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# 5 Steps to highly effective Strategic Planning In Higher Education



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**APPR AIS**

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## What is strategic planning in higher education?

Strategic planning is the process an institution follows to realize its vision of its ideal future state. Your vision becomes a reality through the process that defines specific goals, needs, and actions. It helps you to structure and contextualize information leading to important decisions.

## What is the real purpose of the strategic plan in higher education?

Your first and foremost goal should be to stay true to the promises you made to your stakeholders.

Think of your strategic plan as **the foundation to achieve your long-term goals**.

It's supposed to help you translate **high-level ambitions** into **tangible actions** at a departmental level. Furthermore, it organizes everyone so that they can do those actions and report on them in a systematic and transparent manner.

It serves as a guiding light for your staff, allowing them to focus on the things that drive real progress towards the university's strategic goals.

On top of that, it's an important resource for planning your yearly budget allocation. Even in the most difficult financial times, integrating strategic planning and budgeting throughout the organization creates opportunities for success.

## What are the 5 steps in the strategic planning process?

This five-step process will help you to craft a strategic plan that goes beyond marketing and delivers on promised results.





## 1. Understand your current situation

An effective planning process starts with a thorough understanding of your current situation.

You can start by asking these questions:

- *What are our core competencies?*
- *Which important KPIs are trending over the last few years upwards?*
- *Where do we notice a drop in performance? What led to this drop?*
- *Where do we want to be in 5 or 10 years?*
- *Do we need to develop new programs?*
- *How do we get there?*
- *What external factors can impact us in the future?*

Search for answers and go deep into every department and aspect of your institution. From financial health and university rankings to student enrollment, retention rates, and placement rates.

Next, understand the expectations and needs of your internal and external stakeholders.

Remember, top-down approach doesn't work for universities. Higher education institutions are highly interconnected with their community and shouldn't neglect its interest when making strategic decisions.

Collect feedback from every stakeholder group whose expectations affect your performance:

- *Students*
- *Alumni members*
- *Faculty members & campus community*
- *Community groups*
- *Senior administrators*





- *External partnerships*

Include their input into planning and translate it into the institution's major goals.

## 2. Lead with vision and values

Your university's vision is a part of its identity and a powerful latent tool.

A clear and unique **vision statement** will set you apart from the competition and make you more memorable to potential students. They will know exactly what to expect from studying at your university and why they should come.

At the same time, it gives a strong sense of pride and belonging to current students, faculty, and alumni. It becomes an emblem that attracts the right students, staff members, and funding opportunities.

Here's an example of a vision statement for the university:

*We will work as one Oxford bringing together our staff, students and alumni, our colleges, faculties, departments and divisions to provide world-class research and education.*

And don't forget about the **values**. They define your university's culture. They determine how people act, which behaviors are praised and which are condemned.

When you build a culture intentionally, then everyone inside and outside your school knows what you stand for, reinforcing all the benefits of a harnessed vision.

## 3. Concentrate your strategic planning efforts on key areas

Clarifying the obstacles ahead of time helps you prioritize your strategic goals and develop focused efforts to achieve them.

For example, let's say you're creating a 5-year strategic plan. Here are some key focus groups you might want to focus on:





- Provide superb undergraduate experience
- Ensure graduate education and lifetime learning
- Increase community engagement
- Increase research excellence
- Optimize financial resources

Focus areas help you decide what falls outside the university's priorities and prioritize your strategic planning efforts.

## 4. Translate plan into tangible actions

This is the part that turns your strategic plan into reality.

If you ever want to achieve your goals, you need to break down the plan into smaller, granular pieces specific to each department. Start by adding strategic objectives to your focus areas.

The secret to writing great **strategic objectives** is simplicity and specificity. Avoid jargon and use a verb to indicate action. Accompany it with a deadline and preferably an owner (or two).

Here is an example:

*Increase citations per faculty by 5% by May 2024, owned by Jane Doe.*

The next step is to migrate from **goal-setting** to action-planning with projects. Projects describe what you'll do to accomplish your objectives.

**Projects** articulate a set of actions within a certain timeline. They include specific tasks, milestones, dependencies and dates (deadlines). Every objective should include at least one project or action-like event. Otherwise, you'll never achieve any progress towards it.

Of course, nothing is so linear, but this process forces you to come up with action plans to support every strategic initiative and allocate funds and your staff's time appropriately.





## 5. Don't forget to measure progress

There is no perfect strategic planning for higher education (or anywhere for that matter).

Every plan can be derailed by events beyond our control (such as a pandemic, change in public policy, or an unstable economic environment on a global scale). There is, however, disciplined execution through regular reviewing habits. The secret lies in the way you measure your progress and the frequency of reviewing it.

Determine the indexes that you want to improve and then **set key performance indicators (KPIs)** to drive and measure your performance against set targets.

Here are some examples of KPIs you might want to keep track of:

- University ranking
- Post-graduation placement rate
- Number of students involved in undergraduate research
- Fundraising ROI

Establish the KPIs you will be reporting on in advance, and always end your reviews with a "next steps" discussion.

