

# Strategic Planning in Higher Education: Plans, Pauses, Perils and Persistence

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## ABSTRACT

*The strategic planning process requires considerable detail, much of which is covered in traditional literature on strategic planning. Using actual and existing strategic plans as example, we discuss aspects of strategic planning in academic settings that are often not addressed. We present a list of action items that should be considered as part of any strategic planning process, speaking to their value in the case of the example plans. One important action item is assurance that one's plan, when formed and when implemented, is robust enough to weather unexpected circumstances like the financial surprises that arrived when recently-minted plans were launched. We also present cautions that require awareness and appropriate action as a strategic plan is created or implemented, again using example plans as case-study guides.*

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT THESE REFLECTIONS COVER

This paper describes select elements of the strategic planning process, using actual and existing strategic plans as exemplary models for discussion. Rather than provide a comprehensive overview of typical strategic planning and implementation processes, this paper illuminates elements of strategic planning and execution of a strategic plan that can help or hinder the plan's ultimate success. Many of these items are not typically described in strategic planning literature; our hope is to provide "insider tips" for those engaged in planning process or implementation.

We base our discussion around "Action Items," with some Items supplemented by "Cautionary Tales." Throughout, we use actual strategic plans as *ex post facto* "sounding boards" for each Action and Tale to help guide the reader toward effective planning and execution. In Section 1, we cover issues associated with creating a plan. This section is short because the goal of this paper is not to walk the reader through the planning process in a "soup to nuts" way, but, rather, to highlight tips that may not be covered in typical writings about strategic planning. Section 2 outlines robust features of a good strategic plan that may not be typically covered in the literature. Section 3 discusses dynamics related to implementation of a given plan. In this case, we outline several surprises that erupted during implementation of a recently-executed plan, most of which were related to unexpected financial challenges. Though these are specific to the current era, one can always count on (expect!) unexpected issues to arise. Section 4 discusses issues related to termination of a given plan and the transition to a new one. We conclude with a summary of the twenty Action Items and Tales of Caution around which this paper is organized.

As a faculty member at five institutions, a dean at one, and a vice president for academic affairs at another, my involvement with strategic planning was comprehensive. I was involved with all the strategic plans cited in this publication. At one institution, I was a member of the president's cabinet, which was responsible for creating its plan, and, because the plan focused almost entirely on academic issues, I was also closely involved with the plan's implementation. As a result, I had to broker, directly, many of the challenges we encountered and compromises we made during the plan's execution phase.

## FROM PRIMORDIAL TO FLESH: CREATING A PLAN

For an overview of the strategic planning process, one can consult many available references, including books by Argenti (1968), Olsen (2012), Allison and Kaye (2003), and Burkhart and

Reuss (1993). The latter two are specific to nonprofit organizations. Here, we cover four Action Items that one should always consider as part of the planning process.

### *Action Item 1: Consult with Everybody in Sight.*

Even though this paper attempts to cover items not widely discussed in the literature, we must lead off with ample encouragement concerning consultation because broad consultation is arguably the most crucial need in the strategic planning process; it can affect a plan's success dramatically. Though a particular management team will be charged with deciding what the strategic plan will ultimately be (animated by the initiatives the team selects), the team and the plan need to have input from a comprehensive set of community constituents. This is especially important when mobilizing an organization around the plan's ideas as implementation begins: if the planning stage does not involve sufficient participation, debates concerning the merits or challenges of given ideas in the plan (and also the many more that did not "make the cut" in the plan's formation, but still linger in colleagues' minds) will be end up comprising campus and "hallway" talk—and inevitable controversy that will diminish or even dismiss a plan's chances of success. This is especially true in the case of faculty buy-in in academic settings. Broad consultation, on the other hand, allows debates and discussions to take place *prior* to the plan's implementation phase, clearing space for the focus that is necessary for the plan's initiatives to succeed. Though not all parties will be satisfied with the outcomes of the planning process and the initiatives selected for a given plan, associates will be more disposed to accept the plan if they have assurance that their input was valued and considered.

The leadership team in charge of a given plan must assure that it understands who the plan's stakeholders are. In academic settings, this typically includes faculty of all types, staff groups, students, administrators, and "less internal" constituents like alumni. One must be sure to include parties that may be perceived to be "smaller voices"; this is discussed below as Action Item 3.

In a recent case of an East Coast Jesuit university, the deciding body was the President's Cabinet.<sup>1</sup> As part of the planning process, the university began by gathering ideas through meetings with faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni, donors, and parent groups. Dozens of meetings were held over a period of roughly two years. As is typical in the academe, receiving formal acceptance of the plan by a formal governance body—in this case, a group of faculty, staff, administrators, and students, with the faculty being the most active members of the group—was the greatest challenge. As its planning evolved, the university moved from conversational stages to written draft-plan stages. At each stage, the strength of proposed ideas were weighed and evaluated, largely through discussion, though, at times, more formal evaluative measures were employed. During the last year of the planning phase, prior to formal presentation to the appropriate governance bodies, the president appointed a formal drafting group, which was led by the associate vice president for academic affairs. This group included representatives from all appropriate campus constituencies. It formally drafted at least eight versions of its plan, each with subversions. As is common in the academe, the conversations became more serious (and at times, more strident) once ideas began to appear in ink.

As the Drafting Committee's work proceeded, several key groups vetted formal ideas that remained under consideration, or they contributed additional ideas to the mix. Many of the latter used prior ideas as ingredients. Using input from all bodies who had worked on the plan prior to this phase, the President's Cabinet suggested 25 candidate initiatives; a broadly configured "summer task force" suggested 17; academic department chairs suggested two; and the Student Development directors suggested two. This process ended with 33 specific candidate initiatives that were slated for review by the President's Cabinet; these were grouped into five broad

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<sup>1</sup> Deciding bodies and approving bodies are often different. In this case, the approving (formally, the accountable and a consulted) body was the university's Board of Trustees. Formal assignments of responsibility are discussed in Action Item/Cautious Tale 4.

categories. The Cabinet and the Summer Task Force had considerable correspondence in selections of the initiatives: 10 of the items were suggested by both bodies.

Using Likert scales, members of the President's Cabinet expressed degrees of importance associated with each of the 33 candidate initiatives, and then discussed the outcomes of this exercise. As we will see later, only eight items made the final cut for the plan. One may hold that the Cabinet, in this case, made too many decisions in the planning process. While that argument may hold some weight, nearly all the ideas associated with the final 33 suggestions were sourced from the broader university community—many of them directly. One can think of the process as a funnel, with the broader community at the top, and the President's Cabinet, the formal acting governance bodies, and the Board of Trustees, who had final approval of the plan, at the bottom. As planning proceeds, the scope of consultation becomes limited to governance bodies charged with decision-making.

### *Action Item 2: Engage A Qualified Consultant.*

Having been involved in strategic planning processes with and without an external consultant, I have become convinced that using an external consultant to guide the process is valuable to a plan's ultimate success and the organization's health as planning and execution go forward.

A good consultant brings not only seasoned experience, but also efficiencies in plan formation, a more global perspective than "local" organizational personnel may have, and neutrality in discussing and helping vet ideas that are locally controversial. Beyond exhibiting neutrality, a good consultant can identify and help an institution work through any internal biases it may have that should be reconsidered, while also being able to challenge any form of "groupthink" that exists within a particular constituency. This is especially important for groups that may have central powers of decision. Overall, one should also be sure that a selected consultant brings an ability to communicate with multiple and varied communities. One university used RJ Valentino and Kathy Jones of the Napa Group as consultants for its plan formation and felt well served during and following the programming through which the Napa Group guided the process.

### *Action Item 3: Know That Perceived Smaller Voices May Bring Greatest Gifts.*

One must be sure during the planning process's consultations that communications with constituents are not exclusively geared toward obtaining necessary buy-in. This is especially true when working with formal governance organizations. Rather, one should be disposed toward understanding that the ultimate reason for vetting elements and drafts of a plan are to ensure that the plan is indeed as strong as it might be in ideation and in potential for implementation. With this in mind, I often caution colleagues not to ask, "Does this have to go through [a governance body—say, an Academic Senate]?" but, rather, to adopt an attitude that a given idea "gets to go through" a given governance body. Such a disposition can be helpful in academic administration, in general; in strategic planning settings, it is crucial.

Adopting such a disposition opens a plan's leadership team to valuable ideas that may be dismissed because they come from voices that are perceived or considered to be less powerful, or are traditionally rendered less powerful.

A recent case provides an instructive example of this Action Item's benefits. Prior to its recent strategic plan, the university was known for its study abroad programming, which engaged nearly two-thirds of its undergraduate student body.<sup>2</sup> Because, however, the university was relatively weak in international student enrollments and in globally-oriented curriculum and learning opportunities for students on its home campus, most constituencies—and especially

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<sup>2</sup> Quality and participation were strengthened further during the years associated with the Strategic Plan. The university received a national award for its study abroad activity and also placed highly in the nation in study abroad participation for universities in its category twice over a five-year period, as documented in the Institute of International Education's (2014) *Open Doors Reports*.

leaders of the university's Board of Trustees—spoke of a need to take positive action concerning on-campus international presence.

An early draft of the university's strategic plan contained what most members of the campus community saw as an innovative formulation for leveraging the institution's success in study abroad to expand significantly the presence of international students on campus. I authored it. Following distribution and discussions of the draft plan, a collection of students, led by a sophomore who was the President and founder of the university's International Affairs Association, a student-run group seeking to bring more international interest and awareness to its campus, wrote to the chair of the Drafting Committee. The student explained that, while the draft plan's global initiative was exciting, the specifics needed to be reprioritized toward intensifying efforts devoted to its Global Studies Program. At that time, Global Studies was the university's only interdisciplinary undergraduate major; it was relatively new but had quickly garnered nearly 100 students. Though it was well stewarded, it was still largely the province of its founding faculty member and seemed poised for expanded emphasis.

The student's powerfully expressed suggestions made more sense than mine, at the time, and the President's Cabinet was resilient in adopting them. As a result, the Global Studies Program became a major (what we describe below as a "Spotlight") initiative of the university's plan. Following more detailed planning and an eventual launch of a comprehensive (fundraising) campaign, the Global Studies Program ended up garnering the largest gift in the university's history, at \$5 million. This episode demonstrates the value of considering a typically less powerful voice as primary: without an open mind toward student input, this plan would have been less strong, and the university would probably not have fared as well as it did by adopting the student-driven initiative.

#### *Action Item/Cautious Tale 4: Who Owns The Plan?*

Most literature concerning the execution of strategic initiatives recommends that various tasks be assigned to "owners" who will be responsible for the initiatives. A good plan must articulate appropriate tasks, responsibilities, and authorities. Literature on project management typically advocates for such arrangements (Jacka & Keller, 2009, p. 255; Cleland & Ireland, 2007, p. 234), but academic leaders are often not experienced with them, so we discuss them here. One compelling arrangement, laid out in Jacka and Keller (2009), is known as an *ARCI scheme*. The *ARCI* scheme assigns strategic planning actors to four groups:

- *Accountable*: The *A* group are those (usually just one person) who are *Accountable* for a given task's completion. One can think of the *A* group (or party) as the individual(s) "on whose desk" the success or failure of the project lands. Typically, this is somebody at the executive level.
- *Responsible*: The *R* group is *Responsible* for the execution of the task. That is, the *R* group carries out the work associated with it.
- *Consulted*: The *C* group consists of parties who are *consulted* as the project takes place; these are parties who can provide appropriate feedback on actions taken and on options that may be explored.
- *Informed*: Finally, the *I* group consists of parties who need to be *Informed* as actions, including decisions, take place.

We note that the *Consulted* and *Informed* groups differ in the style of communication as the *Accountable* or *Responsible* groups engage with them: typically, dialogue occurs in a back-and-forth manner with the *Consulted* group, while information passes into, but not from, the *Informed* group.

Clarity concerning each of these groups can make a project more efficient and more effective, often because it defines appropriate roles, helps all involved understand those roles, and then assures that all appropriate parties are involved in accordance with those roles. It keeps planners and implementers from having an "Oh, my, we should have known to consult with *x*" moment, and it assures from the outset that all involved know each other's roles. One can see that, in the case of a strategic plan, the *ARCI* scheme allows a plan's ownership to be parceled out across the

organization so that multiple parties can have relevant roles, while still maintaining appropriate lines of authority.

As noted above, academic leaders are typically not versed in project management. For example, the leadership team in an Academic Affairs division with which I was involved learned of it through consultants, Tedd Smith of Tedd Smith Consulting, LLC, and Karen Pell (independent), who had been engaged to refine Academic Affairs' organization and performance. At a wider level, though, as part of its planning process, the university had not assigned ultimate "owners" to its strategic initiatives and their execution. Because most of the university's strategic plan's "spotlight" initiatives were in the academic realm, the division of Academic Affairs adopted them by default. From there, the division developed and used *ARCI* assignments (what we called "*ARCI* Charts"). These were typically created at a summer retreat for use during each academic year.

In the case cited immediately above, by default (via formal university governance), the university president was the strategic plan's ultimate authority. The president therefore occupied the *A* role in the *ARCI* scheme. From there, however, the university still never assigned any other "keepers" of the plan's execution and initiatives. Because of a lack of formal assignments, data related to the plan and its execution were scattered across several divisions—some were in Academic Affairs, some were with the executive vice president's office, and some were held in the finance office. At times, this led to inefficiencies and confusion, and, one may argue, slowed down components of the execution of the university's plan. The university also experienced challenges in establishing appropriate benchmarks and dashboards that helped summarize and communicate landmark accomplishments associated with its plan, as described in the next section. On reflection, the use of a formal tool like an *ARCI* scheme at highest organizational levels would have helped the quality of the execution of this plan.

#### SING THE BODY ELECTRIC: WHAT MAKES A GOOD PLAN?

What should one look for in assessing the quality of a strategic plan? In this section, we provide five Action Items and two Cautionary Tales that deserve consideration. Many of these are from one university's plan, which had some features that are not common in strategic planning literature, but were key to the plan's success.

##### *Action Item 5: Establish And Communicate An Audacious, Unifying Vision.*

Typically, a strategic plan requires resources for it to succeed. These are usually procured through fundraising campaigns; often the campaigns are built around strategic initiatives. Because strategic goals are usually "stretch" goals, the campaigns must be fueled by inspiring messages. Often, goals set internally, one by one, are more readily inspiring for those who set them than they are for constituents who are less directly related to the institution (e.g., alumni of a school—typically the primary candidates for fundraising sources). An *audacious vision*, consistent with the definition of "audacious" (e.g., in the Google Search Dictionary (2014)), demonstrates a willingness to take bold risks. Such a disposition can inspire the sources on whom a strategic plan relies for support. The audacity of the vision gets people talking, gets them involved, and motivates participation. When the vision is also uniform, it serves as a point of leverage from which constituents are drawn more deeply into the details of the plan. The goal also helps motivate internal participants to carry out the work associated with the plan.

As one university's strategic plan began to take shape, its president set an audacious vision: "to be the leading Catholic comprehensive institution in the nation." This goal brought several challenges, but it was ultimately a worthwhile step. Without question, the goal represented a huge, and possibly an unattainable, step. Even though the goal may not have been attained as the university's plan was implemented, having such an ambitious goal helped the university's constituencies to focus on the plan and strive to attain its goals. Furthermore, the goal became well known among members of the university community and united all involved around a common theme. As the plan proceeded, one could ask any member of the university community

what the goal of the plan was, and chances were good they would have responded precisely and correctly.

Of course, an audacious vision also brings challenges. For this university, these started with how one might define attainment of becoming the leading Catholic comprehensive university in the nation. The university elected to engage its institutional research personnel to self-define what such attainment would look like. Unfortunately, as noted in the previous section, this process was not accompanied by development of professional dashboards, and the indicators of success were not consistently communicated as the plan's implementation was underway. Such tools, if appropriately configured, can bring recognizable data and confirmation to attainment of goals, thereby bonding with the audacious, uniform vision of the strategic plan. Though this university assembled superb detailed annual reports of what had and had not been accomplished in its plan, the lack of consistent, understandable, and well-communicated dashboards confounded execution, at times, and the lack of dashboards has left only a heuristic sense of when the plan should be formally concluded.

A second challenge related to the university's audacious, uniform theme was that it allowed dissenting opinion—related to the plan or to other university issues—to rally around the goal's audacity, framing the goal as a dream never to be realized, and not realized yet. In this sense, one's audacious, uniform vision can give leverage to harmful dissent. That noted, in our example case, the many pros of the plan's audacious vision outweighed challenges associated with it.

#### *Action Item 6: "Long Live The Plan!?" No: Short-Life The Plan!*

Circumstances and needs related to education are presently undulating at paces more rapid than was the case in the recent past. For this and for other reasons, strategic plans that are executed over shorter periods of time allow an institution to remain current and shift priorities more rapidly than institutions engaged in longer-term plans.

#### *Beware 15- and 20-year plans!*

Most institutions engaged even in ten- and especially twenty-year plans (which used to be typical intervals for plans) frequently have to engage in repeated customizations or reformulations of their strategy. These activities are usually saddled with plan visions that were struck many years ago—at times by persons no longer with the institution. Those charged with reformulating the plans are therefore often restricted as they seek to find ways to adapt yesterday's ideas to today's circumstances. In fact, the process can feel like wrapping today's circumstances around yesterday's ideas.

Some plans may seem immune to such concerns about their length because their strategic visions are broad enough to capture issues that may emerge ten to twenty years from their inception. This represents another plan hazard: Plan visions that are general enough to admit twenty-years-hence circumstances are necessarily too broad in scope, if not too generic (e.g., "to excel in teaching, scholarship, and service"). This lack of focus and specificity brings about a void in the institutional community, if not ignorance of the plan that is contrary to the excitement and motivating qualities discussed above as we surveyed the merits of an audacious, uniform vision. When the main strategic structure is general enough to engulf social, fiscal, and generational upheavals, it is not likely to be effectively "carried" by personnel and resource providers who otherwise might exercise ambition in accomplishing the plan's goals.

With these thoughts in mind, one may argue that the wisest element of one university's plan was its five-year duration of implementation. Five-year strategic plans are a tradition at that has served this university well. Even where certain needs related to a given plan remains unrealized, plans typically get old and dry, and imagination and zeal associated with their execution can wane. With the university now near the terminus of its execution cycle, with considerable success in meeting its plan's goals, and even with some goals not accomplished, many members of the its community seem to be experiencing, and some are expressing, a need for strategic renewal.

One should also note that a relatively short plan also makes an organization more nimble in the event that environmental circumstances demand a revision or even an abandonment of a given plan. Though we do not survey such circumstances in this paper, we can assure that should they arise (and they are likely to!), changing or canceling a shorter-term plan is considerably easier than doing so with a longer plan that is more deeply entrenched in organizational culture and commitment.

*Action Item 7: Create A Small Number Of Tight Spotlight Initiatives That Drive Toward The Audacious, Uniform Vision; Relegate Ongoing (Including Ambitious) Activities To Appendices.*

Arguably the biggest challenge to typical strategic plans is their breadth. Plans can take the form of an elaborate “mass feeding” in which each division, if not department, of a given institution has some stake in the plan. Often, when planning, the main question being asked is one posed to each facet of the operation, revolving around what that operation may need. A better approach works at a higher level: though all needs and all ideas must be vetted, and vetted responsibly, as described in Action Item 3, above, those who are responsible for the plan must assure that the plan ends up focused on a *tight, limited subset* of the institution’s activities. Inevitably, this means that

*Those responsible for drafting the plan must be prepared to deny inclusion of valuable ideas.*

Why is this so? Typically, organizations, largely writ, have *a priori* resource capacities. The main ones are (1) the capacity to carry out the work of the plan and (2) the capacity to finance the plan.

Often, in selecting strategies, planners are reticent to consider that many of those who are expected to carry out a plan’s tasks are already working at full capacity. This is to be expected: the most ambitious members of the organization, who are usually its most busy, are the ones most likely to provide brightest innovations for inclusion in the plan. Though the plan, if successful, may eventually secure resources that permit appropriate expansion of a given operation to accommodate a new initiative, even the planning of the new initiative and the procurement of resources in the implementation phase of the plan can be intense. Planners need to be mindful of the likelihood of this situation.

Planners can also lack awareness that, typically, fundraising efforts are ongoing, and that they may also be already “maxed out.” If the institution is at an appropriate “pause” phase between capital campaigns and is readying for a next major campaign cycle, it may be prepared to amplify its efforts to procure resources. But even in this case, planners must not set sights on goals that will require unnatural (beyond capacity) boosts in fundraising. The easiest way to bring about such fate is to include too many, or too many ambitious initiatives in the plan.

Limitations in capacity underscore the importance of having an audacious, uniform vision as a motivator. But limitations will also indeed require planners to reject for inclusion ideas that are valuable in favor of ideas that are more valuable (or at least more consistent with the audacious, uniform vision). Planners also have to consider resources required for each initiative’s planning and implementation, relating them carefully to the institution’s capacities (most importantly, one may argue, its personnel’s and volunteers’ time). In some cases, a capacity study in fundraising will guide a limit to the plan’s summed (fiscal) needs, but such studies typically do not analyze available time.

All of these considerations drive us to a mantra:

*Planners must assure inclusivity in the planning process, but strategic planning outcomes cannot be fully inclusive.*

A best way to assure that this takes place is to use the concept of “spotlight” initiatives, which the Napa Group’s RJ Valentino advocated for a recent university during its planning process. Spotlight initiatives comprise the plan’s main specific goals, and they are the ones determined to drive the organization most directly toward attainment of its main vision.

The university’s plan worked well using this strategy. The plan featured just eight Spotlight initiatives, total, spread over five general areas. These were in:

- Undergraduate Education
  - Spotlight on a universal first-year living-learning program
  - Spotlight on the natural sciences and student scholarship in them
- Graduate Education
  - Spotlight on formation of a school of education and renown for the business schools and some clinical centers
  - Spotlight on the graduate student experience, no matter which of the three university campuses a given student attends
- Faculty Development
  - Spotlight on faculty support, including a universal pre-tenure research leave
- Community Engagement
  - Spotlight on a Global Studies Program
  - Spotlight on a local community in need, and
- Athletics
  - Spotlight on the university’s athletic facilities and the fan experience.<sup>3</sup>

Though the union of the five main areas is clearly too broadly encompassing, the Spotlight Initiatives within each of them—just one or two in each of the main areas—focused the plan toward specific issues. Even where a given area looks too broad, as is the case in the first Spotlight of the Graduate Education initiative, the text of the goals assured limitation in scope. For example, for the university’s business school, the goal was to ensure greater renown, and not to, say, reach a given threshold in enrollments.

While the use of spotlight initiatives necessarily will force some good ideas to be left “on the cutting room floor,” planners must also decide whether and how to include initiatives that is already underway. One has two options in doing this. A first method is to summarize the activities currently in progress and include them as goals of the plan. The value of doing this is that it can bring about more internal “buy-in” because it shines light on activities in which members of the community are already engaged, with their work now recognized as part of a larger, unifying vision. Inclusion of ongoing initiatives also gives a plan some momentum, in that partial successes already accomplished can be “counted” as part of the plan’s attainments, and some initiatives already underway may reach conclusion relatively early, allowing for success stories that can drive a plan’s wider success further.

A second method for inclusion of ongoing initiatives is to relegate them to an appendix or companion document of the strategic plan. The idea here is that such initiatives, while remaining important, and while receiving assurance of support, is not deemed to be the fresh initiatives that will make a significant difference relative to the plan’s main vision. This separates out and places a highlight on the newer initiatives that are deemed to be “difference makers.”

The above university selected the second strategy, relegating important initiatives already underway as the plan was inked—including some deemed critical, like faculty compensation and specific diversity initiatives—to an appendix of the plan entitled, “Ongoing Initiatives.” These initiatives were not meant to be diminished in priority by being placed in the appendices; rather,

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<sup>3</sup> Though this paper does not discuss the financial dimensions of strategic planning, we note for completeness that the plan used as an example here was set to require roughly \$5 million in new expenditures, across a five-year trajectory.

they were not considered to be new Spotlights that would ultimately propel the university toward its audacious, unifying vision. Though this might have led to controversy, the clarity with which the plan was presented helped members of the university community understand the appropriate rationale for how the initiatives were listed. That stated, failure to commit to at least one important Ongoing Initiative also led to challenges as the plan's execution took place. This is discussed in Action Item/Cautionary Tale 10, below

***Action Item 8: Sew Parallel Strategic Streams Into The Plan's Spotlights.***

Often, institutions may have wide, ongoing "reach" goals that are too broad or too "vanilla" to be part of an inspirational strategic plan. These can be accomplished, at least in part, by assuring congruence between them and initiatives that are selected for the strategic plan. I use an experiential example to demonstrate how this can be done.

As a leader at one institution, my overarching vision for helping the institution realize its mission was to strengthen its faculty further, largely through hiring. Increasing the university's diversity was key to any improvement: prior to implementation of the university's strategic plan, its faculty diversity was strikingly absent. This was true in many dimensions, including the presence of faculty of color, who comprised just 9% of the institution's full-time faculty. Meanwhile, the university's faculty culture for grant acquisition needed significant overhaul; largely because of its legacy financial well being, it had not developed a culture of grant seeking that was common at its peer institutions. With university budgets increasingly threatened in higher education, and with the university beginning to experience fiscal challenges along with its sibling institutions, the need for enhanced grant application activity had become acute. On a simpler level, the institution's faculty were not seeking funding in ways consonant with their success in scholarly production.

Through the development of the university's strategic plan, we were able to address these necessities as parts of the plan's Spotlight Initiatives. For example, over 60% of the plan's Spotlight Initiatives had faculty hiring as part of the plan's execution; these included a living-learning Spotlight, a natural sciences Spotlight, a faculty development Spotlight, a graduate programming Spotlight, and a global studies Spotlight. Over a period of six years, we hired 59 new tenured or tenure-track faculty;<sup>4</sup> because of other factors leading to faculty replacements (retirements, moves, deaths, and so on), we made 136 new tenured or tenure-track hires during a six-year period. This allowed us to have roughly 48% of our full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty appointed within a seven-year span. In parallel with the strategic plan, my division initiated an ambitious hiring program that leveraged current faculty's successes to improve the faculty further as we underwent the new hires. Key to this improvement was an expansion in diversity in all dimensions—including improving the presence of faculty of color to 18% and a marked increase in faculty born in places other than the United States. Most members of the university community, including the legacy faculty who carried out most of the work associated with hiring, are proud that, during execution of the strategic plan, the university experienced a bright renewal of its faculty.

We also leveraged a faculty development initiative to increase grant application activity. Prior to the institution of a new pre-tenure research leave program, we offered a total of nine internal sabbaticals per year to pre-tenure tenure-track faculty. These grants were awarded through an internal competition. Our pre-tenure research leave program gave every pre-tenure faculty member the opportunity to take a semester's leave, at full pay, provided they submit an external grant to an agency approved by their chair and dean. This significantly improved the number of grants submitted by the university's faculty, which grew by 69% over the last five years; we anticipate the new program will bring significant increases in grant procurement in the

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<sup>4</sup> Not all of these were fully-new lines; 18 of the positions were "conversions" of full-time non-tenured and non-tenure-track positions to tenure-track or tenured positions. We deemed these investments worthwhile because they increased the institution's scholarly impact, provided deeper and more lasting knowledge of university mission within the faculty, and lowered the average service load per tenured or tenure-track faculty member.

years to come. The program engages faculty in the grants process at the outset of their careers, while also helping personnel in the institution's office of research and sponsored programs to learn immediately about the specific work in which the new faculty are engaged.

Though none of the faculty renewal, diversity, and grants-related outcomes were related directly to this university's strategic plan's Spotlight Initiatives, the initiatives gave us a platform from which it accomplish them, including necessary resources. This is a key element of a successful strategic plan.

*Action Item 9: Set A Time Line, But Announce And Anticipate Annual Revisions Of It.*

The provision and understanding of a dynamic time line should be included in a successful strategic plan, especially given the speed at which circumstances can change for academic institutions in the current era. As is well documented, higher education suffered serious setbacks in recent years in meeting its fiscal requirements. Though it had not anticipated it, one university encountered myriad fiscal challenges nearly immediately after its strategic plan was birthed. For the first time in many years, budgetary projections, largely because of factors external to the university (e.g., stock market and other valuations associated with its endowment, diminished state funding provisions, near-complete disappearance of short-term interest revenues, challenges for families during and following the recession), forced the university to delay some of its plan's more fiscally ambitious initiatives.

Though few in higher education had predicted the challenges that beset the academe's fiscal health, this university's strategic planning execution weathered the new environment well. From the plan's very beginning—even when the plan was in draft stages—the university included an annual re-assessment feature as a fixture of the plan. All presentations of the plan included clear reminders that any time lines associated with the plan were subject to revision, including annually. This allowed the university to delay implementation of a major living-and-learning program twice, without much fanfare (though some faculty held that the delays were signs that the relatively-controversial program would never be realized). The feature also allowed the university to extend the length of the plan's implementation, as was appropriate, given the financial challenges that accompanied the active years of the plan. The plan is presently extended by two years beyond the university's original intent; following or during the creation of a next plan, the plan will be formally concluded.

The financial circumstances that brought about pauses in this university's plan brought new challenges that have, in part, compromised its success. This is described in the following two Cautionary Tales.

*Action Item/Cautionary Tale 10: Do Not Ignore/"Remove" Your Appendix!*

As noted above, one university wisely elected to relegate several key ongoing initiatives to an appendix of its plan. Unfortunately, as the plan's length was extended and fiscal challenges mounted, some key elements of the plan's Ongoing Initiatives section were abandoned. The most serious of these was the university's faculty compensation agreement, which was approved by the university Board of Trustees, the university president, and the university's faculty at the same time the strategic plan was launched. The compensation agreement contained benchmark salary goals that all parties expected would be met across the five-year time period associated with the plan.

Unfortunately, the university made little significant progress toward meeting the goals of the compensation plan. As the Board of Trustees and new leadership in the university finance office strove to keep the institution fiscally stable under unexpected new circumstances, new priorities—e.g., setting aside monies for funded depreciation—emerged. Despite strong arguments by the Faculty and some administrative personnel, the University changed course, electing to devote new monies to financial initiatives that were not in place when the strategic plan and compensation agreement were launched. Part of this is understandable, given the dynamic nature of university financing and the present environment associated with it. But one should also observe that, as

time went on, new Trustees and university personnel replaced members of the Board and colleagues who were more familiar with the compensation agreement, and especially with the agreement's inclusion as part of the strategic plan. On reflection, with the compensation agreement relegated to an appendix, it probably did not receive the presentational fanfare with the Trustees and other members of the university community that it arguably should have.

Two lessons can be learned here. The first is stark and simple: establishing significant new priorities during execution of a strategic plan is likely to hinder the accomplishment of at least one of the plan's priorities. The second is that, though one can be wise to relegate ongoing initiatives to places in a given plan that may receive less attention, one must still be vigilant in keeping those initiatives in prioritized positions that allow them to progress appropriately, especially as new colleagues arrive as implementation goes forward. This makes for a strong argument for convenient, easily grasped dashboards that summarize a plan's accomplishments.

*Action Item/Cautious Tale 11: Keep The Vision Alive.*

In the section above on audacious goal-setting, we noted the value of having an ambitious, noteworthy vision. One university with an admirable goal has experienced a diminished discussion of its vision: the zeal for the unifying phrase can and should be more readily used in campus conversations than it presently is. Two factors seem to have led to the reduction. Time is one: no matter how audacious or exciting a given vision is, keeping it active or instilling it into the hearts of new personnel can be a challenge. Also, specific to this university's case, shifted emphases to financial survival and well being, caused by dramatic changes in the higher educational environment, have diminished excitement around the president's main vision relative to where it was at the outset of the plan's execution. No matter what the circumstances, most would agree that, until a given plan is formally abandoned, the vision of the plan should be emphasized continually.

### RUNNING THE 5K: REALIZING THE PLAN<sup>5</sup>

The execution of a strategic plan is not without challenges, and it relates closely to many of the issues that surround the planning process. We note that suggestions in this section relate tightly to several of the issues that were discussed above.

*Action Item 12: Tie The Plan To Budgeting, Allocation, And Annual Review Processes.*

Strategic plans should include provisions related to how and when the plan will operate, fiscally. A provision for re-evaluation is key, as are ties to annual budgetary and resource allocation processes. This provides a formal bond between strategy and implementation.

We noted above that one university announced at the outset of its plan's execution that it would re-evaluate the plan annually, and that community members could expect changes based on those evaluations. Each annual evaluation at this university considers the plan's goals relative to the current and coming budgets, and the institution's formal budget allocation processes always include the plan and its initiatives as line items.

At the outset of the plan's execution, a master schedule linked plan initiatives to specific dates that spanned the plan's intended years of duration. As the plan moved forward, each year's draft budgets included the appropriate initiatives. As part of annual budget conversations, the university had to determine which of the slated initiatives were to implement; where necessary, appropriate bodies also determined which slated initiatives were to be delayed until consideration in the following fiscal year's processes.

These activities were key to healthy execution of the university's plan, and they allowed members of the university community to stay focused on implementation of the plan amidst challenging fiscal circumstances by instituting appropriate delays. On the short side, the

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<sup>5</sup> I use "5K" here to remind that 5-year plans are better than longer ones.

university has yet to realize some of the hires associated with two of its plan's major spotlights. But nearly all the other initiatives have been accomplished, with several of them fully implemented and even performing beyond original expectations. Given the many unexpected challenges that beset higher education during the duration of the plan, this speaks to the quality of the plan and the work and support of the many people who contributed to its activities.

As one considers their plan in light of budgets and resource allocation, one may also consider other evaluative processes. For example, as part of one university's response to the ten-year evaluation by its accrediting body, the university evaluated its budgeting decisions and allocations in light of data related to assessments of student learning. This process was forged with considerations related to the strategic plan.

*Action Item 13: Let The Plan Drive Development Operations/Campaigns.*

In creating a strategic plan, one is wise to involve the development operation, and one is also wise to assure that the plan's focus is adopted by that organization. Many institutions engage in capital campaigns to procure resources for the kinds of initiatives that naturally belong to vital strategic plans. This brings about a great potential for symbiosis between a given strategic plan and a capital campaign. In a best of worlds, leadership in development should be part of the strategic planning process so that likelihoods of funding and interests can be matched with strategic initiatives under consideration. Of course, this can misdirect what may be best pathways for an institution, but one must caution that any pathway unfunded is a pathway unrealized.

Campaigns also work well with the short-window plans we advocate in Action Item 6. A typical campaign has a five-year duration; this corresponds with our recommendation of a five-year plan. Timing issues, however, can present challenges. A campaign cannot be prepared in a vacuum, and for it to correspond to a strategic plan, the strategic plan must be complete, or at least nearly complete, as campaign planning is shoring up. One wants to avoid concluding a given strategic plan while fundraising initiatives associated with its goals are still active; this can happen when the plan arrives too far in advance of the campaign. With this in mind, organizations are wise to consider strategic planning and fundraising initiatives in tandem with one another, especially when considering time lines associated with them.

Another issue is one of focus: development operations should focus as strongly as possible on initiatives that are concerted with the strategic plan. This draws donors toward the plan's initiatives, and it can be motivating to personnel responsible for fundraising.

In one university's case, changes in leadership caused campaign planning to start roughly two years after its strategic plan's implementation began. As it was planning a comprehensive fundraising campaign, the university's advancement division announced internally that it would not actively seek to raise funds other than for initiatives associated with the strategic plan. Though the division has welcomed donations for many other initiatives, it has only actively promoted, as part of its campaign, (1) initiatives associated with the plan and (2) student tuition support. This has helped energize the campaign and those associated with it: the plan benefits when campaign support for it materializes, and those involved in fundraising benefit by being able to "shop" initiatives that have broad exposure and sufficient excitement within various campus communities. For example, when students linked to a give initiative that is a plan Spotlight are featured in a university's official magazine, all alumni, including those considering making gifts to the university, can share in some of the wonder that the featured program has generated.

*Action Item/Cautious Tale 14: Keep The Spotlights Focused.*

Once a strategic plan's goals are announced—especially those that are overarching or visionary—members of an organization seeking to have new initiatives approved will quickly map their ideas to the plan. This is true even when the ideas are not specifically part of the plan.

The challenges here run parallel to the ones with which planners engage when they are determining what the strategic plan will include: not all good ideas can go forward. Perhaps the

greatest challenge when executing a prioritized plan is not having resources available to fuel new ideas that are generated after the plan has become active.

A colleague may come in with bright, ambitious goals and bright ways of attaining them while a given strategic plan is underway. The academic leader must be prepared for two situations that require delicate diplomacy. A first occurs when the colleague has mapped their desired initiative to the strategic plan's main vision. In this case, the leader, if not able to fund the new idea, must explain that the plan's defined Spotlights simply have to have priority while the plan is active, no matter what their relative merits.

One experienced this as part of its "Leading Catholic Comprehensive" overarching vision. Time and again, visitors to my office would lead off presentations of new ideas as being directed toward, if not a piece of, this vision; hence, the new ideas were presented as being "part of" the strategic plan. I learned to be prepared for this, as should be anybody involved with executing a strategic plan. I had to assure colleagues that, while I would be happy to consider all new ideas, we had to maintain understanding that the new ideas were not and could not become Spotlights of the strategic plan, for those had been determined; and that the Spotlights will remain our top priorities during the duration of the plan. This made communication of some decisions easier, for it brought order to the institution's prioritization.

A second situation is simply one in which a colleague's new initiative is well presented, without being claimed to be part of the plan, and is not affordable given available resources. The requesting colleague may relate the merits of their idea to those of the strategic plan, making a case that the new idea is as good as or better than those of the plan. In this case, the leader is wise to understand exactly what is being lost by not being able to fund the new idea, and communicate that understanding appropriately. But the leader must also indicate that many ideas were vetted, with only a small number selected, during the planning process, and that, following conclusion of the current plan, a cycle of consideration will commence again. This establishes a place for excellent ideas that one cannot afford to implement right away—in many cases, I could advise that a given colleague keep an idea brewing until the next strategic planning process, and perhaps even provide some small funding to facilitate that. Faculty understood this reasoning and, while in some cases were disappointed, they accepted it.

On occasion, this approach can pay off in surprising ways. For example, a select group of faculty, while implementation of one university's strategic plan was active, sought to create a formal program in peace and justice. Because this was not part of the university's plan, the dean of arts and sciences was not able to provide sufficient funding to realize it. The dean, however, was able to provide funding for conference attendance and meetings that kept exploration of the idea active. Recently, a donor approached the university seeking to fund a peace and justice initiative. Because of the dean's encouragement and past provision of skeletal funding, despite not being able to support the formal development of the program internally, the institution was ready to meet the donor's generosity when the donor kindly offered a major gift to found the program. Of course, the gift also required resiliency from the advancement office because the office had resolved to focus only on the strategic plan, hence the initiative was not specifically part of the university's comprehensive campaign.

When working diligently on the many dimensions of a plan's initiatives as a leader, one can easily forget that members of an organizational community typically have awareness of a relatively small subset of the plan or engage in limited activities associated with the plan. In some cases, re-emphasis on the plan by other leaders within the organization's hierarchy may not occur, so some colleagues may be working on elements of the plan without being specifically aware they are doing so. I have learned during discussions with colleagues that many, if not most, of them have not had exposure to the complete spectrum of efforts involved in a given institution's active plan. With this in mind, when I have to explain why a given new idea cannot supplant one of the current plan, I have learned to share data concerning efforts that are being put into the many

current initiatives of the plan (e.g., the number of fundraising personnel dedicated to them). Most colleagues have found these explanations compelling.

*Action Item/Cautious Tale 15: Recognize That Implementation Takes Person-Time.*

University leaders involved with overseeing strategic plans must always be aware of the planning, effort, and labor associated with the plans' implementation. At one institution, during many periods simultaneous with implementation of our plan, new ideas from various administrative quarters were offered or demanded that were not part of the plan. While we must be certain to accept that new demands on our institutions will at times necessarily require new actions, we must also be vigilant that commitments associated with a strategic plan typically ask many members of a campus community to stretch beyond their customary responsibilities. New ideas piled into the mix can compromise execution of the plan if leaders are not aware of the constellation of efforts associated with the plan. Given the complexities of day-to-day academic life, this awareness can be hard to maintain at times.

*Action Item Cautious Tale 16: Assure New Board Members And Personnel Are Reminded Of Plan.*

As noted in the discussion of one institution's evolving fiscal priorities, above, we must realize that the training of new personnel, including at the trustee level, must include all aspects of a given plan. Reminders associated with a plan's goals must persist, if focus on the plan is to be maintained. Even when the institution assures that this takes place, one can never expect true "ownership" of a given initiative that new personnel, including board members, have not helped create. New colleagues typically seek to forge new initiatives; leadership must be prepared to broker these while remaining with the course associated with a given plan. One must also realize and communicate that, as priorities change, because resources are finite, adding a new major initiative can diminish the capacity to accomplish an important initiative of the strategic plan.

## FINISHING, STRETCHING, RE-ENERGIZING: CLOSING THE PLAN AND RE-GEARING

Sometimes, the termination of a strategic plan can be as much as an art as the creation of one. Plans can linger well beyond their useful lives, and ideas from one plan, unrealized, can drift across planning "oceans" into subsequent plans without the scrutiny that newer ideas typically receive in the planning process. These considerations merit several Action Items and Cautious Tales, most of which are strongly related to the ideas presented above.

*Action Item 17: Always Include The Plan's Duration Dates With Its Title.*

We have discussed above many Action Items that rely strongly on the implementation time line of a strategic plan. These include fundraising campaigns, handling of new ideation that takes place in concert with plan implementation, and so on. With this in mind, all members of a given organization must remain aware of the plan's time line and where the organization is within that interval.

The institution cited in Action Item 9 was wise to include its plan's duration and dates in all presentations associated with it. This was important for reminders related to fundraising efforts; for personnel involved in the plan's continuing execution; and for those incubating new ideas for a coming plan.

Of course, though a good strategic plan should and typically does have a published intended termination date, one should always be aware that environmental circumstances may indeed call for an eventual adjustment of that date. In one university's case, necessary delays pushed the termination date back (forward in time) by at least two years. As described in Action Item 12, above, the plan was created, announced, and implemented with the capacity for such changes honored.

*Action Item/Cautious Tale 18: Cut The Cable While The Plan Still Feels Relatively Fresh.*

As noted above, plans can become “old and dry.” Once this happens, the zeal associated with a given plan can be replaced by malaise. One can sense such developments; at one institution, the most recent plan’s excitement is has started to subside; in part, this is so because so many members of the current campus community, at all levels, are new to the university. They have brought new ideas to the mix, while the people who forged the current strategic plan have accomplished many of theirs. One must be vigilant in sensing when a given plan’s excitement has ebbed. Unless an active fundraising campaign is underway, one is better off moving toward a new plan at an earlier stage, rather than waiting for a given plan, and zeal associated with it, to stall.

***Action Item 19: Do Not Be Compelled To Inject Failed Initiatives Into The Next Plan.***

Even though this should be on a strategic planner’s top-five list of “do-not’s,” time and again strategic planners begin their process by gathering all of the previous plan’s failed initiatives and injecting them into the new plan. In doing this, planners immediately associate what should be new, fresh ambitions with items that have been in the mix for plenty of time, yet have not been accomplished. Even when such failed initiatives are important, they inevitably can be accompanied by negative feelings, including those shared by persons charged with the initiatives who did not succeed, along with a sense that the institution is seeking to accomplish something it cannot. Inclusion of failed initiatives also keeps stories associated with decisions-gone-wrong alive and abuzz. Not a good basis for a new plan!

One recent university plan was rife with new initiatives. Even where some were retained from the previous plan (e.g., diversity), they were reinvigorated with new perspectives (e.g., moving from proportional inclusion (measures of minority presence) to improvement of institutional quality (through expanded diversity). This made for a lively plan, along with lively conversations and marketing associated with it.

***Action Item 20: Use What Was Denied, As Not Being Part Of Plan, As Input Into The Next Plan’s Idea Mix.***

As noted above in Action Item/Cautionary Tale 14, members of an academic community can produce valuable new ideas while a given strategic plan is being executed, but many of these ideas are not able to receive prioritization. Because such ideas are good and already have champions, they make terrific starters for elements—and even, expanded, themes—of an exciting new plan.

**CONCLUSION: SUMMARY OF ACTION ITEMS AND CAUTIONARY TALES**

We conclude with a summary of Action Items and Cautionary Tales discussed in this paper, here listed simply as “Actions.” We rephrase some of the items in order to make them, when not attached to their accompanying text, more portable, and we collect them into the categories of Voices, Vision, Vitality, and Vista.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, to those engaged in or about to engage in planning: all best wishes!

***Voices:***

Action 1: Consult with everybody in sight.

Action 2: Engage a qualified consultant.

Action 3: Know that perceived smaller voices may bring your greatest gifts.

Action 4: Determine and communicate roles, responsibilities, and authorities associated with the plan.

***Vision:***

Action 5: Establish and communicate an audacious, unifying vision for the plan.

Action 6: “Long live the plan!”? No: *Short-life* the plan!

Action 7: Create a small number of tight *Spotlight Initiatives* that drive toward your audacious, uniform vision; relegate ongoing (including ambitious) activities to appendices or companion documents.

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<sup>6</sup> The author thanks Kashlak (2014) for suggesting these categories.

Action 8: Sew parallel strategic streams into your plan's Spotlights.

Action 9: Set a time line for your plan, but announce and assure that members of your community anticipate annual revisions of it.

Action 10: Assure that strategic items that are part of your plan, but not listed as plan spotlights, remain visible and appropriately prioritized, especially in the plan's later years.

Action 11: Maintain emphasis on your plan's audacious, uniform vision for the plan's entire duration.

#### *Vivacity:*

Action 12: Tie your plan to appropriate budgeting, allocation, and annual review processes.

Action 13: Assure that development personnel are involved in your planning process; let the plan drive development operations and campaigns.

Action 14: Keep the spotlights focused: avoid "initiative creep" into your plan's mix of goals and its encompassing vision.

Action 15: Recognize that implementation of your plan takes person-time; avoid adding new "to-dos" to plan implementers' slate of duties.

Action 16: Assure new board members and organizational personnel are aware of and frequently reminded of your plan and its goals.

Action 17: Always include your plan's duration dates with its title.

Action 18: Do not allow zeal associated with your plan to be replaced by malaise: cut the cable while the plan still feels relatively fresh.

#### *Vista:*

Action 19: Do not be compelled to inject the failed initiatives of yesterday's plan into your new plan.

Action 20: Use valuable ideas that could not be realized while your plan is being implemented as input into the next plan's mix of fresh ideas.

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