Richard Wayne

The academic library strategic planning puzzle

Putting the pieces together

The purpose of strategic planning is best illuminated by using a familiar story from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland:*[1]

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
> "I don't much care where"said Alice.
> "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
> "—so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.
> "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

More recent and authoritative advice for how the modern academic library can get where it wants to go is found in a recent *Library Journal*[2] interview with Maureen Sullivan—ACRL's 2010 Librarian of the Year. She says, "I really think [strategic planning has] become part of how an organization can be run most effectively."

A balanced strategic planning process and plan tailored to a specific library can be an invaluable instrument that helps a library to chart and navigate these turbulent times. A library that just stumbles along without a solid plan will not thrive in the long term.

The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas Library (UT Southwestern) has placed increasing importance on the strategic planning process and the resulting plan over the last several years. It's now obvious that academic—and indeed

all —libraries face rapid changes and numerous challenges that will continue into the foreseeable future. However, with challenges come opportunities—the demand for high-quality, timely information has never been greater.

In order to develop and maintain an optimal plan, UT Southwestern continuously learns from the planning ideas and research circulating throughout the library and business worlds. The library monitors its external and internal environments very carefully—part of that is studying what successful peers are doing.

UT Southwestern's strategic planning methodology

Recent methodologies at UT Southwestern are generally based upon processes described in business and library texts, books, and journals. No single strategic planning methodology is authoritatively prescribed for academic libraries. Therefore, a library's leadership needs to examine the choices and pick one methodology or a combination of methodologies that are suited to each library's unique environment and culture. Joseph Matthew's book *Strategic Planning and Management for Library Managers*[3] does a good job of summarizing many of the available methodologies.

A graphic representation of our current strategic planning process is provided in

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figure 1. The current methodology relies on the key elements of vision statement, themes, goals, objectives, and extensive feedback from clients and staff.

The foundation of the methodology is the vision statement. That is a bold, ambitious statement of where the library wants to be in the future. Every two years, the library charts a revised course of action toward the vision. In fact, the vision statement itself is constantly open to scrutiny and revision. James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras have provided an informative and creative article[4] on this critical step.

The most important step at the outset of the process is to cultivate multiple information streams so that the plan reflects accurate, relevant, and up-to-date information. For example, there's an extensive examination of most recent LibQUAL+ results, other client feedback, library reorganization feedback, university information, and authoritative nationwide or global environmental scans—such as those from OCLC and ACRL.

The next element is strategic planning themes. Those are five-to-eight broad directions or concepts that will have a major impact upon the library's future—perhaps up to five years or more out. One of our current themes, for example, is "value management—we will be aggressive stewards of library value and resources. . . ." In these tight economic times, this is certainly an important theme for the library and its greater context of the university. Themes help the staff and other stakeholders to bridge the vision statement to specific goals.

From the themes, library planners create a set of three-to-five two-year goals. The goals should clearly delineate what the library needs to accomplish in the next two years. Current goal one, for example, is to "provide clients with a more integrated, easier-to-use findability tool for the array of library electronic resources." Each goal has associated performance indicators. Every goal should also be SMART:[5]

- specific
- measurable
- attainable
- results-focused
- timely

Goals are then broken down into objectives by various library departments and individuals. Objectives detail the work to be done. They can span less than one quarter or up to multiple quarters and years. Objectives frequently require the work of staff members in several different library areas.

That's a brief summary of the main concepts of the current methodology. At UT Southwestern, the strategic plan leads the library into the future by encouraging action in the present. It does that by constant examination, modification, and deliberation. It's not, as in too many organizations, merely a document collecting dust on a real or digital shelf.

Figure 1. Graphic representation of current strategic planning process.

Technical infrastructure

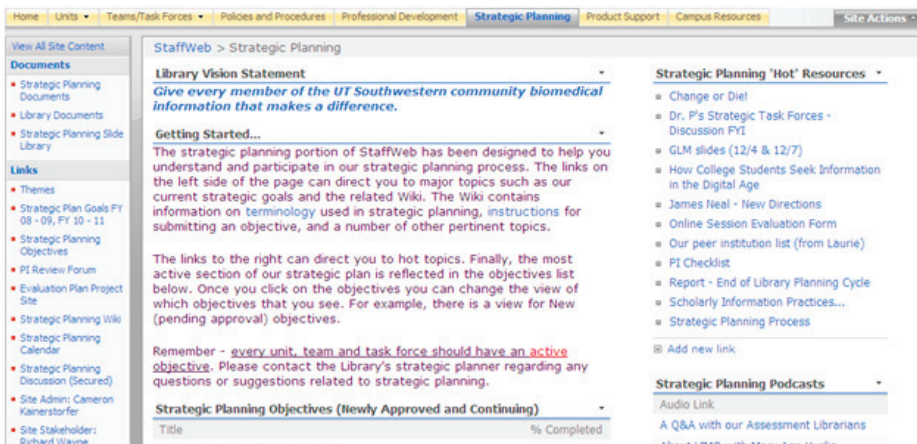Just a few years ago, the strategic planning

Figure 2. Section of main StaffWeb strategic planning page.
Visit this article online for detailed image.

process was fueled by numerous Microsoft Word-based forms and a related document repository. Then a library intranet was developed—StaffWeb—that uses Microsoft's SharePoint technology. SharePoint has worked remarkably well for this purpose.

In fact, it supports the entire library intranet, not only the strategic planning portion. (See figure 2 for a screenshot of the main StaffWeb strategic planning page.)

SharePoint does many of the things that you would expect from a networked application. It authenticates users, provides navigation aids, organizes documents and files, and searches content. But it also provides some additional functionality that has made it particularly well suited for working with the strategic plan. SharePoint includes blog, wiki, and calendaring capabilities.]

Most importantly, it manages the data workflow and some of the related communication that are an essential part of that data being used effectively.

Any member of the staff can submit a new objective or update the information in an objective at any time. Instead of snapshots of library progress on objectives, the system provides an almost real-time indicator of where the library stands on all strategic initiatives.

Communication and assessment

At the end of each quarter, library-wide staff meetings address the progress on the entire strategic plan. The meetings usually consist of an introduction that emphasizes topical issues. Different speakers synthesize the progress on the objectives related to his or her selected goal.

In addition, the speaker will introduce new objectives that have been submitted for that goal. Finally, there is ample time for questions and discussion. The meetings are a wonderful opportunity to fully involve the entire library staff in the evolving strategic plan.

At the end of each planning cycle, there's a quantitative assessment of how well the library performed based upon the following criteria:

• performance against goals
• performance against schedule
• performance against quality

The results and recommendations from the assessment are discussed with the library leadership as well as the entire library staff.

The recent global economic meltdown clearly demonstrated that measures in addition to traditional quantitative measures are needed to assess true organizational health and performance. Several subjective measures have become part of our evaluation plan. For example, the leadership of the library takes a step back from the strategic plan and explores the question

"Was the strategic plan successful?" After all, "Strategic planning is a tool; it is not a substitute for the exercise of judgment by leadership . . . Strategic planning merely supports the intuition, reasoning skills, and judgment that people bring to the work of their organization."[6]

There's always room for improvement in the communication and assessment areas. However, we have more comfort with our recent approaches because they each include multiple tools and methods.

Results

Have the strategic planning methodology and the strategic plan been successful? Has the library moved closer to achieving its vision? Is the library successfully meeting the needs of its clients? In the last strategic planning cycle, there was a quantitative evaluation of the level of success for each of the four goals as reported in the previous section.

Unfortunately, some important evaluation-related information was missing or incomplete, which prevented a complete analysis. Those deficiencies have since been corrected. However, results are available in specific areas. In some areas, the library did not completely meet goals and objectives. However, the evaluation did indicate numerous successes in other important areas.

In addition to the quantitative indicators, the library leadership thinks that the library is on the right path. There have been significant improvements in some critical growth areas, such as marketing and outreach during the last planning cycle. In one area—full-text findability—there is still much work to do, and we have that high on our priority list.

Closing thoughts

The strategic planning system that has been briefly described in this article did not evolve overnight. It developed over a number of years and was modified to accommodate emerging technologies and changing client and staff needs. It required

a culture change for the UT Southwestern library staff.

Each staff person needed to understand the important changes that were unfolding in the library's environment. Staff and units had to learn how to work better as an integrated whole, as opposed to relatively isolated silos.

The strategic planning process will continue to change in the future. Academic libraries have faced dramatic changes and many of the changes are showing even increased momentum. Our planning process will need to reflect a fluid definition of an academic library, a new generation of clients and library professionals, as well as a constantly shifting information environment.

As a result of the comprehensive strategic plan, library leadership has confidence that the library is on the best possible course to thrive into the future.

Notes

1. Lewis Carroll and Helen Oxenbury (illustrator), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* 1st U.S. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 1999).

2. Josh Hadro, "Consultant and Simmons Professor Discusses Leadership, Strategic Planning, and the Changing Nature of Library Jobs," *Library Journal* (2/18/2010), www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6719366.html?nid=2673&source=link&rid=17609399.

3. Joseph R. Matthews, *Strategic Planning and Management for Library Managers* (Libraries Unlimited, 2005).

4. James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision," *Harvard Business Review* 74, no. 5 (1996): 65–77.

5. ALA, "What Is a Smart Objective," www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/sections/is/webarchive/smartobjectives/whatsmartobjective.cfm.

6. Michael Allison and Jude Kaye, *Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations: A Practical Guide and Workbook,* 2nd ed.: (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2005). 𝓝