

An Education Dive playbook

CONNECTING THE DOTS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY



An Integrated Approach to Strategic Planning and Mission Fulfillment for Higher Education Institutions



Today more than ever, higher education institutions cannot afford to be either passive or reactive to changing circumstances. Rising costs, less predictable funding streams, transformative cloud technologies and increased competition for students all require colleges and universities to become more focused and intentional when it comes to planning for the future.

An important part of that future planning must focus on effectively recruiting and retaining a student body that aligns with the institution's mission, while also preparing them for success in their personal and professional lives beyond graduation. Doing that successfully in an increasingly competitive market calls for a more integrated approach to strategic planning and implementation to execution.



A SHARED VISION FOR THE FUTURE



For many institutions, strategic planning statements often lack a burning platform for change:

We're doing just fine ... and we're going to continue to be great!

“Unfortunately, it is often not clear how the institution is going to achieve greater impact,” said Peter Stokes, managing director of Huron. “Statements of that type are really about re-committing to the present. Effective strategic planning requires institutional leaders and the broader institutional community to be more future-focused when considering the critical choices before them.”

Planning with an eye toward the future state will better position the institution to effect

positive gains for its diverse internal and external stakeholders in ways that enhance the distinctiveness of the institution's market positioning and impact. A transparent, inclusive envisioning of the future also can create the energy and momentum for transformation.

“Once you have set the vision of what you want to be, then you figure out the strategy to get there,” said Timothy S. Tracy, provost and chief academic officer of the University of Kentucky. “People too often go to the tactics first. They drop down to ‘I’m going to do X, Y and Z’ and they don’t define why they’re going to do it, and then the strategy to get to that why. Once you’ve defined the vision and the strategies, the tactics become much clearer. Then you don’t perform tactics that don’t reach your ultimate goal.”



EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING MUST ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

- What is the vision for our future state?
- How do we want to be known?
- Who are we going to impact?
- How will we know when we’ve arrived?

IDENTIFYING AND EFFECTIVELY SERVING THE TARGET AUDIENCES



A well-constructed strategic plan clearly identifies the type of students an institution is setting out to serve. To best support students, it's critical to understand students are on a journey.

This journey touches all four pillars of student success: academic aptitude and learning, ability to pay for college, a feeling of belonging to the campus community, and a holistic sense of wellness that includes physical, mental and social well-being. A developmental approach is especially critical as the makeup of the American university student

body has changed dramatically in the past decade becoming increasingly racially¹ and economically² diverse.

“Universities often support students from a silo-ed or functional perspective without recognizing how all these activities are interconnected in supporting student development,” said Rose Martinelli, senior director of Huron. “Thinking about the student journey from their perspective helps the university better serve its students, reduce duplication of services and more closely integrate the services provided as part of a full, developmental curriculum.”



THE FOUR PILLARS OF STUDENT SUCCESS RELY UPON THE COLLABORATION OF STUDENTS, FACULTY AND INSTITUTION-WIDE LEADERSHIP:

- Affordability & Value
- Preparation & Learning
- Connected & Engaged
- Health & Wellness

“Discerning the qualities of successful students begins to reshape who we recruit, how we recruit and how we support students through their education. **Across academia, we are working with a much more diverse student body than ever before.** Understanding the components of student success will be crucial as we use resources to admit, aid, onboard, support, and educate our students.



JAMES T. HARRIS III
President, University of San Diego



DELIVERING THE MOST RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE



Today's most effective universities are tightly integrated in the regions they serve. Academic institutions have long been engines of economic development, talent development and the source of an enlightened citizenry.³

For example, in Colorado, a college education is essential because the Colorado Department of Higher Education projects 74% of Colorado job postings will require some type of post-secondary credential by 2020.⁴ With only 10% of its budget coming from state appropriations, the University of Colorado-Denver has doubled down on offering market aligned, differentiated programs.

“As the only public, urban research university in the state, the loss of state funding has made us pivot to integrate our programs into the needs of our community and more deeply integrate our research,” said Jennifer Sobanet, vice chancellor of administration and finance, and chief financial officer of the University of Colorado-Denver. “We are cultivating experiential learning experiences for our students so they feed into those careers and become the leaders of this community.”

Program portfolio management requires continuous performance tracking and reassessment to ensure that program offerings are market aligned. Market aligned programs set

the institution apart to both employers and students, are more financially sustainable, and focus program decision making.

“Increasingly students know what they want to do. For them, having a range of programs linked to career pathways is very important,” said Martinelli. “There is also a large body of students who don’t know where to begin when it comes to linking academic interests to career planning. Families will look for programs that do really well helping undecided students navigate their way and finding a pathway that leads to a major and then to a job.”

“Linking a student’s academic journey more closely with their career pathway is becoming increasingly important as families seek to justify the cost of education with the opportunities for full employment upon graduation. Understanding labor market trends, and establishing partnerships with alumni and regional corporate partners to enhance employment opportunities for students should be part of an institution’s value proposition.”



ROSE MARTINELLI
Senior Director, Huron



ALIGNING RESOURCES TO SUPPORT STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



It's tempting to use financial and personnel resources on the crisis of the moment rather than focused on strategic priorities. It's here that the strategic plan and institutional mission become a guiding light – especially when making choices about what to pursue and, perhaps more critically, what not to pursue or even cut.

“We need to realize that one single university cannot do everything,” said Emory University President Claire E. Sterk. “We should not be ashamed of the fact that we have to make

choices. As long as they are driven by an inclusive, evidence-based process, and lean into the strengths of the institution, there will be more buy-in and excitement for the priorities.”

Depending on an institution's students, academic strengths and economic context, performance improvements could take the form of streamlining organizational efficiency, integrating administrative departments, leveraging emerging technology to deliver quality pedagogy, rationalizing academic programming, and funneling more resources

to targeted recruitment and retention. It's here that a well-crafted strategic plan with a broad base of faculty, staff and alumni support can make all the difference. And when strategic priorities are reinforced by enterprise-wide technologies, performance is further improved through more efficient service delivery models.

“There is such a tendency for universities to create a laundry list; to perhaps have a limited number of priorities, but those priorities are so broad that everything can fit in them,” said Sterk. “We have to be intentional about the choices we make.”

“Making strategic choices is so essential today. Not making choices is an irresponsible way to do business.”



CLAIRE E. STERK
President, Emory University



INCENTIVIZING SOUND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY



As unstable revenue streams wreak havoc with institutional bottom lines, universities are questioning everything, including their budget models. Many are moving away from the incremental budget approach and toward other models that will better enable them to plan confidently for the future by aligning investments and resources with institutional priorities.

“We had been managing the annual budget process through an incremental approach with no explicit connection to our strategic plan, which did not reward our schools and colleges directly for any growth in enrollment, research, or other growth,” said Sobanet. “We’re moving to an incentive-based budget. It still maintains

strategic control at the central executive level, but also provides incentives for our school and colleges to grow revenue, to contain costs and to reallocate resources with their budgets.”

As state appropriations for public higher education fall across the nation, unpacking which academic programs contribute to the bottom-line and which programs consume the bottom-line is key to making sure an institution has a balanced set of programs. A relentless focus on revenue streams and process improvements is critical, said Andrew L. Laws, managing director at Huron.

“The goal of process improvement initiatives should be to increase the efficiency and effec-

tiveness of administrative operations, such that institutions can increase their investments in academic programs,” said Laws.

At the end of the day, it should be clear that **the budget is serving the strategic vision rather than the strategic vision serving the budget.**

“Academic excellence is what makes universities; that is our business,” Sterk said. “It’s that academic excellence that needs to define and be at the center. At Emory, we don’t want to become this great university that has the best financial model, but rather find the financial model that enables us to go where we want to go.”

“Our financial model is going to marry up to our strategic priorities.

This is going to allow us to change our focus to differentiate ourselves in a very crowded market here in Denver.”



JENNIFER SOBANET

Chief Financial Officer and Vice Chancellor of Administration and Finance, University of Colorado-Denver



DELIVERING ON THE VISION



“**T**he strategic plan itself is a road-map. It’s not the journey,” said Stokes. “At the end of the planning process, you’re really at the beginning.”

Delivering the strategic vision at the University of Kentucky, Tracy tasked an assistant provost with overseeing the five teams that align with the focus areas of Kentucky’s strategic plan. Clear metrics have been established so at quarterly internal meetings and annual reports to the Board of Trustees, the status of each focus area is understood and next steps are clear.

An integrated approach also applies to implementation. The vision for a more inclusive and

diverse campus is woven into the other four goals of Kentucky’s strategic plan. Technology is often key to that integrated approach and brings the strategic plan to life.

“We took extra steps to make sure that there was a crosswalk across all of the individual sections of the plan so they didn’t sit in isolation,” said Tracy. “Literally you’ve got to make sure that efforts in research and scholarship are working to enhance the interdisciplinary initiatives that build the faculty that teach the students. It’s all connected.”

Many higher education institutions are looking to cloud technology to help support their connected missions. Deploying cloud

technology can transform and modernize universities so that they are better able to meet the needs of their students and stakeholders and achieve their mission well into the future.

Colleges and universities fuel economic development, promote the public good and train an enlightened citizenry. The mission continues even as public support and political will is in flux. With passion, ingenuity and teamwork, limited resources need not prevent proactively engaging in future-focused plans that will ensure continued success and positive impact for students, alumni, faculty, staff, donors, employer partners, and all other university stakeholders.

“One of my primary jobs was to create the environment in which our implementation teams believed that they were empowered and had the authority to carry out their work as defined in the strategic plan. **That takes effort and it can’t be done with a 10-minute speech at the beginning of the process.**”



TIMOTHY S. TRACY

Provost and Chief Academic Officer, University of Kentucky



SOURCES

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