concerns or areas for growth that have been identified, the institution must establish strategic goals, action plans, and tactics to change the landscape (Fathi & Wilson, 2009). These goals are longer-term (one to five years) and should align with the mission and vision of the overall university. Categorization is particularly helpful when setting strategic goals in areas, including students, faculty, academic programs, community and industry engagement, branding, and others relevant to the institution. Strategic goals should be considered as those that if not achieved will be largely consequential and detrimental to the long-term success of the academic unit.

As such, careful attention should be placed on goals that are truly strategic and measurable, as focus is given to those things that are measured (Jennings, 2020). For example, for student-focused strategic goals, appropriate metrics might include student enrollment, student graduation rates, and student job placement data. For faculty-focused strategic goals, recruiting and/or retaining academically-qualified faculty, fostering professional development, or the number of scholarly contributions/journal publications might be effective metrics. A tactic for retaining academically-quality faculty, for example, could include the development of a mentoring program for new faculty in which a senior faculty member regularly shares impactful topics such as tenure process, shared governance, effective classroom instruction, enhanced visibility, collegiality, etc.

Given the significance of strategic goals and the specificity to which they are written, it is advised that, in general, the maximum number should not exceed ten. Deas et al. (2012) highlighted the University of South Carolina's success in using the strategic planning process for improving diversity in their medical school by emphasizing the role of input from stakeholders, the value of annual assessment to evaluate outcomes, and an intentional approach to recruiting and retention with special goals and metrics. Of course, an academic unit may have other goals such as those related to operational (short-term) and tactical (mid-term) procedures, but extreme focus should be made to have a concise list of strategic goals.

Once strategic goals are finalized, detailed action plans including a strategy to achieve success for each goal should be developed, ownership of each goal should be defined, as well as a process for driving, recording, and communicating results in a proactive manner (Sullivan & Richardson, 2011). Moreover, it should be noted that the very nature of strategic goals is that they are not often achieved by one singular action, but rather a series of interrelated actions. For example, a strategic goal of "increasing student enrollment of first-generation college students by 10% within 2 years" may not be achieved by a singular action, but rather a host of interrelated and multi-tiered actions and initiatives. These actions might include implementing new marketing campaigns, increasing visibility within regional high schools, forming of program-specific recruiting committees, enhancing on-campus visits, implementation of dual-credit programs in high schools, reduced and/or waived application fees for targeted populations, or actively engaging with potential feeder programs. In short, every strategic goal must be operationalized in terms of identifying and implementing specific actions (e.g., strategic plans).

Core values are those behaviors and attitudes that guide an organization as it pursues its mission, vision, and strategic goals. Values can be thought of as boundaries that are adhered to at all times, regardless of circumstance. Developing and updating core values should involve employees' input and be responsive to changing times, rather than imposing them in a traditional bureaucratic top-down manner (Jin & Drozdenko, 2010). Brevity is vital and should focus on those essential core values that are uncompromisable and highlight the academic unit's overall culture. Research emphasizes that organizational values come in four distinct forms—espoused, attributed, shared and aspirational (Bourne et al., 2013). As such, one or two values from each of those four distinct forms is suggested. Commitment to excellence, integrity, service, intellectual curiosity, inclusivity, and collaboration are core values identified in many academic units.

While much has been written about strategic planning in a general context, particularly on behalf of for-profit entities, less research exists in terms of impact, best practices, and guidelines for strategic planning in academic institutions. As such, this research effort has potential for a new path of research to guide non-profit organizations as well, particularly academic institutions. A recent article by U.S. News & World Report listed nearly 4,000 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (Moody, 2021). Assuming those degree-granting institutions have on average 10 academic units (e.g., schools of business, education, humanities, sciences), the number of units within academia that should or could be doing strategic planning easily exceeds 40,000 in the United States alone. As such, the following key steps are presented in an effort to guide strategic planning processes.

### Key Steps

While no comprehensive checklist exists for ensuring success in strategic planning, the key steps identified below are offered as essential building blocks that may enhance and streamline the strategic planning process, especially for teams or committees that have responsibility for either crafting an initial strategic plan or refreshing one for an upcoming reaccreditation.

1. **Alignment With University Strategic Plan**: The first step in refreshing strategic plans for any academic unit must be understanding the university's overall strategic plan to ensure alignment, which is often referred to as strategic fit. Chopra and Meindl (2013) share that strategic fit requires that both the overall strategic plan (e.g., a university's overall strategic plan) and the functional plan (for an individual academic unit) align and fit together to form a coordinated overall strategy. Alignment with the university's overall strategic plan enables an academic unit to pursue the same or similar goals and objectives (Al Hijji, 2014). For example, if the overall university is focused on greatly expanding enrollment through the recruitment of international students, corresponding academic units should have an aligned strategic plan of recruiting international students. If the overall university is focused, for example, on greatly expanding enrollment through the recruitment of first-generation college students, corresponding academic units should have an aligned strategic plan to reach that particular market. Ensuring alignment reduces the likelihood of an academic unit pursuing goals and objectives that detract or are inconsistent with the university's overall strategic plan.

2. **Team Formation**: A cross-representational strategic planning committee composed of both faculty and staff adds diversity in terms of thought and opinion. Members should be chosen based on the knowledge they contribute to the team, their individual capacity for innovative thinking, and their position in the organizational hierarchy, ensuring adequate representation (Wells & Doherty, 1994). As such, the strategic planning committee should be composed of tenured, tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty (e.g., lecturer, instructor, in-residence, adjunct faculty). Additionally, cross-functional selection should be considered in terms of those with significant service (i.e., years of employment) as well as those who have recently been hired into the academic unit. Representation from different sub-departments, such as Marketing, Management, Economics, Accounting, Supply Chain, and Business Law, among others, is also helpful. Further, staff representation from functions such as recruiting, retention, advising, and/or external affairs adds complementary value to that of faculty members. Recurring team meetings are an effective way of managing timelines and tasks, as is the creation of mini-teams (composed of two to three people) who work on specific areas (e.g., mission statement) and then provide input, updates, and direction to the overall team at predefined intervals.

3. **Resourcing**: Given many college and university systems continue to face major budget challenges, the number of administrative resources is often a bare minimum, leading to many faculty members taking on administrative roles above and beyond the typical service aspects. Strategic plans are not a "set it and forget it" type of endeavor; rather, the values, goals and objectives that arise from a strategic plan must be actively managed. Once a strategic plan is finalized, resources must be allocated to ensure it becomes deeply integrated. In other words, for every strategic goal (the 'what'), there must be a strategic plan (the 'how') on how each goal will be achieved with regard to relevancy, associated timelines, and ownership, which further aligns with the SMART goals approach (Latham, 2003). For example, a strategic goal of "increase student enrollment" is vague and lacks clarity. Strategic goals should be much more specific. For example, a strategic goal to "increase student enrollment of first-generation college students by 10% within two years" adds elements of who (first-generation college students), by how much (10%), and by when (within two years). As is often said in business, "we can't manage what we don't measure."

4. **Benchmarking**: Benchmarking encompasses key themes such as measurement, comparison, identification of best practices, implementation, and improvement (Anand & Kodali, 2008). Most colleges and universities, as well as specific academic units, openly share elements of their strategic plan, particularly their mission, vision, and values. Obviously, strategic goals and detailed plans for achieving those strategic goals are less publicized, as they are a sort of blueprint to organizational success. Benchmarking can be done with peer institutions of a similar size, mission, within the same conferences. Benchmarking plays a pivotal role in strategic planning by providing valuable insights and a comparative perspective. By analyzing and comparing performance, processes, and strategies against industry/academic aspirants or competitors, units can identify areas of improvement and set realistic goals. Benchmarking enables evaluation of efficiency, effectiveness,

and competitiveness, ultimately guiding informed decisions to enhance strategic direction and stay ahead in the market. Further, it serves as a powerful tool for continuous improvement, fostering innovation, and driving growth.

5.  **Faculty/Staff Input**: Getting input from faculty and staff (above and beyond the steering committee) is very important from a shared governance perspective and should be done at various points in the strategic planning cycle.  Engaging these stakeholders in strategic planning enhances overall conditions for all partners, improves retention conditions, and, perhaps most importantly, fosters loyalty (Gandrita, 2023). Shared governance refers to processes in which faculty and staff participate in the development of policies and decision making that impact the overall academic unit going forward.  A kick-off meeting is often effective for gaining initial input on areas of greatest concern, with periodic listening sessions for gathering input and feedback on progress to date.  Giving faculty and staff opportunities to provide input in different venues (e.g., in-person meetings, Zoom sessions, email) is often highly effective.  Care should be taken though to avoid "analysis paralysis"—meaning that it is virtually impossible to incorporate every person's individual input (often conflicting) into specific strategic plans (Langley, 1995).  In these cases, seek to identify general themes in which specific individual input can be grouped and categorized for effectiveness.  As always, collegiality is highly valued.

6.  **Input from Advisory Boards**: Many academic units have advisory boards composed of successful alums, industry, and civic leaders, etc., who provide ongoing direction in a role similar to that of a board of directors, with a concentration on providing guidance, fundraising, developing programs, and engaging with institutions (Mandviwalla et al., 2015). Advisory board members are, in essence, champions and advocates within their respective companies and professional networks.  These connections often lead to co-ops, internships, part-time jobs, job-shadowing, interviews, and other opportunities for aspiring young professionals.  As such, seeking input from advisory board members, or establishing one if it does not yet exist, is a particularly important step in refreshing strategic plans.

7.  **External Surveys**: While getting input from faculty/staff and advisory board members is highly valuable, so, too, is input from external constituents. This group might include alumni, program supporters, local and regional leaders, and governmental officials. This group of constituents provides additional context and insight to complement other inputs. Many academic units have lists of external constituents which are readily accessible. Additionally, survey sites provide a low-cost approach to generating and disseminating surveys to large groups of people, especially combined with social media networking groups such as LinkedIn.

8.  **Final Reviews & Approvals**: After gathering input from as many sources as possible (faculty/staff, advisory boards, program constituents), submitting and defending final reviews and gaining approvals is essential. Major changes within academic units often require a vote by faculty/staff to approve. Here, the noble Japanese art of nemawashi is invaluable in having pre-meetings and gaining consensus with those who may otherwise publicly dissent (Wolfe, 1992). Often, several iterations of wordsmithing may be suggested, but care should be taken to

avoid diluting the work that has been done up to this point. As such, clearly defining what is open for debate and discussion is essential as the desired and required outcome is a formal approval to proceed with resourcing and integration.

9.  **Integration**: Above and beyond each of the aforementioned steps, integration is the most important.  Strategic planning is of minimal value if it does not get integrated into organizational plans, systems, and culture. Strategic plans should not be undertaken to "check a box." Rather, it should be done to add real value to the academic unit.  Certainly, the various elements of the strategic plan (i.e., mission & vision statements, strategic goals) should be physically visible to those within the academic unit.  But even more so, the strategic elements should be integrated into all the various processes, including but not limited to, hiring of new employees, convocations, classroom instruction, faculty meetings, symposiums, on-campus recruiting, and commencements. Integrating strategic elements into classroom instruction is of utmost importance, as values, for example, should be particularly highlighted in terms of how classes are taught and how students engage with others (i.e., service to others, integrity, collegiality).

10. **Commitment and Assessment**: Commitment to the strategic plan and measuring outcomes are two crucial components of successful strategic planning in higher education institutions. These elements ensure that the plan is not just a document but a living roadmap that guides decision-making and progress towards goals. First, commitment to the strategic plan is essential for its effective implementation; one of the largest pitfalls of planning is a dysfunction and discouragement of commitment from the organization as a whole (Mintzberg, 1993). Strategic planning requires buy-in and support from all stakeholders involved, including faculty, staff, and administrators. Without commitment, the plan may be treated as a mere formality or quickly abandoned. Therefore, it is important to foster a sense of ownership and engagement among the academic unit. This can be achieved by involving faculty and staff in the planning process, soliciting their input and feedback, and creating opportunities for open and ongoing communication. When individuals feel invested in the plan, they are more likely to actively contribute to its success and take responsibility for their assigned tasks. Measuring outcomes is equally important in strategic planning as it provides a means to assess progress, identify areas of improvement, and make informed decisions. Setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals allows for clear evaluation and tracking of outcomes (Drucker, 1954; Williams, 2012). By defining key performance indicators (KPIs) that align with the strategic goals, the academic unit can monitor its progress and determine whether it is on track to achieve the desired outcomes. Metrics also enable the academic unit to identify what is working well and what needs adjustment; regular evaluation allows for the identification of potential challenges or obstacles early on, enabling timely corrective actions. By collecting data and analyzing results, the academic unit can gain insights into the effectiveness of its strategies and initiatives. This information can inform decision-making, resource allocation, and adjustments to the plan, ensuring that the institution remains agile and responsive to changing circumstances.

## Conclusion

Strategic planning is one of the most important endeavors any organization can take, whether public or private, including for-profit and non-profit institutions. While elements of a strategic plan may vary by organization, the ten-step approach above adds tremendous context in terms of key areas of importance. Seeking input from various constituents adds significant value by incorporating perspectives across various spectrums including faculty, staff, students, and alumni, as does assigning ownership and incorporating the various strategic elements into actionable plans and organizational culture.

The manuscript provides a comprehensive framework for refreshing strategic plans within higher education institutions. By following the outlined ten steps, academic units can engage in a purposeful and collaborative strategic planning process that aligns with the university's overall goals, leverages diverse perspectives, allocates necessary resources, benchmarks against peers, integrates the strategic plan into the organization's culture, measures progress, and builds commitment to achievement of overall goals. Through this holistic approach, academic institutions can foster growth, innovation, and excellence in pursuit of their missions and long-term success.

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