

Admin 101: How to Plan for Strategic Planning

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/admin-101-how-to-plan-for-strategic-planning/>

By [David D. Perlmutter](#)

AUGUST 6, 2019

More than a decade ago I was in a leadership workshop with about a dozen deans and a few department chairs when one of them raised the subject of strategic planning. Fairly new to administration at the time, I had never participated in strategic planning myself, but almost everyone else there had. And their reviews of that experience were decidedly mixed.

Among their biggest complaints:

- Despite good intentions, the process often ended up disorganized.
- Too many committees were created. And each of them had too many members.
- Instead of being a tool to set priorities, the strategic plan turned into a checklist of everybody's hopes, dreams, and delusions — often with internal contradictions.
- A year or two after a splashy kickoff, most people on the campus lost interest in the plan and paid no attention to it.
- When it was time for the plan to wrap up, the ending proved anticlimactic, with only administrators and marketing departments feeling any sense of accomplishment or closure.

The [Admin 101 series](#) explores all aspects of higher-education leadership, from landing an administrative post to doing the job. This month, and in several sequels to follow, I will set forth some best practices for strategic planning — a crucial task that most leaders must manage sooner or later. The series begins with the gestation phase: what to do *before* the formal planning process begins.

Plan how to make a plan. One way to get organized is to think seriously about the “how” of strategic planning — and to get a mix of people on the campus involved in the preplanning stage.

Almost every college or university has experts in management, sociology, organizational psychology, organizational communication, and the like. Use them. Bring them together on a preplanning committee — task it with organizing the formal planning process, structuring the future committees that will produce the plan, and selecting potential participants.

Their wisdom, I'm willing to bet, will set practical guidelines to avoid a free-for-all in the planning process. Chances are, these same academics also know the campus well — its culture, institutional history, political sensitivities. Among the questions they might answer to create a process that is both workable and inclusive:

- How many committees should be formed — with how many members on each?
- What methods should be used to get the pulse of the campus — surveys, focus groups, actual votes?
- What lessons were learned from the previous strategic plan about how to go about drafting it — or how not to?

Make sure everyone understands the rules. One of the biggest logjams in strategic planning occurs when the process begins without any agreement on exactly how decisions should be made. The various committees will have to make final recommendations, but how will they actually decide on what they recommend? Will the committee members agree to abide by a majority vote, two-thirds, or what?

Obviously, on any campus, rules of order, academic culture, and governance traditions may vary. But now — before any strategic planning begins — establish an agreed-upon constitution of how committees will be run.

For example, what powers will committee chairs have to carry out vital duties like closing discussion or calling a vote? In the latter case, I have seen all too many committees flounder: Working under the laudable goal of “reaching consensus,” they try to obtain a unanimous vote on the panel’s recommendations and end up with a messy set of compromises that satisfy no one.

In short, make sure you agree ahead of time on what constitutes agreement.

Pick the right people to lead the planning. An administrator at another university described how her provost had “handpicked the heads of all committees” in the strategic-planning process, choosing “people he could manipulate behind the scenes.”

As a result, many groups on the campus felt slighted by the planning process. A strategic plan that is perceived as a fait accompli will not elicit much passion from bystanders.

In [a previous essay](#), I discussed the trade-offs of “playing favorites.” In brief, I argued that favoritism — defined as tipping the scales in someone’s favor because of personal friendship or for political advantage — is ethically wrong and undermines trust. Yet if certain people consistently perform well in the tasks you’ve given them, favoring them with other important assignments is a necessary part of successful administration.

The tricky part, then, is matching the right person with the job. In choosing leaders of the various planning committees, consider whether they have:

- Relevant expertise on the topic the committee will explore.
- The ability to deliberate dispassionately and not be seen as the champion of a particular position.
- A consistent record of working with diverse groups of people.
- A strong work ethic, and a willingness to devote the necessary time to the endeavor.
- A reputation for efficiency — the ability to do good work and still meet the deadlines.

Don’t expect to find the perfect chair for every committee. Just think carefully about who is most likely to propel the planning process forward.

Set up a reward system. Different faculty members will put different degrees of time, energy, and conscientiousness into the service work they do during different phases of their careers. (The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman famously remarked that he’d made a point of being consistently terrible at departmental service so that administrators would leave him alone to focus on his research.)

But as an administrator, if you truly believe that strategic planning matters — that it’s not just supposed to replicate the city-council meeting at Potemkin Village — then you have to offer tangible, substantial rewards to the people who lead the effort. Typically the opposite happens:

- A vice provost is told, “You will head the strategic-planning team.” Meanwhile, he is expected to maintain all of his other duties, too. Strategic planning becomes another 25 percent of his time to add to the 150 percent already spoken for.
- Or a respected professor is invited to lead a strategic-planning committee. Yet she is given no teaching relief or research assistants to help her maintain her workload while she is spending days and months sitting in committee meetings.

On many campuses, while everyone agrees that strategic planning is essential, we don’t support the people whose time and effort goes into making the plan meaningful.

Why not agree beforehand that good strategic planning requires close attention, and that people need free blocks of time to offer that attention? Committee chairs, for example, should be relieved, officially, of other service duties during the planning process. Allow an administrator to hand off a few duties while chairing one of the planning committees, or give a professor a course buyout.

Doing a lot of planning in advance of strategic planning might seem like overkill. But consider the old wisdom about conducting research: “One hour in the library will save you 100 hours in the lab.” Strategic planning, likewise, necessitates careful preparation and reflection.

In what will soon be the third decade of the 21st century, the stakes facing colleges and universities, whatever their mission, are too great to treat strategic planning as an off-the-cuff, make-it-up-as-you-go-along amateur function.

David D. Perlmutter is a professor in and dean of the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University and an executive coach for hospitals and universities. He writes the “Career Confidential” and “Administration 101” advice columns for The Chronicle. Browse the previous columns in this series [here](#).