Strategic Planning Resource: Illustrative Goals, Strategies, and Initiatives

The examples below are provided as illustrations of the relationships among different elements of a strategic plan. They are drawn from actual college and university strategic plans with which AKA|Strategy is familiar. In some cases, however, we have taken the liberty of revising text to maintain confidentiality or to make something clearer that would be difficult to understand out of context.

A few caveats about these examples:

There is a wealth of terminology in strategic planning – “priorities,” “goals,” “objectives,” “initiatives,” “tasks,” “action steps,” *ad infinitum*. What do they mean? Whatever you want them to! In other words, our bias is not to get hung up in the terminology and instead to call the parts of the plan whatever is clear to those involved in the planning process and to the audiences for the strategic plan. A shared understanding is useful. Spending time in debates over terminology is not. Call it a “shoe” if you like.

We have found it useful to use the terms “goal,” “strategy,” and “initiative” to describe the three levels of strategic plan components illustrated below. The rationale/explanation behind these terms is essentially this:

- “Goals” are broad targets (occasionally we refer to them as “overarching goals,” though not usually in the text itself). They are big, often general, outcomes an organization is striving to achieve. Typically, there aren’t more than five or six of these in a strategic plan.

- “Strategies” are *what* the organization is going to do to achieve its goals – the “how’s.”

- “Initiatives” are the more specific activities the organization will undertake to put in place its strategy. Like strategies, they speak to “how,” though at a finer level of detail.

We haven’t yet used “shoe,” but we’re warming to it.

We’ll stop with these three levels because, in our opinion, more detailed items (*e.g.*, “tasks,” “work steps”) are generally part of implementation planning that follows completion of a strategic plan.

Another important caveat is that one person’s goal is another person’s strategy. In other words, depending on its scale or organizational level, the entity doing the planning (*e.g.*, university system, university, college/school, division, department, etc.), may consider something an overarching goal that a larger entity would consider a strategy or tactic. As you look at the examples below, you’ll realize that for every goal it’s easy to imagine a higher order “goal” that would subsume it.

On to some interesting examples.

**Example 1: Large, Private Research I University**
Goal: Improve the quality of the teaching and learning environment

Strategy: Build a world-class faculty

Initiatives:
- Recruit at least [number to be determined] faculty members who have attained or have the potential to attain the highest honors in their discipline.
- Implement a faculty recruitment, retention, and development plan that is in line with our benchmark institutions.
- Transform the library into a 21st century information/knowledge center.¹
- Provide faculty with the latest technology and training for leadership in teaching & learning, research, and career development.

Example 2: College of Engineering Within a Large Private Research University

Goal: Build a research agenda that addresses society’s most pressing challenges²
At the center of one of the nation’s most densely populated urban corridors, adjoining a major transportation hub, and surrounded by numerous academic and corporate institutions, the College of Engineering is uniquely positioned to address needs of the city, region, and beyond. The College will be a leader in [XYZ University’s] “One University” transformation by combining its expertise with the strengths of the other colleges, and deepening its relationships with industry to develop at least three interdisciplinary research areas focused on critical societal challenges.

Strategy: Establish the College among the leading voices on energy and the environment
By working closely with the University’s other colleges to build broad public understanding of the scientific, public policy, financial, and political issues surrounding energy and the environment, the College of Engineering will establish [XYZ University] as an expert institution on these inherently complex issues and a balanced and thoughtful party in the public debate that surrounds them.

Initiatives:

¹ This was felt to be necessary to attract top faculty and graduate students. Arguably, it could have gone under another goal or strategy (e.g., one on facilities or as a separate strategy unto itself under the Goal here); however, because it was the only mention of the library, it was decided to place it here.

² In this case, the college decided that strong introductory narrative paragraphs following each goal and strategy would help make them clearer and provide a context in which to present the specific initiatives, which are expressed in relatively terse phrases.
• Develop research groups on new energy sources, economical conversion technologies, efficient storage methods, and optimal distribution systems.

• Promote research on environmental issues arising from energy production, new materials for energy conversion, and energy efficiency in the built environment.

• Build a strong focus on renewable energy production and green technologies.

• Disseminate research results broadly to inform the scientific community, public discussion, and policy formulation.

Example 3: Urban Public University with a Focus on Art and Design and Associated Businesses

Goal: Be an innovation center for creative industries worldwide

Partner with creative industries worldwide to help anticipate and address key challenges, build a stronger culture of innovation and entrepreneurship at [University], and establish collaborations that translate creative ideas into action.

Strategy #1: Establish an “Innovation Center@[University]” to foster research, creative work, and strategic partnerships

Initiatives:
• Build three primary components into the Innovation Center:
  ▪ A think tank to pursue visionary forecasting, propose new approaches to common problems in the creative industries, and identify public policy implications and approaches.
  ▪ An incubator that will move projects from concept to reality.
  ▪ A partnership collective that will intensify research and creative collaborations with local educational institutions, governmental agencies, non-profits, and businesses.

• Explore development of a “Small Business Development Council” that would be affiliated with the Innovation Center.

• Pursue advanced research that will foster product development, address pressing issues in industry and the marketplace, and catalyze creative activity across disciplines.

Strategy #2: Create an organizational and information infrastructure that promotes innovation and experimentation

Initiatives:
• Use visiting professorships, artist residencies and graduate fellowships to develop clusters of innovators and thought leaders focused on similar research interests.
• Build partnerships with the numerous regional incubators to leverage their expertise and ensure the strongest positioning for [University].

• Develop a faculty scholar database to serve as a resource for researchers and artists within and outside of [University] and to raise external awareness of [University] faculty activity and achievements.

• Create faculty incentives for innovative and creative work, including support for teaching release and recognition for external and internal grants.

**Example 4: Public University in an Urban University System**

**Goal: Deepen engagement with the world outside the campus**

**Strategy #1: Leverage the breadth and richness of our relationships with New York City**

**Initiatives:**

• Engage students in internships, service learning, faculty contract research and other projects that address real needs of New York City organizations, integrating such experiences with classroom pedagogy and curriculum.

• Establish greater coordination of our numerous existing relationships with public, private and not-for-profit organizations in the greater New York City area.

• Emphasize the importance of “translational research” – i.e., the ability to apply research results to communities of practice – as a means for the College to increase its engagement with the communities around it.

**Strategy #2: Make a global perspectives and engagement central to the College experience**

**Initiatives:**

• Build links between the cultural diversity of the student body and the College’s international and global initiatives.

• Capitalize on the extraordinary linguistic diversity of our student body to reinforce and develop students’ proficiencies in languages other than English.

• Develop initiatives that introduce global perspectives into curriculum and pedagogy.

• Increase the number of programs and activities that encourage formal and informal cross-cultural interactions among our students.

• Develop a focused set of exceptional, cross-school global studies in such areas as hemispheric studies, immigration, trade policy and sustainability.
• Target Brazil, China and Turkey as the initial focus for expanded international student recruitment.

**Strategy #3: Expand academic programs around the globe**

**Initiatives:**

• Expand international executive graduate programs, such as those that already exist in Singapore and Taiwan.

• Take advantage of the Center for International Business as a focal point for expanded study abroad opportunities and international efforts, such as the current initiative in Chengdu, China.