

A Shared Future: Advancing Institutional Goals by Aligning Library, Unit, and Campus Strategic Plans

Alexandra Stark

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin, USA

alex.stark@wisc.edu

ABSTRACT

Higher education is undergoing radical change due to heightened competition, increased globalization, and changing student populations. Universities are using mission and vision statements to provide clarity for everyone in the institution during this period of change and uncertainty. Strategic plans are created to provide a pathway for the institution to reach a desired future which addresses the diverse challenges and opportunities impacting higher education. However, without collective commitment to the organizational goals and objectives by all units and departments, strategic work becomes siloed and serves to create a separation between campus administration and faculty and staff.

This paper explores methods and strategies library units and departments can use to align themselves with organizational strategic plans in order to demonstrate value to campus leadership and advance institutional goals. To further examine institutional alignment, this paper will demonstrate alignment methodology in practice through the University of Wisconsin - Madison Libraries' E-Learning Plan as a case study. The University of Wisconsin - Madison's Chancellor launched an initiative to offer online undergraduate degrees starting Fall 2020. The Libraries' created the E-Learning Plan to shift information literacy instruction and library services online and to be responsive and proactive to the changing campus landscape.

Challenges, successes, and emerging best practices from the creation of the E-Learning Plan are considered. Librarians and professionals can apply observations and lessons learned from the development of a unit plan that aligns with campus initiatives and campus-level strategic plans to their own institutions and libraries.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Leadership, E-Learning

INTRODUCTION

Higher education faces an unknown future, which has only been exacerbated by the events of year 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic and economic instability have placed most institutions into an uncomfortable and unpredictable scenario. Will institutions be able to return to in-person instruction in the Fall? Will the number of students seeking post-secondary education decrease? Will organizations be able to survive the economic losses of 2020? All of these questions and so many more

culminate into one major question: how does an institution plan for the future when there are so many unknowns?

Crisp (1991) defines strategic planning in higher education as “the set of activities designed to identify the appropriate future direction of a college and includes specifying the steps to move in that direction” (p. 3). This is a simple definition for a complex process. However, it does emphasize the most important aspects identifying a desired future state and outlining the goals, objectives, or plans that will move your organization forward into that future. Institutions will utilize their strategic plans to help direct budgets, resources, and decisions in the upcoming years as they face a myriad of challenges. Strategic plans are not developed solely for the use of campus administration, as they impact all departments and units within the organization. However, strategic planning is not only useful at the administration level. Library units and departments have begun to create their own strategic plans to ensure that their work aligns with the goals of the library and with campus plans and initiatives, which often demonstrate the value of libraries to campus leadership. This alignment can also lead to a more unified campus that shares the same desired future across all departments. This paper will explore challenges facing higher-education, strategic planning, and alignment methodology through a use case from University of Wisconsin - Madison (UW- Madison).

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Enrollment in American higher education has been declining since 2012-2013, which is a radical change from the consistent increase seen from 1970-2012 (Alexander, 2020, p. 42). Institutions are currently competing to recruit students as well as federal and state funding. There are many factors contributing to this situation, including globalization, changing demographics, and decreasing enrollment.

Millions of students from around the world study internationally. Traditionally, the United States has been a top destination for international students. In the last decade, there has been an emergence in the global higher education marketplace. This is mainly due to an increase in liberal arts education offerings in nations that typically did not offer that avenue and global rankings of institutions by research output and teaching, rather than just national rankings (Alexander, 2020). The competition for international students has increased among nations, and this can be heightened by geopolitics. Applications from international students declined starting in 2016 after the “dual impact of the Trump administration’s immigration policies and media coverage of school shootings,” while applications rose in competing English-speaking countries, such as Canada and Australia (Alexander, 2020, p.31). The United States has recruited heavily from East and Central Asia, but increased tensions between Washington D.C. and Beijing could damage the consistently large number of Chinese students in the United States. International Higher education growth and geopolitics have dramatic implications on student recruitment and the associated revenue.

The demographics of students have also been evolving as the American population changes. For some time, there has been a steady decline in the birth rate and number of children in America, which will only become worse over the next decade in response to the Great Recession of 2008 (Machovec, 2017). The result of declining birth rates correlates with a decrease in the amount of “traditional” college-aged students (18-24 year olds). A declining population is not the only factor impacting enrollment—ballooning student loan debt. Increased economic inequality, structural racism, and the longest-American war in history have all contributed to a decreasing college enrollment. Because “there is a direct correlation with the size of the student body and available revenue, either through tuition or funding from the state or municipality,” this reduction in enrollment has also resulted in damaging financial consequences for academic institutions (Machovec, 2017, p.578). The reduced revenue has placed most institutions in a difficult situation, and as a result, they have had to adjust their recruitment strategies. Campuses have been competing for more adult and non-traditional learners, shifting the profile of the average college student – “American students are more likely to be older, nonwhite, female and first- generation learners and to have military experience than ever before” (Alexander, 2020, p.47).

Even with these efforts, campuses are still facing budget crises and challenges that have led to drastic measures, such as closed departments, reduced faculty and staff, reduced operations and programs, and merged or closed institutions.

Scarcity of resources is likely to drive competition between institutions and between departments within a campus to an even higher-level than before. This has a direct impact on libraries since the libraries’ budgets are directly tied to the institution’s budget. As a result, academic libraries have the threat of budget cuts continually looming over them. This threat is exacerbated by the fact that, even before budget cuts, the library “needs are almost always greater than available funding” (Machovec, 2017, p.582). Subscription costs continue to rise substantially, making it increasingly difficult for libraries to adjust to the possibility of a reduction in budget. In 2012, both UC-Berkeley and Harvard contemplated budget cuts to the libraries: two wealthy institutions where research is integral to the university mission, demonstrating that no library is exempt from this threat. Academic libraries are viewed as an essential resource by faculty and administrators, but this will not remain the case if libraries do not demonstrate value by meeting the needs of the changing student population. Smith, Hurd, and Schmidt (2013) said “new demands and shrinking budgets have propelled library administrations towards re-examining their resources in light of the services they must provide to future patrons....what results is the need for a workforce that is flexible, forward-moving, and highly skilled” (p. 14). The question is, how do the libraries implement this change among their staff and service offerings?

Colleges, universities, and libraries are reacting to these trends and budget challenges by adapting a future-oriented mind-set. Institutions are shifting recruitment strategies and experimenting with new services that may attract new students, such as online degrees and alternate credentials. The willingness to experiment will increase these institutions’ chances of survival. This strategic

foresight is not a simple process and cannot be achieved without developing a plan. Universities and libraries alike are using strategic plans to provide a pathway forward.

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND LIBRARIES

Strategic planning Accreditation required that institutions have a strategic plan and an assessment plan in place in order to meet accreditation standards. Creating a strategic plan that meets the requirements of the accreditation commissions has led to a consistent format and structure:

- *Foundation*: mission statement;
- *Supporting Components*: values, institutional goals, vision;
- *Strategic Plan*: goals & objectives, and implementation plan.

The mission statement and vision represent the current and desired future state of the institution, while the strategic plan is used to bridge the gap between the two. (Hinton, 2012).

Initially, the integration of strategic planning in higher-education was not met with overwhelming or widespread support. Due to early errors by leadership in producing plans that developed a mission or vision for the university or library system but failed to create action or change, even the words “strategic plan” can illicit trepidation and resentment from staff today. This was a result of organizations using plans as a way to articulate their vision, prioritize resources, and organizational focus, but these plans did not include an implementation procedure or a means to reach the desired future. Ultimately, this led to staff spending a large portion of their time on a planning committee to develop a strategic plan that was then never implemented or revisited until the original one expired. However, strategic planning has come far since it was first integrated into higher education. Strategic planning is not a one-time effort, it is a cyclical program of development, implementation, and evaluation. This continuing cycle allows strategic plans to be responsive to the most current situation and reality. Due to this, it has become common for universities and colleges to have strategic planning offices or strategic planning positions on staff to consult with departments undergoing the strategic planning process.

Strategic plans are developed at many levels throughout the organization, including within Libraries. Corral (2000) outlines six reasons that libraries should undertake strategic planning:

1. To clarify (the organization's) purpose and objectives;
2. To determine directions and priorities;
3. To encourage a broader-based, longer-term view;
4. To identify critical issues and constraints;
5. To provide a framework for policy and decisions;
6. To inform resource allocation and utilization (pg. 2).

Another reason to engage in strategic planning is that the library's traditional value propositions are being challenged by an increasing number of competitors, and academic libraries must respond to remain central to the institution and its patrons (Thompson, Maringanti, Anderson, Soehner, and Comer, 2019). The strategic plan allows the library to define their vision of the future, which can be used by all library staff when communicating with campus administration. Libraries are undergoing change due to advances in technology, evolving student population, and emergence of open educational resources, alternate credentials, and more. The strategic plan guides the library through making informed change.

INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

A university's strategic plan is created with the needs of their users in mind and how the institution needs to change in order to support them. However, the goals of an institution's strategic plan cannot be achieved by campus administration alone. It takes collective commitment across the campus in order to implement change. Similarly, a library's strategic plan is not formed in an organizational vacuum. The library is a unit of a larger institution that supports the library, and in return, the core goal of academic libraries has always been to support the mission of the university, whether through supporting faculty research and scholarship or student learning (Thompson et. al, 2019). In order to contribute towards the achievement of the institution's goals and priorities, the library or unit needs to align their strategic plan with the institution's and develop goals and priorities that would progress implementation of the plan.

Advancing institutional goals is not the only benefit of alignment. Aligning the library's plan with the institution's strategic plan "changes the focus of library staff from the library and its function to its users and their needs" (Franklin, 2012, p. 105). This assists libraries in meeting their core mission of supporting the research, teaching, and learning of the institution, rather than being focused on internal library functions only. Possibly the most important reason for alignment is to demonstrate value to campus leadership and secure funding and allocation of resources. Libraries do not generate revenue for the campus and are at the behest of campus leadership for funding, so it is important that they can demonstrate how the library is supporting campus goals and initiatives. Overall, alignment assists the library in serving the institution more effectively and can raise the library's profile with campus administration.

Alignment is not always part of the library's planning process. A study conducted by Saunders (2015) revealed that of the 63 library strategic plans she reviewed, "63.5% alluded to the parent institution's mission, goals, and/or strategic plan, but the level of attention to the parent institution varied; only seventeen libraries (27%) made explicit connections between their plan and the larger university plan" (p. 288). There are strategies that can be used to ensure that alignment is intentional and explicit. A common tactic that works well is to map goals in the library or unit strategic plan to institutional goals and priorities. Mapping makes it clear which institutional goals the library's plan will help to advance or achieve. Another strategy that pairs well with mapping is to assess and provide

metrics for goals that are mapped to campus goals and initiatives. Providing assessment data and metrics demonstrates contribution to the institution and are useful tools that can be leveraged when discussing needed resources or budget for initiatives. Lastly, adopting language and terminology from the institutional plan into the library's own plan helps to make connections and aids campus administration in understanding the library's initiatives and services better due to shared language (Franklin, 2012). The campus environment may dictate which alignment strategies are appropriate to implement and which would not translate well. Alignment will strengthen cross-campus relationships and can lead to more collaboration between units and departments.

UW-MADISON E-LEARNING PLAN CASE STUDY

To further examine institutional alignment, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries' E- Learning Plan will be discussed as a case study. The Teaching & Learning Programs Office in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries collaborates with faculty, instructional staff, and campus administrators to help students develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge base needed to become efficient and effective users and producers of information. I am the E-Learning Librarian and I provide online learning leadership to set vision and strategy via expertise, services, and tools that position the Libraries as a leader in the development of innovative educational practices and online learning. I'm supervised by the Director of Teaching and Learning (T&L) Programs, who provides leadership and administration for all teaching and learning efforts across the campus libraries. The Director of T&L and myself collaborate cyclically to develop a two-year E-Learning Plan, which provides vision and strategic goals that steer online learning efforts for the libraries. In the fall of 2019, development on the next E-Learning plan began. Around the same time, the campus released their five new strategic goals and initiatives associated with each. This allowed us to develop goals that aligned with the Chancellor's initiatives and advanced the library's strategic goals at the same time.

The first strategy we implemented was to use the Background/Vision section to introduce and link to campus projects, initiatives, and plans that our own plan was aligned to. We also formulated our vision statement to align with the existing library strategic plan, as well as tailored it into our program's goals with the addition of the following point; the vision of e- learning for the libraries is one that calibrates with the Libraries' mission/vision to advance shifting campus initiatives. We also developed our goals and objectives so they would map to and advance the institution's goals. To demonstrate this, we will discuss one campus initiative and how we aligned to it. The Chancellor's first goal was to: maintain and further strengthen educational outcomes. Past successful initiatives in this area led to decreased time-to-degree and lowered the number of undergraduate students with student debt. The university wanted to continue this direction of making higher education more affordable and accessible for all students, as well as strengthening the educational experience. An initiative launched in 2019 with the goal to "pursue online degree programs, which expand access and allow us to

bring a UW-Madison degree within reach for more nontraditional undergraduates” (Blank, 2019). By fall of 2020, the university wanted to launch the first fully-online undergraduate degree program. The Libraries’ Teaching & Learning Program is deeply rooted in undergraduate education, including two general education requirements that have mandatory library instruction. This goal was a natural fit for the libraries to contribute to and led to the development of four goals in the e-learning plan. The following are the mapped e-learning goals:

- (B) Refine and formalize collaborative models to enable library subject specialists and instructional staff across the libraries to actively support online degree programs.
- (C) Examine a diverse array of profiles for fully online students to identify instructional needs, potential barriers, and support structures.
- (I) Establish a procedure to measure, collect, and record instructional statistics for online courses, programs, and consultations in order to track library involvement in online education.
- (J) Investigate data collection models for online instruction in order to align with the Libraries’ principles, purpose, and process for approaching analytics related to instruction and online users.

These goals will help shift information literacy instruction and library services online and also aid in being responsive and proactive to the changing campus landscape as described by the Chancellor. Due to the success of the previous E-Learning Plan and established relationships with campus partners, the libraries were involved in several campus teams focused on developing and launching online undergraduate degrees. Involvement in these teams allowed us to achieve goals B, C, and I in the first half of 2020. Completing both goalS I and J will allow us to gather metrics to demonstrate our impact on student learning and success within the online undergraduate degree programs. These metrics can be used by library leadership when discussing allocation of resources and potential increases in budget or positions that may be needed for the libraries to continue to support the growth of online learning programs. This approach of mapping, capturing metrics, and using language from the campus goals was applied to the majority of our 2019-2021 E-Learning Plan.

Through the process of developing the plan, we faced challenges and successes. A challenge that we faced early on in our planning process was that of aligning our plan to the larger library and campus initiatives. This alignment process expanded the number of stakeholders that were consulted and lengthened the time for gathering feedback and negotiation. Expanding the stakeholder pool and gathering more feedback led to a stronger plan with more buy-in, but it slowed down the process. Due to this, our plan was not finalized until two months later than we had originally planned. To adjust for this, more time needs to be built into the planning and feedback phase of developing our next plan. A common challenge is the shifting priorities of campus and leadership. Goals set at an institution may be moving targets due to the significant challenges

higher education is experiencing. For example, with institutions having to shift their services dramatically in Fall 2020 due to COVID-19, it might be possible that resources that would have gone towards a specific goal or initiative will be re-allocated, and that goal may be placed on hold or abandoned. If you have mapped your projects to this goal, you will have to be flexible and embrace a culture of experimentation and innovation, which allows rapid development and change. While there will always be challenges, we also have had successes related to aligning our unit plan to that of the campus'. Library leadership recognized that the 2019-2021 E-Learning Plan had the ability to significantly contribute to campus initiatives. They were highly supportive and requested that we create an organizational investment chart that delineated the personnel, resources, and staff hours needed to achieve these goals. This allowed us to ask for necessary resources and to identify staff and external partners outside of our department whom we needed to work with. Another successful practice we used was to share our plan with key campus stakeholders so that they were aware of our priorities and were able to identify connections between their own work and ours. Our campus is quite decentralized, which can cause work to become siloed and can lead to the duplication of work across campus, so it was a success for us to be able to communicate our intentions and find the best pathways for collaboration. Aligning our plan to the institution's led to higher staff engagement, more collaboration, and additional resources.

CONCLUSION

Libraries and higher education are going through a period of unexpected challenges as well as the continuing changing of trends that have been in place for the last decade. It can be difficult to try and look ahead when even a month forward is so unpredictable. However, referring to your institution's mission and your organizational goals is the best way to remain focused with a future-oriented mindset. The likelihood of future budget cuts or constraints in the coming years is high due to COVID-19 and having to sever normal campus operations. Aligning goals and gathering metrics and assessment data can demonstrate the contribution of your library and unit to the success of campus goals and initiatives. It will be more important than ever moving forward to be able to exhibit how your library or unit is contributing and adding value to the institution.

REFERENCES:

- Blank, R. (2019). *Investing in UW-Madison* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://chancellor.wisc.edu/blog/investing-in-the-university-of-wisconsin-madison/>
- Crisp, P. (1991). *Strategic Planning and Management*. Blagdon, UK: The Staff College.
- Corral, S. (2000). *Strategic Management of Information Services: A planning Handbook*. London: Asil/IMI.

- Franklin, B. (2012). Surviving to Thriving: Advancing the Institutional Mission. *Journal of Librarian Administration*, 52(1).
- Hinton, K. E. (2012). *Practical guide to strategic planning in higher education*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Machovec, G. (2017). Trends in Higher Education and Library Consortia. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(5), 577–584.
- Saunders, L. (2015). Academic libraries' strategic plans: Top Trends and Under-Recognized Areas. *The journal of academic librarianship*, 41(3), 285-91.
- Smith, D. J., Hurd, J., & Schmidt, L. (2013). Developing core competencies for library staff: how University of South Florida Library re-evaluated its workforce. *College & Research Libraries News*, 74(1), 14-35.
- Stark, A., Stoeckel, S. (2019). *UW-Madison Libraries E-Learning Plan*. Available From: [UW-Madison Libraries E-Learning 2019-2021](#).
- Thompson, G. C., Maringanti, H., Anderson, R., Soehner, C., & Comer, A. (2019). *Strategic planning for academic libraries: A step-by-step guide*.