

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Eight Themes in Strategic Planning

Reflections from a Year of Focused Learning

by Jennifer H. Stephens

Strategic planning and how higher education leaders use strategic planning to move their institutions forward are changing to remain relevant in today's highly competitive and fast-moving environment.

“If we don't change anything, nothing will change.”
—President Mark P. Becker, Georgia State University

INTRODUCTION

STRATEGIC PLANNING IS DIRECTLY TIED to the trajectory and forward momentum of an organization. In 2015–2016, I had the opportunity to experience this firsthand as I participated in an intensive leadership development program as an American Council on Education Fellow. I spent the academic year at a host institution, Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, learning under my co-mentors, president Mark P. Becker and provost Risa Palm. My area of focused learning for the entire year was strategic planning.

During the year, I observed and contributed as Georgia State went through a revision process at the midpoint of its 10-year strategic plan. I had the opportunity to observe a highly complex research university as it evaluated its current plan, identified its accomplishments against the plan, wrestled with the plan's relevance five years after its initial development, tweaked the plan, and moved into the action planning phase for the second half of its implementation. Following a consolidation with a two-year institution in January 2016, Georgia State has more than 52,000 students and is one of the nation's largest universities. The complexity of the organization cannot be overstated.

In addition to learning about strategic planning through immersion in my host institution, I visited 20 different college and university campuses in eight states and collected 19 strategic plans from universities and other organizations. Several of these visits involved sit-down meetings with the organization's president and other leaders responsible for the strategic planning process and results.

The year was one of intentional and focused learning on how college and university leaders are using strategic planning to move their institutions forward.

STRATEGIC PLANNING DEFINED

Since the field of strategic planning was born in the 1950s and '60s with the military and municipal governments (Young 2003), many definitions of strategic planning have been offered. Young (2003) defines strategic planning as a process of developing a long-term plan to guide an organization toward clearly articulated statements of mission, goals, and objectives. Barry (1997, p. 5) states that strategic planning is the process of determining “(1) what [an] organization intends to accomplish, and (2) how [leadership] will direct the organization and its resources toward accomplishing these goals.” Drucker (1993) defines it as the ongoing process of making “entrepreneurial” decisions methodically and with the maximum knowledge of futurity, logically organizing efforts to implement those decisions, and assessing the results of those decisions as compared to targets or expectations

through feedback. Mintzberg (1994) offers that strategic planning involves both analysis and synthesis. The analysis is breaking down a goal or set of intentions into steps, formalizing and articulating them, while the synthesis, which involves intuition and creativity, is what strategic thinking is all about. Mintzberg (1994) states that real strategic change is about inventing new categories, not rearranging old ones, and that an important role of planners is to study the hard data and ensure that managers consider the results in the strategy-making process.

THE PURPOSE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IS TO EFFECT CHANGE

With these definitions as a backdrop, it is important to remember that strategic planning is a process and its purpose is to manage change. A traditional understanding of change management includes Lewin's (1958) unfreeze-change-freeze model that provides a way to think about managing change based on the analogy of a block of ice. You unfreeze the organization, make a change, and then freeze it again in its new form. With a greater understanding of organizational dynamics and rapidly changing environments, change management more recently has been defined as "the process of continually renewing an organization's direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers" (Moran and Brightman 2001, p. 111). Change management is understood to be more fluid and constant. According to Burnes (1996), change is an ever-present feature of organizational life, both at an operational and strategic level. Therefore, there should be no doubt regarding the importance to any organization of its ability to identify where it needs to be in the future and how to manage the changes required to get there.

The strategic planning process changes as environments change. Grant (2003) studied strategic planning in the turbulent environment of the oil industry, noting that since the 1980s, systematic, formalized approaches to strategy

formulation have come under heavy attack from management scholars due to the impossibility of forecasting (Mintzberg 1994). Increased volatility in the business environment makes systematic strategic planning more difficult. Rapid change requires strategies that are flexible and creative—characteristics that, according to Hamel (1996), are seldom associated with formalized planning. Grant (2003) found that strategic planning practices have adapted to a world of rapid, unpredictable change by becoming more decentralized, less staff driven, and more informal, while strategic plans themselves have become more short term, more goal focused, and less specific with regard to actions and resource allocations. Strategic planning has become less about strategic decision making and more a mechanism for coordination and performance management.

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With this backdrop in understanding strategic planning and change management, I launched into my year of practical learning.

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY AND ITS STRATEGIC PLAN

After President Becker came to Georgia State University in 2009, the strategic planning process began almost immediately. The year 2010 was spent in a comprehensive plan development process, and the plan was launched in a speech on January 31, 2011. Hundreds of individuals contributed to the plan, which was framed as a guide for the university (founded in 1913) as it entered its second century on a path to becoming one of the nation's premier research institutions.

The plan consisted of five goals:

- » *Goal 1:* Become a national model for undergraduate education by demonstrating that students from all backgrounds can achieve academic and career success at high rates.
- » *Goal 2:* Significantly strengthen and grow the base of distinctive graduate and professional programs that ensure development of the next generation of researchers and societal leaders.
- » *Goal 3:* Become a leading public research university addressing the most challenging issues of the 21st century.
- » *Goal 4:* Be a leader in understanding the complex challenges of cities and developing effective solutions.
- » *Goal 5:* Achieve distinction in globalizing the university.

On September 10, 2016, President Becker launched the mid-point revision process of the 2011–2021 strategic plan in his State of the University address to the university community. He announced the co-chairs and members of the strategic planning committee who would lead the revision process and provided the boundaries for how that process would proceed. The five goals of the plan were not permitted to change, but initiatives under the goals could be tweaked. Any initiatives that had been completed during the first five years could be removed, and new initiatives could be added but only in proportion to the number of initiatives removed. The general scope of the plan had to remain the same. He framed the process with a 1997 Apple commercial that focused on thinking differently. He noted that Georgia State had received national recognition as an innovative institution, and so its strategic planning process should be characterized by thinking big and thinking differently.

Accomplishments against the first five years of the plan were captured and communicated to galvanize the community around the extraordinary progress that had already been

made. Evidence showed a significant upward trajectory during the plan's first five years that included national recognition for student success improvements, most notably a 22 percentage point increase in graduation rates from 32 percent to 54 percent over the period 2003–2014. During this same period, Georgia State eliminated achievement gaps based on race, ethnicity, first-generation status, and income level while maintaining its nationally recognized student diversity and seeing an 80 percent increase in the number of Pell-eligible students enrolled. In other words, graduation rates increased significantly without increasing admissions selectivity. Another notable accomplishment was a near doubling of research awards from \$59 million in fiscal year 2011 to \$101 million in fiscal year 2015. The strategic plan revision was designed to build on these extraordinary accomplishments and further drive the university toward its goals.

The strategic planning committee met from September 2015 to January 2016, conducting more than 10 focused meetings with key groups, collecting feedback from a website that solicited input from the university community, and conducting a SWOT analysis with input from more than 70 individuals at Georgia State. In November, five town hall discussions were held around the five goals. In February and March 2016, the final draft was tweaked with engagement from the president, and in April, the University Senate, which included representation from faculty, staff, and students, approved the plan. In May, the focus shifted to action planning. The provost held a retreat with her cabinet to recalibrate the work in her area, and the president hosted a retreat with the administrative council, a large body of leaders who would all ultimately be responsible for the plan's implementation.

A full year of immersion in Georgia State's strategic plan revision process was somewhat like a study-abroad experience in which I had the opportunity to learn from every perspective possible—from the president and provost, faculty, committee chairs, Foundation Board members, website strategists, and other staff members.

REVIEW OF STRATEGIC PLANS FROM 19 ORGANIZATIONS

In addition to a full immersion experience at my host institution, I reviewed 19 different strategic plans from 19 distinct colleges, universities, and other organizations (figure 1). The plans came from a wide array of organizations—from research universities to schools within universities to other state organizations in eight states (although predominantly from Georgia since that is where my travels centered). The plans were selected due to convenience and interest and not through a scientific process.

Figure 1 **Institutional Strategic Plans Reviewed**

Institution/Organization	Location	Timeframe for Plan (Span of Years)	Timeframe for Plan (No. of Years)
1 Georgia Institute of Technology	Atlanta, GA	2010–2035	25
2 Atlanta Regional Commission	Atlanta, GA	2011–2036	25
3 Georgia State University	Atlanta, GA	2011–2021	10
4 University of the South	Sewanee, TN	2012–2022	10
5 Vanderbilt University	Nashville, TN	2014–2024	10
6 Emory University	Decatur, GA	2005–2015	10
7 University of Georgia	Athens, GA	2012–2020	8
8 Agnes Scott College	Decatur, GA	2007–2014	7
9 The Citadel	Charleston, SC	2012–2018	6
10 Purdue University, West Lafayette Campus	West Lafayette, IN	2008–2014	6
11 College of Law, Georgia State University	Atlanta, GA	2014–2020	6
12 University of West Georgia	Carrollton, GA	2014–2020	6
13 Eshelman School of Pharmacy, University of North Carolina	Chapel Hill, NC	2012–2017	5
14 University of Arizona	Tucson, AZ	2013–2018	5
15 University of Maryland, Baltimore County	Baltimore, MD	2015–2020	5
16 Atlanta Metropolitan State College	Atlanta, GA	2014–2018	4
17 Ramapo College of New Jersey	Mahwah, NJ	2014–2018	4
18 Carl Vinson Institute of Government	Athens, GA	2013–2017	4
19 Clayton State University	Morrow, GA	2011–2014	3

The plans were in different stages—some were newly completed, some were in the implementation stage, some were in the development process, and one had gone through an emergency rewrite due to financial concerns. Some were gathered from websites and others from sit-down meetings with those responsible for the strategic planning process. Some were identified as academic strategic plans, some as institutional strategic plans. Several had been through a revision process.

A review of these plans and the notes taken while visiting several of these organizations, as well as the full year of immersion in the Georgia State University strategic planning process, surfaced eight key themes worthy of highlighting:

1. *Shorter time spans.* Of note is the number of years the strategic plans spanned: the mean was 8.4 years and the median was 6 years. Since external environments are changing much more rapidly than in the past, it is more difficult to forecast future external conditions. Institutions have historically set goals that will take 10, 15, and even 20 years to accomplish because they have had a relatively stable external environment in which to plan. With external conditions changing at an increasingly rapid pace, institutions have determined that strategic planning must be focused on shorter future time spans. This aligns with Grant's (2003) observation that strategic plans are encompassing shorter terms.
2. *Broad brushstrokes.* Most of the plans I reviewed had goals that were broad in nature or identified as "strategic initiatives" or "strategic directions." I did not see a lot of highly specific language indicating exactly where the organization should go. Instead, language tended to point the organization in a direction and be more visionary in nature. While benchmarking and success measures were part of many plans, flexibility was permitted. This most likely is related to the rapid pace of change in the external environment. It is difficult for

institutions to know exactly how external conditions will change so they cannot say with specificity how they will accomplish a particular goal. Instead, the idea is to state a goal in visionary terms but leave plenty of room for adjustments in how it will be accomplished. In other words, if the organization missed the exact mark, it was not as concerning as whether the organization was moving with deliberation in the right direction. This observation also aligns with Grant's (2003) statement that strategic plans are becoming more goal focused and less specific.

3. *Communication matters.* If the plan has been well developed but people cannot understand it, it will not be successful. Many organizations had multiple communication channels focused on the plan, for example, blogs, speeches, talking points, videos, websites, and emails. Organizations and their leaders tried to get the word out in every way possible that the plan was in the process of being developed, explaining to stakeholders why it mattered and how they could get involved. There were many updates on websites outlining exactly where the plan was in its process. The final published plans were sprayed with photos, infographics, and "by the numbers" explanations in an effort to clearly communicate to all audiences what the plan and the plan's accomplishments meant. In other words, organizations were communicating the value proposition that the work they were doing was relevant and important.

Historically, strategic plans have been developed in a phase I and communication has occurred in a phase II. The new trend toward increased communication was seen in the simultaneous development and communication of the plan, the variety of channels used, and the repetition of key messages. Communication was not just focused on a description of the goals, but on why the goals should matter to a variety of stakeholders.

4. *Simplicity rules.* The most complex of initiatives was described in the simplest of terms possible. Georgia State has its strategic plan summarized on one sheet of paper. The University of West Georgia has a small, digestible booklet outlining its plan. The Atlanta Regional Commission has an executive summary of its 25-year plan with limited text and clearly defined directions. In a rapidly changing world and in complex organizations, a strategic plan is designed to help others focus. Attention spans are short, and in a world deluged with information that people need to sort and filter for meaning, the more simply one can explain a complex plan, the more likely the relevance of the work will be understood. In essence, an organization should be able to clearly tweet its strategic plan. Simplicity is a powerful tool to create that focus.

An organization should be able to clearly tweet its strategic plan.
5. *Use of data.* The use of data is a core component of strategic planning. Every strategic plan I reviewed emphasized the importance of data in its development. When organizations understand what is trending both internally and in their surrounding environment, they can be in the best possible position to predict the future and therefore establish a sure course for that future. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, had a data analyst from Institutional Research placed on every strategic planning subcommittee. The Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) engaged more than 700 individuals who were not Georgia Tech employees in strategic planning working groups in an effort to use data from the community and its partners to inform its plan. Georgia State analyzed a decade of institutional student data to determine where the roadblocks were for students as they progressed toward graduation and then systematically addressed those roadblocks one by one to attain marginal gains that added up to a 20 percent increase in graduation rates.
6. *Competitive edge.* As organizations strove to identify what differentiates them from others in the competitive higher education landscape, most articulated their unique position in the marketplace. Terms like “The Vanderbilt Advantage,” Agnes Scott College’s “SUMMIT” experience, The Citadel’s leadership focus, and Georgia State’s focus on cities were all efforts to strategically position each institution in a market niche that distinguishes it from other institutions. The University of the South holds strong to its Episcopal heritage and to the Domain, 13,000 acres of beautiful forest within a few minutes’ walk from campus, as its primary distinguishing asset. The Domain is the university’s unique opportunity for students to do research, find recreation, and contemplate all that they are learning. Higher education institutions must be able to respond to market pressures and clearly articulate to stakeholders the unique benefits they offer, making it clear how they are different from other benefit providers.
7. *Organizational alignment.* Day-to-day decisions must be linked to the plan. If a strategic plan is pulled out only when it is politically useful, then it is not a true plan. The seven key resources of the university must all be aligned with the plan: money, people, time, space, technology, data, and policy. Departments, units, divisions, schools, offices, vendors, partners—all must be aligned, as must be master facility plans, technology plans, budget plans, economic development plans, and community plans. To effect true change, there must be alignment among leadership, people, initiatives, budgets, and other related plans.
8. *Leadership makes all the difference.* I was consistently reminded that the energy and focus a president and a provost put into the strategic plan are critical to its success. When senior leaders are in alignment in the shaping of the plan, know the plan, help write the plan (and rewrite it), emphasize it, resource it, measure against it, and keep it at the center of the institution’s life, the plan can be a symbol, a collaboration point,

a sharpening tool, and a light toward the path to the future. The emotion and intellect that senior leaders invest in the university's plan exudes a sense of purpose in the lives of all those engaged in it. The presence of strong leadership in the plan creates pressure to effect change, but the absence of such leadership leaves the plan without any real power.

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FINAL REFLECTIONS

As I reflect on an intensive and challenging year learning about strategic planning, I am reminded that we as human beings have purpose and a desire to better our world. We must engage deeply in the world around us, including in our institutions of higher education. We must try to continuously improve them. We must envision this improvement and plan for it to happen by wrestling with what is most important and throwing our minds and hearts into the process of charting a course toward those things that are most important. There is not “just one piece” that will give us all the gains our organizations need, but it is a collection of marginal gains that moves us forward. We must create the “new categories” to which Mintzberg (1994) alluded. As leaders and planners we must constantly learn, challenge ourselves, take risks, and use innovation and creativity to shape our future.

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