Chapter 16
Using Design Thinking to Develop and Guide Institutional Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Strategic planning is a routine activity for institutions of higher education. However, these processes do not always result in strategy that reflects the complexity of these organizations or the challenges that they face. By applying design thinking to the challenge of creating robust strategy, the authors put forward a method they called "Four Dimensional Design" that can be readily applied to helping these institutions create strategy with strong buy-in from internal and external stakeholders, innovative solutions, clear expectations for scope and scale, as well as a sense of how new initiatives can be systematized to approach challenges across time.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education often faces the criticism that it is not always aware of, or responsive to the needs of its stakeholders or market demands. These criticisms threaten to impose change from the outside if campus leaders and faculty do not find ways to demonstrate that they are listening to, and care about what these stakeholders have to say. While some of this criticism is warranted, much is based on a fundamental lack of understanding of the purpose of higher education.

Design thinking is a human-centered approach. This is very compatible with the goals of education which seeks to create conditions where individuals can develop and grow. Effective strategic planning processes should have the needs of students, their learning and experiences at the core of every aspect of the process. But in an age in which post-secondary institutions are increasingly complex, there is a lot to distract us from that central purpose.

What's more, students are often not meaningfully engaged in strategic planning processes. Certainly their needs may be expressed in institutional data related to their success, but how often do we engage in shared problem-solving with students resulting from that data? Institutions could benefit from a structure to facilitate this involvement.

A process is needed which can unite higher education leaders together with stakeholders (most notably students themselves) to develop strategies to meet all parties' needs while helping participants gain a better understanding of purposeful education. Design thinking provides a structure for creating strategy that is grounded in this philosophy. According to Degnegaard & Eggers (2019), "By creating empathy with users, design thinking reframes the challenge in a way that enables other participants to contribute to a shared solution" (para 10). This empathy is foundational to these processes and is beneficial and unique in a higher education setting because it offers meaningful solutions to issues that impact both students and the institution.

What's holding us back? Like many issues in higher education, perhaps it is how steeped we are in tradition. There is also a lack of familiarity with principles of design thinking or that this concept seems impractical or hard to grasp. In this chapter, we'll explore traditional approaches for developing strategy in higher education. The authors will draw upon their experiences leading strategic planning initiatives for a variety of sectors, including business and industry, non-profits, higher education and religious organizations to propose a practical structure for applying concepts of design thinking to established best-practices in strategic planning.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is common in most industries, particularly in higher education where accrediting processes require institutions to demonstrate their pursuit of institutional goals and objectives. Sanaghan (2009) defines a strategic plan as, "The narrative map that communicates where an organization wants to go and identifies how it intends to get there" (p. 9). Beyond compliance, these processes intend to help organizations improve.

A typical strategic plan contains elements such as a vision statement, mission statement, strategic themes and goals (Kenny, 2018). A challenge present in many strategic plans is ensuring that each of these terms is clearly defined. Sanaghan (2009) offers the following definitions in his book, "Collaborative Strategic Planning in Higher Education."

Vision: "A description of a desired future state. The best visions are vivid, compelling, and well-understood and build on the institution's strengths and values" (Sanaghan, 2009, p. 9).

Mission: "Articulates the institution's purpose and the major activities in which it is engaged" (Sanaghan, 2009, p. 9).

Strategy: "A particular approach in pursuit of an organization's vision, usually in support of one or more specific goals" (Sanaghan, 2009, p. 9).

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