

# The Importance of Strategic Planning in Academic Institutions

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学術研究機関における戦略計画の重要性

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## Summary

Since gaining greater acceptance throughout higher education in the 1980s, strategic planning has come to play a central role in the success of many academic institutions of all types and sizes. Most often connected to its longer record of use in the business world, strategic planning utilizes assessments of often dynamic environmental factors to help identify an organization's current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in order to foster a proactive approach for meeting projected future needs. While the specific forms that the strategic planning process may take vary from one context to another, the central elements that make up the process, and, importantly, the factors that have been found most likely to contribute to its success have been revealed throughout a broad range of literature on the topic over the past thirty years. Drawing from this literature, this paper seeks to provide an overview of the various approaches that academic institutions have taken toward strategic planning, an outline of the potential benefits that strategic planning has to offer in these contexts, and a set of recommendations for how the strategic planning process can be implemented most effectively within any academic institution.

**Keywords:** strategic planning, academic institutions, academic libraries, stakeholders, consensus

## 要 旨

1980年代に高等教育全般を通じて幅広く受け入れられるようになって以来、戦略計画は、タイプや規模を問わず多くの学術研究機関の成功の中心的な理由として挙げられてきた。ビジネス業界で長期に渡り利用されてきた戦略計画は、往々にして流動的な環境要素を検証し、その機関の現在の長所、短所、機会、脅威となるものを明らかにするのに役立つプロセスである。戦略計画を立てる際の具体的な形式は時と場合によって異なるが、プロセスを構成する中心的要素及び、さらに重要なことに、成功要因とされる要素については、過去30年間の幅広い分野に及ぶ文献によって明らかになっている。これらの文献の考察結果をもとに、当論文は学術研究機関が戦略計画に関して過去に行ってきた様々な取り組みの概要、及びある特定の場において戦略計画がもたらし得る利点を説明しようと試みるものである。さらに、いかなる学術研究機関においても、戦略計画プロセスを最も効率的に導入するにはどうしたらよいかという助言も行っている。

**キーワード：**戦略計画、学術研究機関、学術図書館、利害関係者、コンセンサス

## Introduction

Although planning has always played an important part of how academic institutions have sought to achieve their overarching missions, for much of their history a great deal of this planning was likely to be done only as needed and often left entirely in the hands of overseeing boards and select administrators. Since gaining greater acceptance throughout higher education in the 1980s however, a more formalized approach to the planning process, strategic planning, has come to play a central role in the success of many academic institutions of all types and sizes. At its heart, strategic planning can perhaps best be thought of as a process that helps an organization “determine where it is, where it wants to be, and how to get there” (Aamot, 2007, p. 418). Most often connected to its longer record of use in the business world, strategic planning utilizes assessments of often dynamic environmental factors to help identify an organization’s current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in order to foster a proactive approach for meeting projected future needs (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Ferriero & Wilding, 1991). As Ferriero and Wilding point out, “the process is especially effective during a turbulent period or in an unstable environment, such as extended periods of technological innovation” (p. 47), which helps explain both how strategic planning became more widely used by academic institutions in the 1990s and why it continues to be endorsed by those who employ it effectively today.

While the specific forms that the strategic planning process may take vary from one context to another, the central elements that make up the process, and, importantly, the factors that have been found most likely to contribute to its success have been revealed throughout a broad range of literature on the topic over the past thirty years. Though academic institutions of all kinds have made use of strategic planning since it began to emerge as a formal methodology, its use in academic libraries has been especially prevalent and particularly well chronicled. Drawing from this significant area of the literature, this paper seeks to provide an overview of the various approaches that academic libraries have taken toward the strategic planning process, an analysis of why strategic planning has been important to their success, and a set of recommendations for how the process can be included as a routine activity not only in libraries, but also in many other types of academic institutions such as academic departments and language centers. While the findings suggest that strategic planning can contribute to the success of academic institutions in a wide variety of contexts, they also stress the need for the process used to be firmly grounded in the context where it is used, well-situated to both the unique and specific internal and external factors that exist, and able to be modified as needed. Indeed, as the strategic planning process to be outlined suggests, the ability to continually revisit, reassess, and reformulate the ways in which institutions can continue to best meet the changing needs of the stakeholders which they are

intended to serve is essential for strategic planning to achieve the great promise it has to offer.

## **Strategic Planning in Higher Education**

It is important to begin our discussion by noting that strategic planning in higher education takes many forms. As Taylor and Miroiu (2002) point out, strategic planning can take place at various levels within a university: the whole institution, the faculty, the department or school, the subject group or research group, or even the individual. As such, the literature on strategic planning, though relatively recent, is also very broad. While this paper will mainly focus on one particularly rich area of the literature from the field of library and information science, other literature has also discussed strategic planning from various other perspectives, most often at the university administration level (Gumpert & Sporn, 1999). Universities, first in the United States and later in the United Kingdom and Europe, began more widely adopting strategic planning in the 1980s as they started operating more as corporate entities rather than purely educational endeavors in response to a confluence of demographic, economic, and technological changes (Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994; Dill, 1996; Dooris, 2003; Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Sporn, 1999). Although many authors have raised criticisms of strategic planning over the years (see Birnbaum, 2000; Mintzberg, 1994; Sevier, 2003), the substantial body of research in this area has also shown that the key to success may lie in the way in which strategic planning is implemented rather than the methodology itself. Indeed, ensuring that a particular institution's unique culture is taken into consideration throughout the process may be of critical importance (Swenk, 1999). Whatever the level at which strategic planning may take place within an institution or the unique circumstances that a particular context may present, there is clearly much that can be learned from a more in-depth analysis of the literature on strategic planning in academic institutions.

## **Strategic Planning in Academic Libraries**

A review of the related literature reveals that strategic planning has come to be an aspect of central importance for academic library management in the some thirty years since the process first came to be applied in library settings in the 1980s. As use of the strategic planning process became more widespread in the 1990s, greater attention was dedicated to ensuring that the underlying strategic planning methodology employed best fit the unique needs of academic libraries. This led to experimentation with several methodologies drawing from a number of established corporate and nonprofit models.

Although there are countless variations of all of these models, the corporate model typically consists of five phases which were recently outlined quite succinctly by Stephan (2010): "(1) creation of vision and mission, (2) setting strategic objectives and targets, (3) creation of a business strategy, (4) implementation, and (5) continuous evaluation of performance of the organization"

(p. 190). The nonprofit model utilizes a different approach to the process but seeks many of the same outcomes in the end. Brown and Blake Gonzalez (2007) note the importance of John Bryson's Strategy Change Cycle, a nonprofit model first detailed in his 1995 book *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations* (still in print in its fourth edition), in influencing how academic libraries conduct strategic planning. Brown and Blake Gonzalez characterize the major phases of Bryson's Strategy Change Cycle in this way: (1) determining if strategic planning should be carried out through building consensus, (2) identifying relevant mandates to clarify the organization mission, values, and vision, (3) analyzing strategic issues by assessing the internal and external environment, (4) creating specific strategic plans to address the issues identified, (5) implementation, and (6) evaluation. As Brown and Blake Gonzalez point out, elements of Bryson's Strategy Change Cycle are particularly useful to academic libraries because this model does seek to address some of the political challenges faced when strategic planning is undertaken by such a variety of stakeholders. As gaining consensus from all of the stakeholders involved is an essential element of the first phase of this model, proponents like Brown and Blake Gonzalez argue that "the inclusion of a diversified group in the early stages of the strategic planning cycle increases the probability for success" (p. 5). Moreover, other institutions within a university that are charged with serving the greater academic community, such as language centers, certainly share a similar mandate to meet the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders. Clearly, all academic institutions with a broad base of constituents would benefit from employing a strategic planning model that addresses these complex factors.

The importance of building widespread consensus is a fundamental concept shared among several other models that have also proven influential on the strategic planning processes carried out by academic libraries, such as the 1992 Hensley-Schoppmeyer model. Birdsall and Hensley (1994) note that this model "operates on the assumption that people with similar motivations can agree on what their mutual purpose should be and can form beneficial partnerships that will advance a shared interest" (p. 150). Beyond seeking to foster consensus among the many disparate stakeholders who should be involved in the strategic planning of academic libraries such as administrators, librarians, staff, faculty, students, and alumni, the Hensley-Schoppmeyer model also serves as an excellent way to concurrently appeal for funding among these various constituencies as the process can serve to highlight libraries' financial needs to these different groups while drawing on their shared commitment to supporting these libraries' futures (Brown & Blake Gonzalez, 2007). Another popular model often incorporated in the strategic planning of academic libraries around the world, the balanced scorecard approach, also centers on ensuring that the views of various stakeholders are taken into account fairly. As Kettunen (2007) summarizes this process: "The balanced scorecard provides information from many perspectives in a balanced combination" (p. 410).

Although all of these strategic planning models have been and continue to be critically

influential in spurring on the development of this process in academic libraries, reports on their use over the past thirty years have served to shed a great deal of light on the conditions under which they may be best applied. One of the main findings in this area is that just as the context of every academic library is unique, the internal and external parameters that affect each library's approach to strategic planning are also unique. As past experience has served to inform the field through the related literature on the subject, including numerous reports of failed attempts to strictly adhere to one specific strategic planning model or another, it is now clearer than ever that there is no one strategic planning methodology that can be applied in all situations (Aman, 2010; Ferriero & Wilding, 1991; Wayne, 2011). Instead, as the growing body of literature shows, for strategic planning to be carried out effectively, it must be applied in a way that tailors the process to fit each specific context and the unique parameters it presents. While it is clear that there are many models to draw from in any number of ways, it is worth reiterating that for planning to be strategic, it must include some measure of the key phases that are shared across the various models: environmental scanning, identification of stakeholders, internal and external analyses of a library's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, plan formulation, implementation, and the continuous evaluation of the resulting plan (Aman, 2010).

### **Why is Strategic Planning Important?**

While the need to adapt the strategic planning process used by any academic institution to its own specific environmental and cultural realities is one of the main themes revealed in an examination of the literature, another common theme serves to underscore the importance of undertaking such a process to begin with. Indeed, given the substantial amount of resources that strategic planning requires for it to be done well and the often-misguided approaches that many institutions may have used in the past, not everyone views strategic planning as an inherently worthwhile activity that academic libraries and other primarily educational or research entities with increasingly scarce resources should necessarily be committed to (Aamot, 2007; Birnbaum, 2000; Brown & Blake Gonzalez, 2007; Gumpert & Sporn, 1999; Linn, 2008; Mintzberg, 1994; Sevier, 2003). However, even the negative issues related to strategic planning that have been raised in the literature can often be traced back to the use of approaches that were ill suited to the contexts or simply poorly executed. Strategic planning must be used with care to ensure that it is effective. As Aamot (2007) warns, "When used thoughtlessly, obsessively, or with excessive formality, it can drive out precisely the kind of strategic thinking, acting, and learning it was supposed to promote" (p. 418). Obviously, strategic planning must be used in a way that promotes the many benefits that the process has been found to offer.

Many of the most readily apparent benefits of strategic planning result from the creation of a well reasoned plan itself. There is no doubt that a strategic plan that is current, grounded in findings from internal and external assessments, forward-thinking, and able to be implemented

with the enthusiastic support of all of the stakeholders involved in its development can provide an academic institution with a clear course of action it can take that can be continuously evaluated and readily reformulated as needed. Wayne (2011) recently highlighted the importance of a strategic plan by characterizing it as “an invaluable instrument” that can help an institution “chart and navigate these turbulent times,” and, pointing to weakness of the alternative, added that an institution “that just stumbles along without a solid plan will not thrive in the long term” (p. 12). Given the rapid rate of change that academic institutions at all levels are facing on a number of fronts today, the fact that a strategic plan, as Aman (2010) notes, allows institutions “to anticipate, rather than react to events in the future” is clearly another major asset that cannot be discounted (p. 21).

One final benefit of the strategic plan worth noting is that it often serves as a way in which an academic entity, such as a library, department, or language center, can more concretely demonstrate its alignment with and contribution to the greater university’s mission and goals, something that has become increasingly important as all manner of academic institutions face growing pressure to validate their worth within their universities (Bryson, 2011; McNicol, 2005). In fact, many academic institutions are now required to formulate or update strategic plans for campus-wide accreditation reviews or annual reports (CannCasciato, 2011; Sauer, 2006). These activities not only serve to better ensure that increasingly scarce resources are being used in a way that supports the greater university’s mission and goals, but that they are being used in an effective way coupled with a greater degree of more transparent accountability (Aman, 2010; Bryson, 2011; McNicol, 2005).

While the plan that is created, implemented, and continuously evaluated as part of any ongoing strategic planning process is obviously centrally important, the process itself has also been recognized for the wide range of benefits it engenders. Perhaps none of these benefits has been cited more in the related literature than the positive effects that the strategic planning process can have on improving the motivation, morale, and sense of shared purpose felt among all involved (McClamroch, Byrd, & Sowell, 2001; McNicol, 2005). As any institution’s use of the strategic planning process requires the active involvement of all administrators, faculty, and staff members at every level for it to be truly successful, strategic planning that is done well has consistently been noted for its ability to foster improved communication among staff as well as a renewed sense of collaboration and commitment to a common vision (McClamroch, Byrd, & Sowell, 2001; Schulz, 1998). In addition to its positive effects on improving the camaraderie among all involved, since all stakeholders should be represented in the strategic planning process, this sense of improved communication, collaboration, and shared purpose often extends beyond the particular institution and can lead to a greater appreciation of the interdependence between all components of the greater academic community, which again helps ensure that the support for the resulting plan is more widespread (Schulz, 1998). Furthermore, as outlined previously, such a broad-based,

inclusive approach to planning also helps ensure that any political concerns are minimized and that a positive, proactive image of the institution is promoted. Such promotion serves to increase the likelihood that critical funding needs are more widely known, understood, and supported amongst all stakeholders who may also come to feel a greater sense of ownership of the resulting plan that they played a role in creating.

One final reason why the process of strategic planning is important is that it has been found to support greater strategic thinking within academic institutions overall. As Aamot (2007) stressed, "The reason for investing our organization resources in strategic planning should not be just to create a plan for implementing existing strategies, but it should help us improve our strategic thinking capabilities and make better choices about the future" (p. 418). Speaking to this point, Brown and Blake Gonzalez (2007) found that the use of new, innovative research methods such as web-based surveys allow institutions to solicit more immediate and detailed feedback that can, in turn, lead to better, more informed decision-making throughout the ongoing process of strategic planning itself.

### **Ensuring the Effectiveness of Strategic Planning**

While the many positive attributes that both a strategic plan and the strategic planning process have been found to provide more than ample evidence of the potential importance of strategic planning to academic institutions, it is also clear that these benefits are only fully realized when strategic planning is carried out effectively. As previously outlined, a successful strategic planning process must first begin with a review of the various methodologies and numerous case studies that have been well documented in the literature and drawing from them that which will best suit the specific context and issues that any academic institution may face given the time and resources available.

While a lack of resources is an easily understandable barrier to effective strategic planning, time management itself has often been an enemy of strategic plans living up to their full potential. Plans projecting too far into an uncertain future are apt to become easily outdated in an era of such rapid change, just as processes that take too long may result in plans that are outdated before they are even finished (Stephan, 2010). Targeting a more modest time frame and ensuring that the initial phases of the plan are completed as rapidly as possible are lessons worth taking away from the accounts of failed strategic plans and the improvements made by successful ones. While it seems that most academic libraries have tended to develop five-year or even ten-year plans in the past, more recent literature seems to support the notion of focusing on time frames that are more predictable and, therefore, less susceptible to dramatic unforeseen changes.

When considering how to best manage the strategic planning process to fit any particular context, another key point worth underscoring is the need for the process used to remain flexible throughout (Ferriero & Wilding, 1991). Some phases of the process may take longer than



predicted; others may fail completely and require taking a step back to ensure that they are done correctly. As circumstances change or aspects of the planning process are recognized as not working, the entire planning process must be able to be revised to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of those involved. A related point worth stressing here is that strategic planning is not a simple linear process. As Riggs (1997) notes, "Unlike traditional planning, strategic planning is ongoing and iterative, involves the development of cognition, and is a learning process" (p. 400). As such, strategic planning should always be considered a work in progress.

Another key consideration to be made in the early stages of the planning process must be the identification and representative involvement of all stakeholders. As mentioned previously, the broader the representation of stakeholders participating in the strategic planning process, the more likely the process is to reach a truly representative and sustainable. Everyone from administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni to the greater academic community should be as actively involved in the process as feasible given the context and circumstances. Such involvement can take any number of forms: from serving directly on the planning committee to attending dedicated retreats or open meetings to serving on a task force. While diversity of representation is encouraged, it is critically important that all those involved in the process fully support the endeavor and are open to the potential changes it may call for. As Stephan's (2010) account of strategic planning within an American university illustrates, including stakeholders from outside of the institution within the planning committee can prove disruptive to the process when they do not understand or support either the need for change or the strategic planning process itself. Instead, formal interviews may be set up to ensure that key constituents who are not directly participating in the planning are heard and informal discussions may also prove insightful. Technological innovations such as online survey instruments have already become an integral part of the processes used by academic institutions and offer another way to help identify many of the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities they face based on the user feedback provided by faculty, staff, students, alumni, and other constituents (Brown & Blake Gonzalez, 2007). Again, each academic institution will need to determine how best to ensure that all stakeholders are fairly represented in the process that is employed.

Another critical aspect to the success of such broad-based participation is the need to maintain open channels of communication and transparency throughout the process (Ferriero & Wilding, 1991; Stephan, 2010). Holding frequent open meetings and providing updates to a dedicated website are just a few of the ways that this communication can occur. Perhaps even more important is the need to ensure that all voices are welcomed and heard. As Aamot (2007) puts it, "[L]eaders should intentionally and deliberately leverage the process to create a framework for enabling new voices, conversations, passions, perspectives, and experiments to emerge and begin building a culture of strategic thinking in their organizations" (p. 419). Indeed, as strategic planning is at its heart aimed at seeking innovative approaches to meet projected future needs, new

ways of thinking and new ways of allowing such thinking to occur should be actively sought out and encouraged throughout the process.

One final area of ensuring the effectiveness of strategic planning worth stressing is that the resulting plan that is implemented must be continuously evaluated and revised as needed. As Riggs (1997) put it, "The strategic plan should be viewed as a working document; it is never completed, and it certainly has to undergo a rigorous updating/refinement on a regular basis" (p. 401). Likewise, as a strategic plan nears the end of its intended lifespan or has been determined to have reached obsolescence earlier than intended, the entire process must be undertaken anew. In this way, it might be said that for strategic planning to be done well, it must be always done.

## Conclusion

Although universities, academic libraries, and other academic institutions have a long history of planning, the use of more formalized strategic planning in higher education is still relatively new. Even so, the related literature on the subject does provide strong evidence of the importance of strategic planning when it is done well. Furthermore, the growing body of research serves to underscore many of the conditions required to ensure such effectiveness. While it is clear that no one methodology can be applied in all academic settings, the most well known strategic planning models continue to prove influential as do an increasing number of related research articles and case studies that highlight many of the common successes and failures. Although each academic institution must develop its own approach to strategic planning that is tailored to fit the unique educational, cultural, economic, and technological issues it faces, fortunately, there is a growing list of recommendations for how this process can be done in a way that is inclusive, manageable, motivating, and transformative. Without a clear strategic plan, any academic institution, whether it be a department, library, or language center, will likely find itself underperforming or even failing to achieve the goals for which it was created. It is important for all involved in higher education to recognize the potential benefits that can result from strategic planning when it is employed effectively. It is hoped that this paper has provided a useful overview of the various approaches to strategic planning outlined in the related literature on the subject and can serve as a starting point for those interested in pursuing this topic further to better familiarize themselves with the insights that this growing body of research has to offer.

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