Meaningful and strategic alignment: A roadmap for library success

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Abstract
It is vitally important for libraries to have strategic plans aligned with institutional vision and missions, and with actionable goals aligned with the user needs. Library plans are often developed in a "library knows best" vacuum without considering the user perspective. Often assumptions regarding the needs of key library stakeholders are clouded by history and tradition and by asking the wrong questions of the community. By carefully reviewing institutional plans, identifying key stakeholders, thoughtfully assessing user needs, and then applying library staff expertise, libraries can develop meaningful plans with Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant or Results-oriented or Realistic, Time-bound (SMART) goals.

Key words: strategic planning; organizational goals; library administration.

Introduction

Strategic planning is often regarded as an onerous task done in groups, convened every five years, where participants are expected to do "brainstorming" to determine effective goals for units. These goals are frequently not achievable due to a belief they need to be high-level, setting lofty strategic directions. Given the opportunity, many libraries will skip strategic planning altogether or will write a plan in a vacuum from a "library knows best" perspective. This is a mistake.

Library strategic plans are often written from the inside out with only library staff participating in plan development. The plan may then be submitted to whoever oversees the library, rubber-stamped, and finished for another five years. In an institutional world where there is stiff competition for scarce resources, it is imperative to develop a strategic plan relevant to, and supportive of institutional and user community priorities. It is about surviving and thriving. The best library strategic plans are created by the union of institutional priorities plus user input plus library staff expertise. They are created from the outside in and they are Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant or Results-oriented or Realistic, Time-bound (SMART) [1].

Institutional strategic plans

Whether in a hospital, university, or other institutional setting, it is likely there will be an institutional strategic plan. Why is it important for the library team to understand the institutional strategic plan? First, an institutional strategic plan, along with the mission and vision frequently accompanying it, sets forth institutional priorities and aspirations. It tells the outside world what the institution hopes to be. Goals written in support of the mission and vision set forth institutional priorities. To put it bluntly, these goals indicate where the institution will put its money and support.

Whether or not the library plans on writing its own strategic plan, it is critical for a savvy library team to be aware of what is important to its institution. It is important to have evidence and projects illustrating

how the library advances the success of the institution. These prove relevancy and position the library as an important partner. Telling stories related to this relevancy are great public relations tools. They illustrate impact. They provide the basis for great "elevator speeches or pitches" (2). These short encounters can create lasting impressions.

User community engagement

The second element of a successful library strategic planning process is user engagement. What do the library's key constituents have to say about the library? What are their opinions about the work the library does? Strategic listening is one way to find out.

Strategic listening involves identifying the library's key constituents from the top and through the organization. Starting with institutional leadership, an interview process begins by asking open-ended questions. Sometimes it can be difficult to get one-on-one meetings with leaders and upper administrators. If a meeting isn't possible, consider asking for specific recommendations of other people who could be consulted as part of the strategic listening process. These could be associate vice presidents or associate deans with a keen interest in some element of the library's work. For example, at a university, a research dean might be very interested in library services such as systematic reviews. In a hospital, there might be a specialty group interested in support for evidence-based practice.

In addition to these leaders, key stakeholders are vitally important. Who has a vested interest in library success? Who are the biggest advocates or champions? Who are the biggest users? Faculty, staff, and students can provide valuable insights as can advisory boards, the IT community, or institutional governance bodies such as faculty senates or student associations.

Logistics

What to ask

Key to the success of any strategic listening exercise, is formulating questions to be asked. Open-ended questions, that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, are best. The focus should be on strategic direction rather than operational issues. Asking

specifically what the library should do or be doing will elicit the same old answers. More journals. Longer hours. Those are not strategic directions. Examples of open-ended questions may include asking about how they define success personally and for their unit and what is critical to ensure success? What can be done together? What are key priorities or projects? The objective is to get the interviewee thinking and talking. Listening and asking clarifying questions is critical to the success of the conversation. It is helpful to have two people attend these meetings so accurate notes can be taken and so there is a second set of ears gathering feedback.

Meeting format

It is impossible to have one-on-one conversations with everyone so multiple formats must be considered. During the Health Sciences and Human Services Library's (HS/HSL) strategic listening tour, in addition to one-on-one conversations, focus groups of eight to ten were employed along with large town hall style meetings. If there was a large group, they were broken down into smaller groups. Whenever possible, and especially with students, food was a big motivator for attendance. Finally, a survey was created to give the community a final opportunity to comment.

Analysis

Quite a bit of information will be gathered in these sessions and patterns will emerge. Keeping mindful of institutional priorities, this information can be separated into broad categories that can be linked to or made into library goals, always with the focus on how the library fits into these priorities.

At the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB), all units are required to use, as the basis for their individual strategic plans, the six university strategic themes (3). That made it easier to think about and categorize some of the input received during strategic listening. From that point, the HS/HSL team, involving library leadership consisting of division and department heads, developed broad goals under each theme. This is what is showcased on the HS/HSL's web site (4).

However, the real magic happens in the development of SMART goals. The SMART goal

strategic planning document is the document used internally to support actual work being done. Users and the public never see this level of detail although university administration holds the library accountable through an annual reporting exercise as to the progress made. This document is a living document, constantly under review, with library staff mindful of the SMART goals.

SMART goals

As mentioned in the Abstract, SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant (or Results-oriented or Realistic), and Timely. SMART goals don't necessarily need to contain all those elements. Being specific and setting deadlines (timeliness) are the most frequent elements. SMART goals are often reviewed and refined multiple times, so they are understood by everyone in the library. Individual units will claim responsibility for various SMART goals. Teams can also be created to achieve various goals. Within the goal, it should be very specific regarding who is responsible, how it will happen, and a deadline for achieving. For example, in looking at the UMB Strategic Plan, one of the major themes, Theme 2, is Research and Scholarship. Under the Research and Scholarship theme, one HS/HSL sub goal states "Evaluate, acquire, and support the technologies that users need to discover, create, use, and preserve information." An, actionable internal SMART goal supporting that sub goal says:

> "Form an exploratory group to advise the Executive Director on feasibility of expanding support for data services through Library Carpentry or other data-oriented programs. Phase 1: exploration – September 2019. Phase 2: potential implementation – dependent on findings. 0% accomplished – still in process."

Keywords such as library, data, research data, training, programming, R, and Python are also assigned.

The process at UMB is a mature one. As complex as it looks, it is adaptable to any size library and once the process is used, it makes it easy to review and revise goals. It is easy to simplify plans in order to develop SMART goals, starting perhaps with just one or two projects.

Library staff review, input, and buy-in

Although much of the work on strategic planning is often done at the library leadership level, it is critical to the success of the plan for all members of the library staff to be engaged and understand their roles in library success and the library's future. Before the strategic plan is fully implemented, it is imperative all members of the staff review it; gathering questions and refining and revising some of the SMART goals if necessary. Are the goals realistic? Should other goals be added?

Reaching a consensus is critical because these SMART goals become part of the daily work and priorities of all members of the team, personally, departmentally, divisionally. These goals can and do become part of personal development plans. Everyone is accountable for the library's success.

Maintenance and review

Unfortunately for those not fond of strategic planning, it is never over. A strategic plan is a living document, needing to be reviewed at least annually. SMART goals can be rewritten, adjusted, deleted. At the HS/HSL, goals are reviewed twice a year, in June and in January. They are always being adjusted. In addition to rewrites, deadline adjustments, and deletions, the twice-yearly review affords an opportunity to add new goals. More complete information about the HS/HSL's process can be found in Shipman and Tooey, Strategic Collaborations in Health Sciences Libraries, Chapter 8, Strengthening strategic planning through diverse collaborations (5).

Conclusion

While strategic planning can seem onerous, time consuming, and frequently useless to some people, imposing a methodology is meaningful. It creates a greater understanding of, and alignment with institutional priorities. It builds a closer relationship with key constituents and stakeholders. It enables the library to cast itself forward and seize opportunities with projects of importance to the user community beyond traditional collections and services. In turn, this alignment is a great way to showcase the great innovative work of the library. It also engages the library staff in a greater

understanding of the work and priorities of the library and builds a process aligning personal goals with library and institutional goals through the use of SMART goals.

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