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## A CHECKLIST FOR USEFUL AND PRACTICAL HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLANS

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A useful strategic plan will identify, define, and justify where the institution is going, why it is going there, how it will add value for all stakeholders, and provide the criteria for effective and efficient decision-making. It will also provide the criteria for planning how to achieve the mission so that financial, human, and physical resources may be properly allocated. Finally, it should provide valid data to justify what it uses, does, produces and delivers. All must be based on solid data and information.

There are several strategic planning imperatives, many of which are not included in current and popular approaches. These imperatives include (along with categories to assess any strategic plan):

| Characteristic   | No | Yes | Partial | Missing |
|--|----|-----|---------|---------|
| 1. Has measurable performance evidence-based criteria  |    |     |         |         |
| 2. Primary focus on ends and results and their consequences, not about means, programs, activities, courses, or delivery.                        |    |     |         |         |
| 3. Does not benchmark other institutions   |    |     |         |         |
| 4. All organizational criteria link are performance criteria to adding value to societal ends including the entire ecosystem for the institution |    |     |         |         |

|   |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| 5. Enables justifiable evidence for how the results of using the strategic plan will demonstrate value for money to all of its stakeholders.                            |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Identifies and evidence-based results at all three levels of results: external contributions, organizational contributions, and individual contributions.            |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Performance data from each of these three levels are derived by documenting the gaps between current results and contributions and desired results and contribution. |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Data for performance criteria are based on a “needs assessment” where needs are gaps in results, not gaps in means or resources.                                     |  |  |  |  |
| 9. The strategic plan is built on the institutions current and future realities and not upon the approaches used by other institutions.                                 |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Will the criteria provide the measurable evidence for identifying and selecting financial resources?  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. Will the criteria provide the measurable evidence for identifying and selecting physical, human (including faculty and staff) resources                             |  |  |  |  |
| 12. Will the criteria provide the measurable evidence for identifying and selecting and/or modifying programs, projects, curriculum, and activities?                    |  |  |  |  |
| 13. Will the criteria provide the measurable evidence for identifying and selecting programs, projects and activities, including curriculum that should be deleted?     |  |  |  |  |
| 14. All governing board members, deans, directors, central administrations, politicians, and faculty representatives are actually committed to the plan?                |  |  |  |  |
| 15. Uses a plan for collecting performance data on closing the gaps in results (needs) identified and selected)?  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. Uses a model or technique for determining measurable and valid value-added for all three levels of results?   |  |  |  |  |
| 17. Does the plan integrate with other strategic plans for other higher education institutions in the overall system?   |  |  |  |  |
| 18. The strategic planners will constantly collect data on its effectiveness and efficiency and be revised as required.   |  |  |  |  |

### What justification is there for this check list?

Much of this check-list is based on *The Assessment Book's* section strategic planning<sup>1</sup> and extensive work on strategic thinking and planning in public and private sectors.<sup>2</sup> It also responds to many legitimate criticisms of conventional strategic planning in order to rectify the many flaws in what is often done.<sup>3</sup>

Following are the rationale for some of the check-list items:

Nos. 1, 2, 3: Often so-called strategic plans don't deal with ends, results, and consequences but focus on means, programs, projects, activities, and resources. While it is tempting to "follow the leader" and copy what other like organizations are using, this is not useful.<sup>4</sup> The definition of 'strategic planning' used here is the identification, justification, and measurable definition of where an organization is headed and why. After strategic planning is accomplished then sensible tactical and operational planning may be sensibly rooted.

No. 4. While not a "Deadhead," the Grateful Dead leader, Jerry Garcia gave some sage advice "don't be the best of the best, be the only one who does what you do." Benchmarking has some potential traps including that the organization being benchmarked has the same objectives as yours, and it also assumes that they are not doing continual improvement so you will be benchmarking old objectives and processes.

Nos. 4-9. All organizations are means to societal ends. Higher education systems obtain resources in order to provide teaching, research and services that add measurable value to all stakeholders including external communities and society, the organization itself, and those in the organization including learners, faculty, staff, and support. What a university uses, does, produces, and delivers must add value outside of itself and thus must provide evidence for value-for-money.

No. 10. For a strategic plan to be useful, it must be built on hard evidence, not on judgments, feelings, or politics. Evidence of where an organization should head, and why it should go there is best obtained from a "needs assessment" that only collects data on

gaps between current results and consequences and desired results and consequences. Gaps in means, programs, projects, and activities should only be addressed after needs are collected and prioritized on the basis of the costs to meet the needs as compared to the costs to ignore the needs.

Nos. 12-18. Previous evidenced-based planning can and should provide useful planning data. And valid data will allow for fiscal planning, budgeting, and sensible resources allocations. Too often, what gets called 'strategic planning' becomes protection of turf and resources and not based on hard evidence of needs (not wants). For effective tactical and operational planning, the integrity of the data collection is central and vital.

No. 19. It is key that all partners not only contribute to the plan but also commit to follow the results. A key indicator of the usefulness of a strategic plan is the extent to which it is used when decisions are to be made. Peter Drucker called getting the buy-in as "transfer of ownership" from "your plan" to "my plan."

Nos. 20-21. A viable plan for collecting needs data is vital, and it should be formalized and include or be acceptable to all planning partners. Based on this data, a viable model for determining the costs-consequences for meeting the needs should be in place.<sup>5</sup>

Nos. 22-24. A plan, no matter how well-developed and evidence-based, will likely fail if key stakeholders don't approve. Sometimes creative and sensitive marketing must be accomplished.

No. 25. No higher education institution operates in an academic vacuum. It is useful to make sure that your strategic plan synchronizes well with other institutions. Your approach also might serve as a model and inspiration to others.

No. 26. Periodically, the planners should track the results of the strategic plan and revise as required.

### Problems with most strategic planning approaches.

Defining and justifying where you are going is a good thing. But, sometimes on the way, things get distorted. Issues include:

1. Focusing on means, finances, budgets, or human resources first before defining and justifying one's mission.
2. Selecting a strategic planning approach on what others have done instead of tailoring the plan to institutional internal and external realities.
3. Not collecting performance data on needs-gaps in results—but seeing needs as wants and doing planning on the basis of programs, projects, activities, and funding.
4. Not relating the strategic planning to the entire value chain that runs from individual contributions, to organizational contributions, to community and societal contributions.
5. Changing the strategic plan each time there is a change in leadership. If a plan is based first on societal value-added, leadership should put their 'stamp' on an institution in terms of how to meet the needs.
6. Selecting programs, projects, activities, human resources without doing costs-consequences assessments.
7. Substituting political initiatives for actual strategic planning.
8. Not using this check-list to assure that the strategic plan will be practical, valid, and deliver measurably useful results.

### Universities are in a unique position in our societal new realities.

Useful strategic planning is possible and very valuable. Higher education institutions have a unique niche to fill in today's realities. Peter Drucker<sup>6</sup> suggests that the new capitalism is not one of money and things but is of knowledge and ideas. Our universities have a unique niche to contribute to this new capitalism of the future.

### Endnotes

- 1 Kaufman, R. & Guerra-Lopez, I. (2008) *The Assessment Book: Applied Strategic Thinking and Performance Improvement Through Self-assessments*. Amherst, MA. HRD Press Inc.
- 2 Kaufman, R., Oakley-Browne, H., Watkins, R., & Leigh, D. (2003). *Strategic Planning for Success: Aligning People, Performance, and Payoff*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.  
  
Kaufman, R., Guerra, I., and Platt, W. A. (2006) *Practical Evaluation for Educators: Finding what Works and What Doesn't*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press/Sage.  
  
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Kaufman, R. & Guerra-Lopez (2013) *Needs Assessment for Organizational Success*. Arlington, VA., ASTD.
- 3 E.g. Lloyd, B. (1992). Mintzberg on The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning. (An interview) *Long Range Planning*, 25 (4), 99-104.  
  
Mintzberg, H. (1994). *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York; The Free Press.  
  
Mintzberg, H. (1995). Strategic Thinking as "Seeing." In Garratt, B., (Ed.) (1995) *Developing Strategic Thought: Rediscovering the Art of Direction-Giving*. London, McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- 4 A noted economist, Schumpeter, aptly noted that in order to move forward, some of the past must be destroyed: Schumpeter, J. A. (1975). *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- 5 A useful model has been developed and validated by Dr. Mariano Bernardez:  
  
Bernardez, M. (May-June, 2009). Sailing the Winds of "Creative Destruction:" Educational Technology during economic downturns. *Educational Technology*.  
  
Bernardez, M. (2009). Minding the Business of Business: Tools and Models to Design and Measure Wealth Creation. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*. 22(2) Pp. 17-72.  
  
Bernardez, M., Kaufman, R., Krivatsy, A., & Arias, C. (2012). City Doctors: A Systemic Approach to Transform Colon City, Panama. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*. 24(4), pp. 41-60.  
  
Bernardez, M., & Kaufman, R. (May-June 2013). Turning Social Capital into Societal Performance: Three Case Studies and a New Framework for Value Creation. *Performance Improvement*. Vol. 52, No. 5. Pp. 5-18.
- 6 Drucker, P. F. (1993). *Post-Capitalist Society*. New York: Harper Business.

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