## Not Just a survey: Utilizing a Comprehensive Assessment Plan to Drive your Strategic Plan

Johnny Robinson | University of Texas, Arlington | @johnnyarobinson

Our organizations and institutions often use strategic plans to skillfully develop a plan of action to advance the long-term goals and objectives of our communities. These carefully constructed strategic plans may help us set a course for a new housing complex, the growth of a community, or improved programming to change the culture or behavior of a community. Whatever priority you may choose, data (or lack thereof) may often drive your strategic plan. Many times, strategic plans fall short by only focusing on the current issues rather than building for future considerations.

To build a successful and expansive strategic plan, it is integral that stakeholders utilize all data, not just quantitative results from annual community surveys, but data from multiple perspectives and data sources.

What is a strategic plan? Bryson (2004) defines strategic planning as "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it" (p. 6). Furthermore, strategic planning must be viewed from a broad-scale perspective entailing information and data collection, comprehension of the organizational mission, exploration of strategic alternatives, and a heightened interest in future implications related to present decisions. In figure 1, Bryson and Alston (2005) provide a simplistic model as you develop your own strategic plan:



Figure 1 ■ The ABCs of Strategic Planning

Utilizing this model, the UT Arlington Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life underwent a strategic planning process over twelve months. Over this time, data was collected from annual surveys, focus groups were conducted, and longitudinal data related to growth, retention, and student persistence was observed. Additionally, by utilizing a SWOT analysis with a group of fraternity/sorority leaders, other strategic priorities were recommended. Through a thorough review of all data, the fraternity and sorority life staff identified a number of trends and themes, including: office operations, community growth, relationship development, and student learning.

Following the Bryson and Alston (2005) model, the next step was to identify where we wanted to be. A task force of students, faculty, staff, headquarters partners, and community members offered recommendations for future goals and objectives. For example, to address community growth, the task force recommended to abolish deferred recruitment as the data did not show a significant difference in increased academic success and community retention. The task force also reviewed various policies and procedures related to event registration in order to better support risk management initiatives with member groups and student organizations. Finally, the task force reviewed the fraternity and sorority life accreditation program which is utilized for awards at the conclusion of the academic year. At the conclusion of their reviews, the task force provided an executive summary with various recommendations for considerations through benchmarking other highly touted programs around the nation.

The most difficult step in the strategic planning process can often be the last step because it is continual and on-going. Currently, the UT Arlington staff is navigating through this phase of the strategic planning process as priorities have been identified. Once your organization has collected comprehensive data and gained an understanding of where your organization needs to go, it's time to actually set a course and objectives to move forward. The "how to get there" phase can sometimes be difficult for an organization if you are trying to build momentum and capacity too quickly. As the old saying goes, "Rome wasn't built in a day," – neither should the strategic plan for your department or organization. To "get there," your strategic plan should take the recommendations, data, and vision for the future to build a plan created around ongoing, attainable and measureable outcomes. It is also important to include other stakeholders in the process to assure its success. Many strategic plans fail when one individual creates the plan and has the sole responsibility to carry it to success. It is important to share some of the responsibility of following up and initiating strategic objectives with others on your team. This can be difficult for smaller departments and organizations. Employing partners outside your organization who have a passion for your vision could be helpful to ensure the success of your strategic plan.

Once your strategic priorities have been identified, set a timeline to follow up on each strategic priority. Our departments often get caught in the crosshairs pulling us in other directions

throughout the academic year. Thus, it's important to create some flexibility in your timeline when these needs arise to ensure your strategic plan is not hindered.

Your strategic plan must be a living document that is constantly referred to, shared, and at the forefront of the vision of your organization. It is not something to simply be reviewed during the annual report period or taken off the shelf periodically. Your strategic plan is your organization's dream – a vision of what you can become. This plan is the roadmap for your organization's commitment to address the growing student needs at your institution. Good luck in your travels ahead.

# References

Bryson, J.M. (2004). *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement.* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bryson, J.M. & Alston, F. (2005). *Creating and implementing your strategic plan* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.