Strategic Planning

Position Your Institution
for Long-Term Success

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If you're like many higher education institutions, you have a beautiful PDF or digital flipbook on your website that outlines a five- to 10-year "strategy." This document codifies your commitment to build enrollment, sustain your financial position, and increase your research productivity or alumni engagement. It was built through an unapologetically inclusive process. The plan is a detailed set of goals for your institution written by a collection of stakeholders. Sometimes, these plans are used for fundraising and are often allocated significant resources for implementation.

But are these strategic plans actually strategic? Or are they simply extensive, but generic, reiterations of mission and values?

Plans are strategic when they:

• Are driven by a long-range vision for the future

• Offer a road map for achieving a competitive advantage or market distinction

• Anticipate trends in an uncertain environment

Explore this strategic planning guide as we help you navigate the process of aligning your strategy to your vision, by building it from the ground up.

The Road Map to Your Strategic Plan

1. Discovery

Collect internal information and external perceptions about the institution to learn more about your operating environment.

The discovery phase of strategic planning should be the most straightforward. It's an important distinction. Institutions should self-evaluate, including taking an inventory of how others in the internal environment and the external environment view them. You can do this through a combination of data pulls, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and environmental scanning. This is an essential step in understanding your culture, and it's even more critical to understanding potential weaknesses or threats to your operation.

You might have recognized two words in that last sentence. Discovery is also where a traditional SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis occurs. A strong facilitator can help you distinguish between these elements at

your institution, but the gist of it is that strengths and weaknesses are internal, and opportunities and threats are external.

One mistake often made in strategic planning is too much focus on internal aspects. Remember, strategy isn't about doing things better, which is what we do when we're trying to meet an internal benchmark. It's about achieving a long-term advantage. Such an advantage requires you to look externally, just as a good political candidate needs to understand the zeitgeist, voter demographics, and economic realities of the next election year. Of course, this may require a paradigm shift that can be challenging. But it can also be exciting.

2. Visioning

Get your team energized about your institution's ideal future state, so that you can move from simple planning into strategic planning.

A good strategic plan acknowledges that change, even necessary change, is hard. You might start by evaluating your readiness for transformation.

- What are the organization's barriers to change?
- What do you expect to be particularly hard, and how do you build a strategy that anticipates and responds to those barriers?

The desired resolution to this process is a shared commitment to design driven by identifying your purpose for action. In other words, why do things need to change, and what will guide us as we lean into our ideal future state? There are several philosophies and approaches to doing this. Our proprietary visioning methodology, for instance, is designed to elicit answers to these questions.
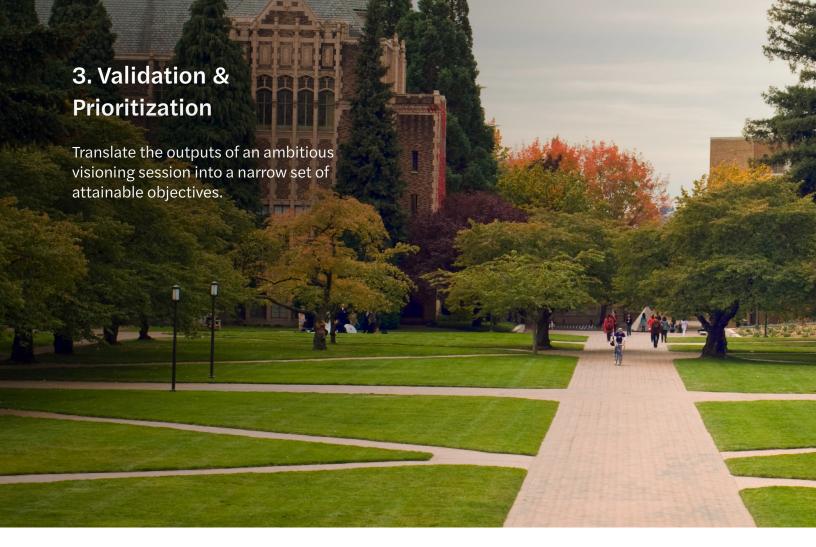
After some consensus on purpose is reached and a plan for change is initiated, it's critical to imagine the ideal, boundless future state. At Forvis Mazars, we call

this "blue sky visioning," but the name isn't important. This process requires the institution to let go of today and focus on imperatives of the future.

- Is your current financial path unsustainable?
- Are you anticipating demographic headwinds that aren't compatible with your operating model?
- Do you have a particular strength that positions you well for opportunities in the future?

Visioning kickstarts the creative process by challenging the institution to think without constraints. In this supercharged brainstorming session, all ideas are on the table, and a premium is placed on doing things differently in order to gain a strategic advantage.

3. Validation & Prioritization

Translate the outputs of an ambitious visioning session into a narrow set of attainable objectives.

By attainable, we don't necessarily mean "safe." It's also an opportunity to validate the vision with a broader group of constituents and align it with the institution's resources. Here are a few questions to ask during this process:
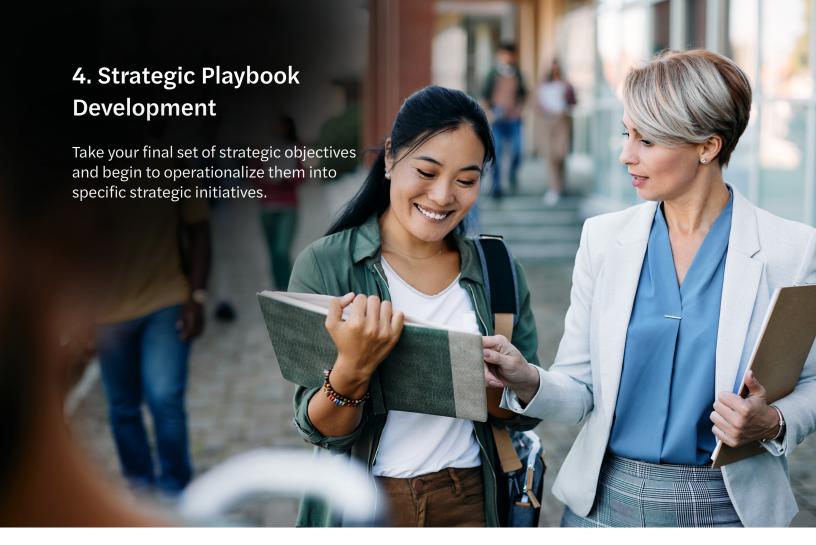
How do we stay focused on strategy while engaging campus constituencies in important prioritization activities?

- How can we communicate the important role campus components played during the discovery phase and how that role contributed to the shared vision? How do we build excitement about initiatives without overpromising?

- How do we help our people think strategically so that we can effectively prioritize objectives?

- How can we get quality feedback on our emerging strategic plan from these constituents? A survey? A set of well-facilitated focus groups? When should this occur?

How do we identify potential costs (financial, reputational, mission, and otherwise) for those objectives that emerge as clear priorities?

- Should we develop a pro forma budget or set of financial statements?

- How do we account for best- and worst-case scenarios for elements such as enrollment and expenses that may limit (or enable) some of our activities?

- How do we determine whether initiatives are accretive?

- Who determines which objectives will move forward in the planning process?

- When are those objectives communicated to the campus community?

- Who will communicate the emerging plan to the campus community?

- How will particularly negative or pessimistic feedback be received and handled during this phase?

4. Strategic Playbook Development

Take your final set of strategic objectives and begin to operationalize them into specific strategic initiatives.
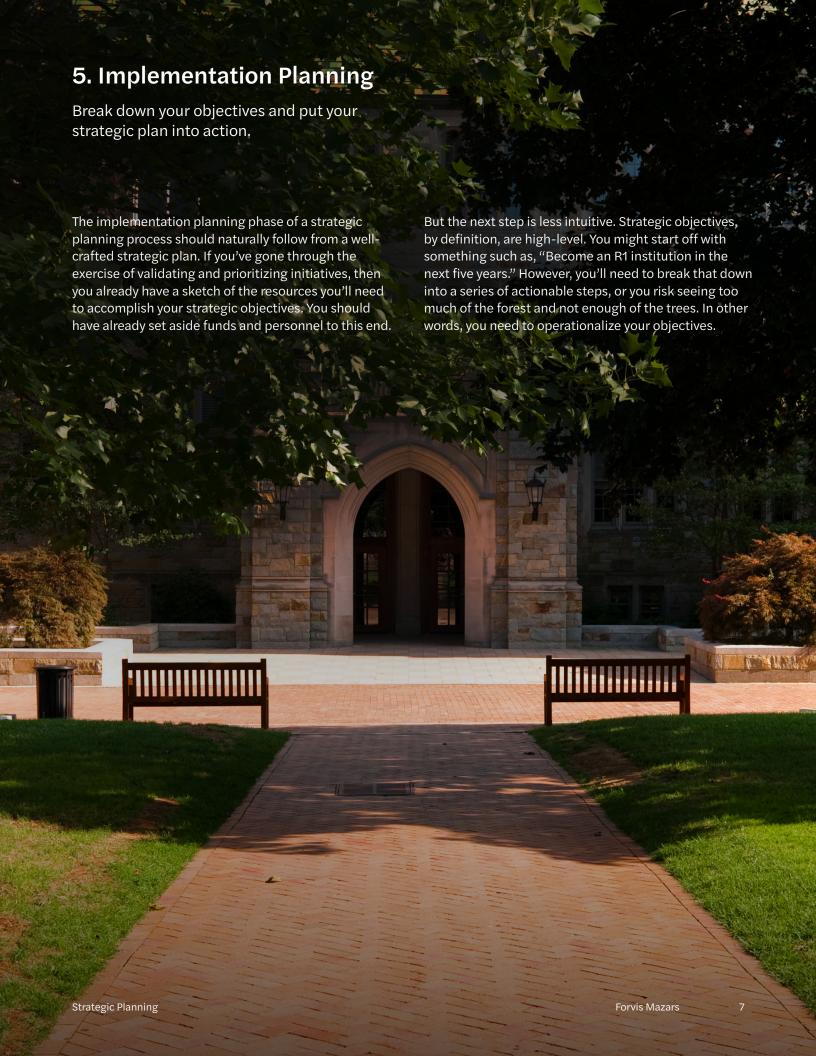
Based on our experience, we expect that each high-level strategic objective will require three to four strategic initiatives to accomplish it. We also expect this to vary depending on the nature of the plan. Again, the final plan should have a narrow, not broad, focus. You may end up with just one highly strategic and heavily prioritized objective. In that case, the objective should demand the bulk of the institution's available resources and lead directly to the institution's continued success or turnaround.

Your final objectives should be time-limited as well, making it much easier to hold yourself accountable for accomplishing them and also more compelling. For instance, if one of your objectives is to become an R1 institution, it's very energizing to the stakeholders when the objective is framed as something that will happen "within five years" rather than "someday."

If the objective cannot be attained in a defined time period, it may be appropriate to revisit that objective and revise it to something more focused, on your way to the "bigger" objective down the road. In the example of seeking R1 status, a more realistic five-year objective might be to focus exclusively on awarding more doctoral degrees. This approach allows you to focus on one thing, rather than spreading your resources to items like research spending, which may not be in the budget yet. Of course, the information acquired in phases one through three should inform playbook development and drive your answers to these questions.

5. Implementation Planning

Break down your objectives and put your strategic plan into action.

The implementation planning phase of a strategic planning process should naturally follow from a well-crafted strategic plan. If you've gone through the exercise of validating and prioritizing initiatives, then you already have a sketch of the resources you'll need to accomplish your strategic objectives. You should have already set aside funds and personnel to this end.

But the next step is less intuitive. Strategic objectives, by definition, are high-level. You might start off with something such as, "Become an R1 institution in the next five years." However, you'll need to break that down into a series of actionable steps, or you risk seeing too much of the forest and not enough of the trees. In other words, you need to operationalize your objectives.

Key Questions to Consider When Operationalizing Objectives in Higher Education

1. **What are the key results that would indicate you've accomplished your objectives? In the R1 example above, according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education,[1] the results would be:**

   a. Awarding at least 70 doctoral degrees annually

   b. Pending at least $50 million on research and development annually

2. **Where are you now? How far are you from achieving those key results, and what has prevented you from achieving those key results in the past?**

   a. Perhaps you've seen steady growth in your doctoral programs over the last three years, and you expect to reach a goal of 70 organically in the next five years.

   b. However, you understand that you'll need to double your research expenditures to meet a goal of $50 million, and you currently lack programs, faculty, and partnerships that would enable that kind of growth.

3. **Which key results are attainable, given the budget and timeline that you've allocated for your strategic plan?**

   a. Will recruiting faculty with different programs of research get you there in five years?

   b. Will dedicating resources to establishing public-private partnerships move you forward?

Once you answer the questions above, start to break each key result into a series of action items and attach them to a specific timeline. If you're focused on research expenditures, for instance:

- Open three new faculty lines focused on energy engineering with a start date of next fall.

- Apply for 10 grants worth at least $500,000 within two years.

- Identify 15 potential corporate partners and secure meetings with each in the next 18 months.

- Establish two corporate partnerships providing at least $1 million in external funding in energy engineering within the next 36 months.

Of course, the process is more complex than what we can cover and will require involvement from people across your organization. We recommend taking a detailed project management approach to implementation by committing to the following best practices:

- Establish an implementation committee or task force and assign a cabinet-level team member to lead it. At a minimum, hold quarterly meetings of this group. The meeting will give members an opportunity to learn from each other and identify areas where the plan is off track.

- Assign a champion to each strategic objective and ask them to provide regular reports on progress directly to the implementation committee. Progress should be measured against key results identified above. Success will be challenging, if not impossible, without this kind of accountability.

- Provide regular progress reports to the board, leadership team, and campus community. It is much easier for people to help you accomplish your strategic plan if they see it regularly and can celebrate wins together. We recommend a dashboard that folks can view on demand rather than a static report.

- Don't be afraid to revisit an objective or action that isn't working. Strategy is fluid because it anticipates an operating environment that is almost always dynamic.

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1 "2025 Research Activity Designations FAQs," carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu, 2025.

Considerations When Developing a Great Strategic Planning RFP

Below are areas to consider when you're developing your strategic planning request for proposal (RFP). You might even think about the exercise of writing the RFP as a pre-planning phase, where you outline your vision for how the process should unfold and whom it should involve to produce the most strategic of plans. Hopefully, this will also save you some time by pre-empting those questions from respondents as well.

Consultant's Role

An important consideration, since the skills you're requesting from the consultant are likely steering your evaluation of responses.

☐ How will the consultant contribute to the process?

☐ Should the consultant develop the strategy or facilitate its development?

☐ Should the consultant lead stakeholder engagement or advise on its timing?

☐ Will the consultant present the final strategic plan to the board?

☐ Should the consultant advise on all aspects of the process, from data requests to formatting of the final document?

Stakeholder Engagement

☐ If consensus is the goal, then how will you begin to collect input?

☐ Will there be surveys, interviews, focus groups, and/or workshops?

Surveys allow you to collect a lot of information from a lot of people, but they can feel cursory, if not passive. You'll also want to think about who you consider "stakeholders"; there are quite a few different approaches on this.

Timeline for Deliverables

Believe it or not, this is one of the most overlooked aspects of RFPs.

☐ When do you need this project to be complete, and how much time do you need from your consultant to accomplish everything from data analysis to stakeholder engagement, and refining your strategic initiatives with leadership?

Process Leadership

☐ Who will champion this effort internally?

☐ Will there be a steering committee?

☐ What role will that steering committee play through the process?

☐ Will it drive strategy via a competent external facilitator, or will it be asked to certify strategies developed by the consultant?

Modality

☐ How much, and what of the process, will take place in person versus remotely?

Travel and the time associated with travel are huge drivers of cost to the project. When travel needs are ambiguous, it's not uncommon for responses to build in additional fees to cover the potential for this unknown. Being intentional about your travel needs will produce more accurate fee quotes.

How Forvis Mazars Can Help Your Institution

Whether you're a storied institution preparing to take your mission to the next level or a growing college looking to find new ways to serve your students, a strategic plan is your road map for the future. Based on our culture of forward vision and experience across multiple industries, we bring a tested strategic planning process designed to help you build and maintain momentum.

Your Mission, Your Vision, Your Future

Our process, designed by leading strategists and tailored for higher education, brings key stakeholders to the table to develop sustainable initiatives to put your mission first. After discovery and validation of your data, culture, and history, we facilitate productive conversations with cross-functional teams on campus. We aim to help you and your team identify your vision, synergize it with your resources, and monitor progress from conception to implementation.

Success-Ready Planning

Our approach addresses the likely causes of apathy by starting big, narrowing your priorities to align them with resources, and landing on a long-range strategy that differentiates and adapts. Through leadership and board of trustee meetings and workshops with stakeholders, we will help you move from institutional goals to a future where your mission is front, center, and realized. During the process, we bring our proprietary benchmarking and financial planning tools into the fold to create a detailed approach.

See how we can support your institution.

Discover More

How Our Consultants Can Help

Our experienced consultants understand the business of higher education, those who drive it, and the value each institution adds to the collective future.

Financial Health
- Program Economic Analysis
- Financial & Scenario Modeling
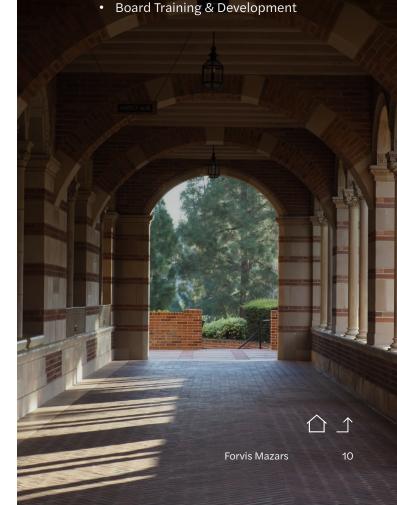- Strategic Academic Planning
- Financial Exigency Consulting

Strategy
- Strategic Planning
- Mergers, Acquisitions, & Other Strategic Partnerships
- Student Body Analytics
- Market Analysis
- Higher Education Benchmarking

People & Culture
- Organizational Development & Change Management
- Faculty & Staff Compensation Studies
- Workshops & Specialized Training
- Board Training & Development

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