

# STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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*A Step-by-Step Guide*

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# Introduction

## Why Engage in Strategic Planning?

The goal of this book is to help academic libraries do three things:

1. Plan and prepare for a successful strategic planning process.
2. Implement a successful strategic planning process.
3. Assess the success of both the process and the resulting plan.

Strategic planning, as defined in the *Business Dictionary* (n.d.), is “a systematic process of envisioning a desired future and translating this vision into broadly defined goals or objectives.” Envisioning—and creating a roadmap for—this future through a strategic planning process involves several planning stages. Each chapter of this book is focused on one stage of the process, with each chapter divided into three sections. The first section of each chapter discusses the planning stage in general terms, covering overarching principles and common challenges and issues; the second section provides a case study, showing how one institution, the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah, handled that stage of the process; the third section examines the lessons learned by the staff of the Marriott Library during that stage. The authors hope that by blending a theoretical foundation with concrete examples, this book will provide both an essential conceptual footing and real-life illustrations that will prove helpful to other libraries considering a strategic planning project.

## Why Engage in Strategic Planning?

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When it comes to strategic planning, the most important initial question is not “how,” but rather “whether,” and if so, “why.” As with many organizational projects—especially large-scale ones that will draw deeply on the organization’s fund of staff time and energy—it is crucial to know from the beginning what problem or problems the project is intended to solve.

Corrall outlines reasons for strategic planning, including:

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. (Corrall 2000, 2)

Nearly twenty years after the publication of Corrall’s book, these reasons for strategic planning remain valid. However, there is also another powerful motivator prompting library organizations to engage in strategic planning. In an environment in which the library’s traditional value propositions are being undermined by cultural and technological change and challenged by proliferating competitors for patrons’ time and attention, academic libraries must respond successfully to the overarching question of how to remain central to their home institutions’ missions and priorities while continuing to innovate and deliver desired research information and services to their users. To remain relevant to their users and mission-critical to their sponsoring institutions, academic libraries must both position themselves strategically in alignment with the goals and priorities of those institutions and respond to the real and demonstrable needs of their users—while also setting a bold but achievable vision for the future.

As libraries position themselves to align with institutional goals, they may discover that these goals are a moving target because universities are facing significant challenges to their ability to accomplish core missions. Growing (or, in some cases, diminishing) student populations; tightening resources and revenue flows (especially for state-supported universities); and changing expectations on the part of the public, state legislatures, and academia’s direct client group—students—all contribute to these challenges. From all sides, universities are under pressure to “do more with less.” With university budgets shrinking and competition increasing across campus for allocations from that shrinking budget—and in light of the popular perception that necessary information can largely be found online via Google and other platforms—libraries may find themselves needing increasingly to advocate for their very existence. As libraries adjust to changing user needs and perceptions as well as

to shifting university priorities, they must find new ways to remain relevant and mission-critical.

Libraries contemplating this changing educational landscape might reasonably conclude that change is needed within their own organizations if they are to remain essential to their host institutions. Some additional important reasons, then, for developing a strategic plan might include:

- Identifying and illuminating the challenges facing the library and its host institution.
- Increasing institutional awareness of the library's value propositions.
- Increasing the library's institutional understanding of users' perceptions and use patterns.
- Improving understanding within the library of the larger institutional environment.
- Revealing possible strategies for addressing the issues the library is facing.

Strategic planning is, in short, designed to help the library *implement informed change*.

This raises a secondary question: is strategic planning a one-time effort, or a permanent program consisting of iterative tasks and projects, designed not only to put the library on a solid course for the future, but to keep it there as well?

The answer, of course, is that it can be either. The authors' recommendation, however, is that strategic planning be adopted as a permanent feature of the library's organizational culture. This does not mean that the library must always be in the middle of creating a new strategic plan—however, as we shall see, it is possible to create both a cyclical program of periodic strategic plans (i.e., one leads into the next) and to maintain an ongoing posture of assessment and review that keeps strategic plans appropriately flexible and responsive to changing realities.

The decision to undertake a strategic planning process, and to incorporate strategic planning into the permanent culture of the library organization, will always represent a significant commitment of time and energy. It is to be expected that embarking on this effort will challenge the organization—it is in the nature of strategic plans that they are disruptive, self-critical exercises that are intended to bring significant informed change to an organization and perhaps even to its core structure. For library faculty and staff, the tasks involved in the strategic planning process itself will be experienced as add-ons to current responsibilities and, therefore, it must be presented to them with skill and sensitivity, by means of processes that invite their input and feedback and that are informed by their perspectives. Inevitably, a serious

engagement in strategic planning will commit the library to a long and laborious process—one that can pay large dividends for the library and its users if undertaken skillfully, thoughtfully, and with sensitivity to the impacts of the process on all involved.

## THE MARRIOTT LIBRARY'S STORY

### Answering the “Why”

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In 2014, the J. Willard Marriott Library embarked on a strategic planning project with an initiative titled “Imagine U: Creating YOUR Library of the Future.” The goal was to envision a “desired future” and to create a roadmap to get there, taking into account a complex array of environmental, political, and fiscal realities. The Library’s prior strategic plan had covered the period 2011–2013 (appendix A). With the arrival of a new dean in August 2013 and with a new university president in place, it seemed an ideal time to draft new strategic directions. In addition, the university’s new administration was leading the campus in redefining the University of Utah’s role as the flagship research institution for the state of Utah. Given the university’s history of innovation (e.g., as a national leader for technology commercialization, entrepreneurship, and video game design), its international reputation for genetics research, and its pioneering work with artificial hearts, it was deemed time to refocus and re-envision the institution’s future.

### *Initial Lessons Learned*

As the strategic planning process got under way, the Marriott Library administration and staff learned a number of important lessons. One of these was that, although no one expected the strategic planning process to be easy or quick, it turned out to be even more labor-intensive than had been anticipated. In significant part, this was because all levels of library staff were involved from the earliest stages of the process. No adjustments were made in the staff’s existing duties to accommodate this new work, and the strategic planning tasks were thus added on top of schedules and duties that were, in many cases, already heavy. In hindsight, those staff who were assigned particularly active and demanding roles in the process should have had their workloads adjusted by either temporarily sharing work with others or putting some projects on hold.

A second lesson learned was that undertaking strategic planning with a new dean made the process very different from what it would have been if the dean had been in the position for a longer period. Because the dean was



new, she was still learning about the Library and its staff, projects, and priorities during the same time that those things were under strategic evaluation. Because she was new to the University, she had to learn to navigate campus structures and rules and to master campus norms and processes (e.g., how to obtain Institutional Review Board [IRB] approval for surveys and the required procedures to hire an outside consulting firm). Assigning someone with more experience at the Marriott Library to guide her through university red tape might have expedited the process and made it easier to keep it on schedule. On the positive side, the new dean viewed Library services through fresh eyes; she was unconstrained by longstanding investment in existing processes and was thus more responsive to ideas that might have seemed far-fetched to a dean with more time in the position.

All in all, the Library has found, and continues to find, strategic planning to be a useful mapping, planning, and evaluation tool for future development. Strategic planning has played an important role in meeting current challenges and in developing creative and flexible new pathways into the future.

# 1

## Preplanning

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ONCE A LIBRARY HAS DECIDED TO ENGAGE IN STRATEGIC PLANNING, the first stage of the process is preplanning. Preplanning for strategic planning may sound redundant and, technically speaking, it might be. However, this is the stage at which the foundation is laid for how the process will be conducted, and therefore an essential element of every successful strategic plan. Because the end product of an effective strategic planning process is certain to be at least somewhat disruptive and to have a concrete impact on all library stakeholders, decisions made at the earliest stages can be of great importance—some of these will determine the trajectory of the entire process or elements of it. In other words, when it comes to strategic planning, “planning to plan” is crucial.

Preplanning involves several considerations:

**Timing:** When will the process begin, and what will be the target dates throughout the process?

**Leadership and management:** Who will start the process, and who will guide the process to its conclusion?

**Context:** What can be learned and perhaps carried forward from the current strategic plan?

**Audience:** Who are the library's stakeholders, and how will they be brought on board?

**Institutional alignment:** How will the library's plan track with the strategic priorities of the host institution?

An overview of these factors may prove beneficial.

**Timing.** Here there are two questions: first, when is the right time for the strategic planning process to begin? Second, how long should the process take, and what will be the inflection points in the planning timeline? The answers to these questions will vary from situation to situation and will be informed by such considerations as the expiration of the current strategic plan; the announcement and implementation of new university priorities or strategic initiatives; the arrival of a new library dean or director; or significant developments within the library profession (or in higher education) that need to be addressed. Although it is essential to lay out a timeline at the beginning of the process so that progress can be tracked and tasks rationally distributed, it is equally important to provide for a reasonable degree of flexibility in the timeline; unforeseen events and complications are inevitable, and a good planning timeline will be able to bend as needed (within reason) without breaking.

**Leadership and management.** It is important to bear in mind that “leadership” and “management” are not the same thing. Introducing the project and setting it in motion is the task of a leader, ideally the library dean or director. It needs to be clear to all stakeholders—especially the library staff—that the strategic planning process is proceeding either under the direct oversight of the library's dean or director or at least with his or her full support. However, in most libraries it would be folly for the dean or director to manage the entire process. Although he or she will maintain close and active oversight and will have hands-on involvement to varying degrees throughout the planning period, he or she will need to delegate most of the day-to-day management of the process to other administrators and managers. In some cases, it may make sense to form a new committee or working group dedicated to strategic planning. In other cases, libraries may have existing organizational structures that can be charged with moving the plan forward. Either way, it is important to have engaged participation from staff who are willing to commit for the long term, because strategic planning is not just a one-time event, but an ongoing and sometimes iterative process.

**Context.** As the new plan is being conceptualized, it is important to review the previous one (if one exists), asking what the library can learn from it and from the process that created that plan. Will the new plan represent a continuation of the general directions laid out in that one, a new set of goals coupled with a redirection of efforts, or, more likely, some combination of both? How did the library change in response to the previous plan? What were the intended outcomes, and—importantly—what were the unintended ones? Is the library now more aligned with campus priorities than it was before the previous plan was implemented, or less so? Although the new strategic plan

should not be written while constantly looking over one's shoulder at the old one, looking back at previous efforts, especially at the beginning of the planning process, can prevent repeating mistakes and duplicating failed initiatives. If the library does not have a strategic plan in place, it is still important to consider what changes the library has undergone in the previous few years and what lessons were learned.

**Audience.** For whom will the new plan be written? Inevitably, it will be aimed at multiple audiences: its primary readers will be library employees, the people who will be most directly affected by it—but it should also communicate the library's vision and goals clearly to campus administration and to interested library patrons; therefore, it will need to be written in a clear and direct manner that avoids library jargon wherever possible. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, is the question of how to get stakeholder buy-in both for the planning process itself and for the changes that will result from that process. Here the primary stakeholders are library employees, but it is also essential to solicit the input of the library's users, including faculty, staff, students, administrators, and donors. For some academic libraries, particularly those embedded in public institutions of higher education, it may also be wise to include input from the surrounding community.

**Institutional Alignment.** The last question to consider is how and to what degree the library should tie its strategic goals to those of the university. Do the university's goals have a natural overlap with the library's mission (e.g., student success)? What if some goals of the university are not a natural fit? Additionally, what if the library has goals that the university does not expressly state? Can and should these goals be tied more explicitly to the university's strategic plans and priorities? If the library has goals that seem to be in tension with those of the university, to what degree should they be adjusted to bring them into greater harmony?

All these questions are important to consider from the beginning of the strategic planning process. How they are answered will vary from library to library, depending in significant part on such factors as the political environment on campus, the strength of the library's existing relationship with campus administration, the degree to which the library enjoys broad support from faculty and students, and so forth.

## THE MARRIOTT LIBRARY'S STORY

### Preplanning

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Looking at these factors through the lens of the Marriott Library's experience may also prove beneficial.

**Timing.** For the Marriott Library, the decision to engage in strategic planning was prompted not only by the arrival of a new dean, but also by the

fact that the Library's previous plan had expired the year prior to her arrival. The 2011–2013 plan had been developed under the previous dean and leadership team, and a more dynamic strategic plan was desired by the current administration. In addition, as stated earlier, the University of Utah's new administration, including the new university president and senior vice president of academic affairs, was rethinking campus priorities. Library administration decided that "business as usual" in the Library was not a sustainable approach and felt that the emerging campus priorities presented an opportunity to rethink the Library's strategic plan.

**Leadership and management.** At the Marriott Library, the strategic planning process began with the Library's Executive Council (EC), which consisted of the dean, associate deans, and directors, as well as elected representatives from the faculty and staff. To begin the pre-planning process, the dean organized a retreat for the EC, the purpose of which was to construct a conceptual framework for the new strategic plan. The retreat marked the first time that the EC had met for such an event and the meeting was held off campus, an unusual occurrence. All attendees were given assignments ahead of time designed to jump-start the thinking process. The dean also provided the EC with an agenda (appendix B) outlining the goals, questions, and schedule for the retreat. The uniqueness of this arrangement, along with the preparation expected of each member, signaled to all participants that the Library was taking the strategic planning process very seriously.

In preparation for the retreat, attendees were asked to read three articles on strategic planning. The first reading, "The Strategic Plan is Dead, Long Live Strategy," by O'Donovan and Flower (2013), advocated abandoning predictions about what the future might bring and, instead, treating the entire organization as a team that was experimenting its way to success. The authors argued for the necessity of creating a plan that would be dynamic and would "be adaptive and directive, that emphasizes learning and control, and that reclaims the value of strategic thinking for the world that now surrounds us" (para. 7). The authors emphasized that "creating strategies that are truly adaptive requires that we give up on many long-held assumptions" and "abandon our focus on predictions and shift into rapid prototyping and experimentation so that we learn quickly about what actually works" (para. 9).

The second reading, Birdsall's "Strategic Planning in Academic Libraries: A Political Perspective" (1997), addressed the importance of soliciting a diversity of viewpoints and encouraging full and broad participation in the planning process, as well as forming a coalition among key library stakeholders. It also advocated creating persuasive planning documents to use as marketing tools to advance library objectives. The author proposed three political strategies that would optimize planning outcomes: (1) build upon the diversity of stakeholders, (2) form alliances and coalitions to advance library interests, and (3) market a persuasive planning document.

The third reading, Germano and Stretch-Stephenson's "Strategic Value Planning for Libraries," warned of nine factors that could undermine the strength of a strategic plan:

1. Poor employee engagement
2. Poor communication
3. Lack of clarity in terms of goals and expected outcomes
4. Inadequate leadership development within organizations
5. Insufficient speed and adaptability when refinements are required
6. Slow decision-making
7. Resource inadequacy
8. Lack of attention to customer needs
9. Non-alignment across functional areas (Germano and Stretch-Stephenson 2012, 74)

The authors stressed that "without the willingness to adapt plans during execution, virtually any strategic plan is destined to perform inadequately or fail. Because most strategic plans take place over sustained periods of time, planning without adaptation is the strategic equivalent of painting oneself into a corner" (Germano and Stretch-Stephenson 2012, 75).

In addition to the three articles, the retreat's participants reviewed seven strategic plans that had been created at a variety of other libraries (Cornell University, University of Kansas, Purdue University, UCLA, New York University, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and Seattle Public Library), each providing a different example of style, format, and focus. Drawing on the insights contained in the articles and strategic plans, EC members began the process of creating a road map to guide the Library's endeavors in the coming years.

One early question that the EC discussed at the retreat was, "Why have a strategic plan?" Although corporations have engaged in strategic planning since the 1940s, libraries began much later, with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) instituting strategic planning for its own mission and vision in 1981 (Brown and Gonzalez 2007). Many libraries subsequently followed suit. The EC discussed the positive outcomes of strategic planning, including being better prepared for changes that were occurring in academic libraries. The EC also considered the limitations of strategic planning, including the inability to predict the future, the difficulty of writing a plan that covered multiple years when library users' needs would be rapidly changing, and the challenge of concisely defining organizational values. Even with these recognized limitations, the EC concluded that it was important to engage in strategic planning to envision a "desired future" and create a road map leading to it. With the conclusion of the retreat, the strategic planning process was officially underway.

**Context.** To ensure that the organization learned what it could from its previous planning process, the EC began by assessing the execution and

success of the Marriott Library's 2011–2013 strategic plan (appendix A). Those in the group who had worked at the Library during the creation of that strategic plan agreed it worked well in some areas, particularly by identifying priorities and laying out concrete steps and guidelines. Also, organizational enhancement had been included, with human capital a priority. However, there were drawbacks as well, chiefly with regard to stakeholder buy-in, which had largely been neglected during the previous planning process.

**Audience.** The previous plan had been developed by a small group of top administrators with little input from others inside or (especially) outside the library. Although feedback sessions had been held, most strategies had already been put in place, and little buy-in had been generated with middle management, front-line employees, or users. The EC felt that an important opportunity had been missed because the Library's users had not been asked what they needed, and indeed had not been included in the planning process at all. The EC felt strongly that staff and users should play an active role in the new strategic planning process.

**Institutional Alignment.** The EC felt that another problem with the 2011–2013 plan was that it was not mapped to the university's goals. It had proven difficult to ascertain how the Library supported the university, making it problematic to provide statistics in support of requests for new funding from the university administration.

Here the Marriott Library was fortunate in its timing. Mapping the Library's strategic plan to the university's goals might have proven difficult had the project been undertaken earlier because the university was undertaking its own institution-wide strategic planning at about the same time as the Library. A new Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs—a position analogous to that of Provost at other institutions—had arrived at roughly the same time as the Library dean in 2013, and a new university president had been inaugurated only a few months prior to that. Fortunately, the university announced its strategic goals shortly before the Library began formulating its own strategic plan. Additionally, the university's four goals were both broad and concise, making it relatively easy for the Library to see how its mission and goals could be aligned with them. The university's goals (appendix C) were:

1. Promote student success to transform lives.
2. Develop and transfer new knowledge.
3. Engage communities to improve health and quality of life.
4. Ensure long-term viability of the university.

The Library embraced these four goals as a guide, changing only slightly the language in number three, and adding two or three points under each goal. In the case of the third goal, the Marriott Library found that the campus-wide version fit poorly with its own scope of mission, and therefore omitted the phrase “engage communities,” retaining “to improve health and quality of life.”

This allowed the Library's goal to fit with the university's goal of promoting community health, while keeping the Library's local focus on maintaining a healthy learning and work environment and fostering diversity and inclusion.

As the Library progressed through its strategic planning process, final reports and the data gathered suggested that something was still missing from the Library's draft plan. For example, many of the surveys and focus groups made clear that some respondents were simply unaware of services and resources already provided by the Library. Additionally, Library employees had indicated that salaries were a problem that needed to be addressed and that they were interested in more development, mentoring, and training opportunities. As a result, two more goals were added to the Library strategic plan:

- Increase awareness of Library services and resources.
- Enhance Library employee potential.

The Library's final strategic goals are in appendix D.

### ***Lessons Learned***

The preplanning process was instructive for the Library in several different ways. On the positive side, the EC retreat brought clarity to the planning process and helped the EC and the new dean solidify their relationship, as everyone worked together for a common purpose. The EC was the appropriate group to start the planning process because it was open to the idea of creating change, an important aspect of strategic planning, and it could visualize the Library at a high level—not just from the perspective of its own administrative units.

Conversely, there were things that the Library should have done differently in the preplanning process. For example, one voice missing from the EC retreat was that of the students. Although students were involved in subsequent phases of the planning process, in hindsight, the strategic plan would have benefited from having them involved from the very beginning. When students joined the effort later they offered wise counsel and insight and added much to the conversation and decision-making process.

It also became clear in hindsight that the EC, in its preplanning work, had underestimated the time it would take to complete the entire process. Eighteen months passed between the beginning of the EC's retreat and completion of the strategic planning document, a much longer period than what was initially anticipated. Writing survey instruments, gathering feedback from across campus (including multiple in-person focus groups), and then writing and rewriting reports and other documents proved to be time-consuming. All those measures to gather feedback were worth the time and effort, but the process of informing staff and users would have gone more smoothly and been accomplished with less frustration if the activities had been based on a more



realistic timeline. Instead, the planning leaders were required to push deadlines back on multiple occasions.

One of the most positive outcomes of the preplanning process turned out to be the mapping of the Library's goals to those of the university. This has proved beneficial in ways the EC could not have imagined at the time of its retreat. Franklin (2012, 105) observed that "a strategic plan and organizational structure based on institutional mission changes the focus of library staff from the library and its functions to its users and their needs." Franklin added that it also "generates campus buy-in" (106). Saunders (2015) noted that aligning a library's plan with the university's goals improves decision-making about prioritizing and allocating resources, and the Marriott Library has found that true.

Since the university's strategic goals were unveiled, campus administration has required that budget reports, requests for ongoing financial support, and requests for new initiatives all be presented in the context of the university's strategic goals. Having the Library's strategic plan mapped to university goals and structuring the Library's internal reporting to correlate with the strategic plan has provided powerful and convincing support for requests to the university. It has also made it easier to write reports and proposals, because the necessary justifications are easily formulated. Dillon's 2008 piece, which foreshadowed the Marriott Library's situation by five years—suggested that "the future of academic libraries . . . [will] be determined by the extent to which they amplify the mission of their host institutions and, ultimately, the mission of the university system at a national and international level." (2008, 54).

In retrospect, the preplanning process was essential to developing the Library's strategic goals. Bringing the Library's leadership team together at the beginning of the process set the tone for everything that followed: strategic planning would be a Library-wide effort and one that welcomed feedback from all stakeholders.

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