# New Approaches to Higher Education IT Strategic Planning

ECAR

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## Introduction

IT plays a significant role throughout the institution, supporting both operations and mission. Ultimately, though, IT is about *experience*—higher education constituents understand the role of IT primarily by their personal experiences with technology. Recently, consumer-driven experience has challenged IT leaders to operate with more urgency, agility, and responsiveness. Fast market shifts that may include introductions of game-changing technology or new ways of delivering education and conducting research stimulate change and action. Effective IT strategic plans provide a broad base of understanding by communicating the IT department's mission, vision, and goals, as well as identifying specific initiatives and directions needed to meet success measures. Outward-facing communications can provide a compelling story about what IT does and plans to do with its constituents, enabling community buy-in and commitment and offering opportunities to communicate—and engage—with the campus community regarding which new technologies to adopt and the best ways to incorporate those technologies into institutional plans.

IT strategic plans have traditionally been written for a time horizon of 3–10 years and, once finalized, generally would not change until the next multiyear planning cycle began. The massive increase in the role and visibility of IT, as well as a change in how IT provides services, requires a new look at how IT strategic plans are created and used. Further, there is a growing focus on the evolution of the service life cycle due to the broad adoption of ITSM as a strategic framework.[1] Current management theory regarding strategic planning calls for continuous review to ensure that the plan stays relevant to both changing institutional needs and a dynamic technology environment.[2]

New IT strategic planning models emphasize continuous improvement, making the plans living, breathing documents that undergo frequent periodic adjustments. In addition to being agile and responsive, new models present plans in social contexts that increase understanding and commitment. At the same time, planners find that looking farther into the future allows them to include current and near-term objectives as part of their strategy for achieving long-term, aspirational goals. As IT plays a more strategic role throughout the campus, the IT strategic plan also is more closely aligned with and tied to institutional planning.



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Strategic plans provide frameworks within which we can address intentions and uncertainty. Plans address intentions when the formulation of a strategic plan motivates us to identify critical goals, providing a beacon toward which we will travel. Plans address uncertainty when they allow us to reevaluate our means of achieving goals even as we pursue them. This paper looks at causes for the shift in how institutions are approaching IT strategic planning and how IT strategic planning relates to overall institutional planning. In addition, new models and trends in IT strategic planning are identified to help guide IT organizations as they are considering their own strategic planning approach.

# IT Strategic Planning in Higher Education

> *"Strategy is the essence of human action—the bridge between an idea and its realization in the world."*
> —Robert Greene

IT is tightly integrated into the fabric of the institution, providing services to varied groups of constituents—faculty, students, business units, administrators, and other stakeholders. These groups carry out the day-to-day operations of the institution, as well as provide a long-range focus on goals and assessment of the institution's success. Each of these groups will have differing expectations of IT. In order to provide services that can meet these various expectations, IT must build and maintain complex infrastructures that support an ecosystem of technology products and services. The IT department is an innovation and service organization, creating an environment where people live, learn, and work, providing the base and tools for a great deal of assessment and planning. All of this must be done under financial, legal, and security constraints. Today's IT strategic plan, then, requires IT leadership to understand the mission of the institution from the points of view of the people whom IT supports.

The temptation is to focus IT strategic planning on lists of services, upgrades to hardware, network services, and a rapidly changing technical world around us. We need to be careful not to confuse a series of tactics—the specific plans for implementing the changes or programs—with a strategic plan. Further, IT strategic planning requires a focus on both strategy *and* transformation. How can IT resources transform the teaching, learning, research, and business operations of the organization? The focus on transformation ensures that IT is seen as a strategic asset, not just a cost center, and positions IT as a reliable business and service partner. In this role, IT has to ensure that core services are sustained with quality while also making sure that IT services are renewed and reinvigorated as scope and capacity shift.

A higher education IT strategic plan sets out goals and directions for IT to develop that will increase IT's value to the institution. Within this broad aim there is a great deal of room for variation, depending on the institution and the current IT situation. For instance, an IT strategic plan may present initiatives that represent different levels of planning. There is a difference between an initiative directly supporting a broad university strategic direction and a foundational IT service that enables university directions. Many elements of IT planning will reflect changes in the architectural direction of technology, such as the shift to cloud-based technologies for infrastructure or software-defined networking for network design and management. Whether evolutionary or revolutionary, these may play an outsized role in your IT strategic plan; as infrastructure, they will be largely invisible to your user community.

IT strategic plan elements may enable or support institutional success. IT strategic plan goals may also intend to transform IT and the IT organization. Regardless, the content in the IT strategic plan should always be strategic to IT—even if it is not strategic to the institution as a whole.

## IT Strategic Plans and Institutional Planning

The strategic planning process in higher education has become a time-honored tradition. Every 5 to 10 years, leaders throughout the institution participate in some way in a process to map out the direction of the institution and its departments over the next 5 to 10 years. IT departments often produce their own strategic plan as part of this effort. In recent years, many CIOs and IT leaders have experienced significant changes in their strategic planning process.

The strategic planning process can differ depending on institution size, IT organizational model (e.g., how centralized or distributed the IT department is, if IT is merged with libraries, etc.), and institutional culture. Surely the "essential tension" within IT leadership is the balance between innovation and service. No reasonable institution will provide its IT unit the freedom to innovate without first having confidence in the rigor and reliability of core services. However, a careful balance must be maintained between the aversion to risk and the acceptance of risk. We seek balance between maintaining reliable core services and experimenting with new technologies. It is helpful to keep this balance in mind as you couple your strategic planning efforts to your institutional plans.

Among institutions with a mature institution-wide strategic planning process, CIOs play differing roles in the conversation. Many institutions view IT as a strategic partner in achieving the institution's goals and acknowledge this by inviting the CIO to serve as a member of the institution's core strategic planning committee or similar body. In this capacity, the CIO serves as both an institutional leader, helping shape the future direction of the institution, and the technology strategist, bringing an important perspective to strategic planning conversations.

In other institutions, the CIO may not be a key contributor to the institution-wide strategic planning process and is only asked to weigh in when the discussion centers on an obviously technology-focused initiative, such as building out the campus computing infrastructure or deploying an e-learning initiative.

It is neither necessary nor recommended to link every aspect of your IT strategic plan to your institutional strategic plan, nor does every detail of the institutional plan necessarily map directly to the IT strategic plan. Nonetheless, linking the IT strategic plan to the institutional plan may increase your constituents' understanding of IT, improve your understanding of your institution, and strengthen the commitment of resources. A plan informed by the institution's goals, as well as by trends and strategies both in IT and in the broader higher education environment, will be a stronger plan.

Can an IT plan be developed in the absence of an institutional plan? Even if the institution has not articulated a plan, it still has strategic goals that must be considered. Some organizations operate with a short list of strong goals (that may even be informal) that are not an institutional strategic plan but that inform IT strategic planning. While it may be suboptimal, conducting IT strategic planning in the absence of a true institutional strategic plan can be a necessity.

If an institutional plan exists, it should not be ignored. A successful institutional plan will be stronger if technology leaders participate actively in the institutional planning process. Given the importance and pervasiveness of technology, the two planning efforts result in a stronger IT ecosystem when there is cross-team effort and awareness in the two strategic planning paths. When the institution does have a strategic plan, including areas that either depend on or involve IT, the IT strategic plan should include strategies enabling the institution to achieve those goals.

## Impetus for Changing IT Strategic Planning

A wide variety of factors can force a new approach in the IT strategic planning process. Sudden financial setbacks, government regulatory changes, or institutional organizational changes can cause enough disturbance to trigger changes in the IT strategic planning process. But a few events trigger planning changes more often than others.

- **Leadership changes:** A change in leadership is a significant catalyst for changes in the strategic planning process. Any new executive within the supervisory chain of the CIO or IT director, right up to the president, may bring a personal view for what should be represented in an IT strategic plan and how university interests should be represented in the planning process. It's natural to think a new CIO or IT director will want to approach strategic planning for IT differently from how a predecessor did. Leadership changes at the IT leadership level or at any senior level of the institution, even if that leadership is not directly involved in the leadership of IT, may bring changes to the IT strategic planning process.

  New executives leading other units within the institution can also bring about IT strategic planning changes. These divisional and school leaders represent important technology consumers, and their needs for technology and their perceptions of present and past performance will directly inform the IT strategic planning process. One more exposure to the effects of leadership change and its influence on IT planning exists at the board level. A powerful new board member can raise the question of the effectiveness of the process and may even, based on his or her background, suggest changes to IT strategic planning.
- **Changes in institutional strategy:** As the institution evolves, its approach to teaching and research may change in significant ways. For example, an institution may embark on a major globalization initiative or expansion of its research program. These changes often require adjustments in the way the institution plans to support that evolving mission with information technology.
- **Technological shifts:** IT shifts and advances occur quickly, challenging institutional planning processes. The traditional university strategic planning model has been 5 years at its shortest and in some cases as long as 10 years. Often, the IT strategic plan, while not tightly coupled with the institutional strategic plan, would be created on the same timeline. Institutions are now finding that IT strategic plans created 5 or more years ago have often lost pace with technology fairly quickly and were too rigid to respond effectively to needs newly identified by institutional IT consumers. As a result, IT departments had to choose between following an old strategic plan or developing tactical plans to fulfill the newly identified needs.
- **Technology misalignment:** The misalignment of technology needs and IT organizational capacity (capabilities and resources) has also been cited as a reason for changes to the IT planning process. Misalignment often occurs due to a weak connection between IT strategic planning and institutional and departmental strategic planning. This can be avoided if technology is a strong component of the institutional plan and if other campus leaders have an opportunity to comment. If the institutional plan has been completed without consideration of technology, the IT strategic plan can compensate if technology leadership involves other campus leaders in the IT planning process and their support for allocation of needed resources is obtained prior to publication of the plan.
- **IT capability assessment:** Comprehensive strategic planning efforts in schools and departments, combined with greater inclusion and consideration of IT capabilities, leads to a significant increase in the need for IT capability assessment. To answer the question of what is required to meet the

technological needs of a strategic initiative, the IT leaders must be able to ascertain current capability. That capability assessment includes skill set, bandwidth (amount of human resource), and current demands and priorities. Developing this comprehensive IT organizational capacity assessment has been a challenge to some IT units as they transform their strategic planning process.

- **Near-term events:** Another reason often cited as a catalyst for changes in IT strategic planning is the occurrence of some near-term event—a near-term event is something occurring after the start of the recent strategic plan and significant enough to affect the perception of the effectiveness of the planning process. Some events cited in this category are security breaches, accreditation citations, audit issues, and project failures. Events that occur due to underlying technological weaknesses often lead to evaluation and revision of the IT strategic planning process.
- **Funding models:** Funding challenges have always existed for higher education IT. Strategic planning initiatives requiring technology do not automatically receive the funds necessary to achieve those goals. As new needs arise and priorities change, the funding allocation will reflect the institution's priorities. Preferences revealed through the funding process may not be the same as preferences stated through the strategic plan process. Because many funding cycles are based on a yearly request process, the first indication of shifting institutional priorities may be seen in approval or disapproval of the IT funding requests. Funding projects not represented in strategic plans may reveal new preferences and indicate the need to revisit or restart the planning project.

## Benefits of a New Approach to IT Strategic Planning

CIOs, IT leaders, and IT organizations may seek new approaches to IT strategic planning in order to reap the benefits that accompany new ideas. These benefits include:

- **Increased responsiveness:** A shorter IT strategic planning cycle, coupled with iterative reevaluation, results in the ability for the IT department to react more quickly to newly identified institutional needs and priorities. Because needs and priorities can be evaluated in the context of the next iteration of the strategic plan, funding and resources can be shifted to the new priorities, and consensus can be gained about which technology needs will be addressed based on institutional capability. The phenomenon of the IT department being pressured to meet the needs of a new initiative without consideration of existing strategic plan driven projects is minimized.
- **Increased IT visibility and understanding:** The general trend toward inclusion of IT leadership and resources in the department/school strategic planning processes has provided increased visibility into the challenges and successes of the IT department. It also increases the department's understanding of where and how it might use IT resources to accomplish its goals. As a result, departments and schools, as well as the institution as a whole, have a better appreciation for the strategic role of IT. Transparency of institution-wide, comprehensive IT needs leads to greater consensus of priority and understanding of funding and resource limitations.
- **Increased goal achievement:** Two years into a traditional strategic plan, many IT leaders would observe that they had to abandon important plan components due to technology shifts and changes in institutional priorities. An agile, more informed IT strategic planning process produces goals that align not only with institutional desires but also with technological capabilities. A more comprehensive approach to understanding the technology needs generated by departmental/school strategic plans enables the institution to prioritize goals so that funding and resources can match the top priority initiatives such that those initiatives can be accounted for in the strategic plans.

# Recommendations

In recent years, many CIOs and IT leaders have initiated significant changes in their strategic planning process. Identifying known pitfalls to determine how to approach things differently can help avoid obvious and repetitive mistakes. Moreover, having a clear understanding of who is initiating and leading the effort is imperative for success.

The seven factors listed below should be given careful review and consideration by leaders considering the launch of a new IT strategic planning endeavor:

- Review of Prior Strategic Plans
- Leadership Culture
- Planning Objectives
- Planning Life Cycle
- Plan Participation and Engagement
- Authoring the Plan
- Communicating and Assessing Plan Progress

Each factor is discussed below and includes recommendations for IT leaders on how to make changes related to each factor to improve IT strategic planning efforts.

## Review of Prior Strategic Plans

Before starting an IT strategic planning assessment, an effective leader will review prior plans for successful, unsuccessful, and missing components. Review of prior process and plan organization is informative. Identifying known pitfalls and how to approach things differently also avoids mistakes.

### Recommendations

- Identify and review prior strategic plans for both the IT department and the institution.
- Benchmark against the IT strategic plans at peer institutions.
- Meet with constituent groups and others in IT governance to gauge success.
- Start the discussion with a focus on shared values for the future to help avoid becoming mired in the problems of the past.

## Leadership Culture

Each institution has a leadership culture that should be recognized and integrated with strategic planning efforts. Given that many campus strategic planning efforts begin with the hiring of new campus leaders, those leading the development of an IT strategic plan need to understand the anticipated role of senior executive leadership, including new campus presidents and new CIOs.

Similarly, new IT leadership in the form of an incoming CIO often leads to strategic planning initiatives that examine IT roadmaps from the new CIO's perspective to incorporate his or her vision and priorities. The change in IT leadership may bring cultural challenges to the IT strategic planning process especially if the new CIO is coming from outside the institution. New external CIOs should consider exploratory

roundtable discussions with senior IT managers and representatives from campus departments to understand the cultural characteristics of the institution to build an inclusive and supportive vision aware of the campus culture and current issues that IT may be able to help resolve.

In addition, a new CIO must understand available political capital and trust. The CIO may not have earned the trust of the campus community for delivering on commitments or may not have developed political capital based on trusted relationships. For that reason, a new CIO may not be able to introduce stretch goals that require community trust. On the other hand, if the community is eager for change, or if the new CIO has a strong recognized history and reputation for delivery of strategic projects, there may be not only opportunity but also demand for the introduction of stretch goals or advanced initiatives.

New leaders expect to create and use new strategic plans to develop a shared vision that is then used to prioritize projects and tactical initiatives. A "turnaround" leader brought in to revitalize an organization may expect an emphasis on transformative IT objectives, while a leader focused on growth may expect a number of goals around scalability and capacity improvement. A planning process that recognizes shifts in leadership culture will result in greater goal alignment and reduced conflict, achieving increased understanding and reduced goal abandonment over the life of the plan.

Incumbent CIOs may not face as many challenges with cultural alignment in their strategic planning efforts due to the fact that they already understand the institutional and departmental culture and may have already built trust and partnerships with other key stakeholders. In this case, they may have a greater opportunity to obtain consensus when introducing strategic transformation if they have a proven history of successful execution and a reputation that can be capitalized to leverage community support. Conversely, their ability to drive change and transformation through the strategic plan may be hampered if they are viewed as having an interest in maintaining the status quo.

Factors that need to be carefully reviewed and considered include the current institutional leadership model and whether leadership is in a firmly established state, in a holding pattern waiting for new leadership, or in a transitional leadership state. Institution size, IT organization model (centralized or distributed), institution culture, and maturity level may all impact the strategic planning process.

## Recommendations

- Take the time needed to assess culture before starting a planning project. Something as simple as a TechQual+[3] or the MISO[4] survey can give important information about how IT performance is perceived. The EDUCAUSE student and faculty technology research studies, as well as the annual EDUCAUSE Core Data Service survey, provide both information and starting points for discussion.
- Engage senior administrative and academic leadership as well as distributed IT leaders in cultural discussions. Ask:
  - What are the most important institutional values? How should IT be supporting them?
  - What is the most important technological factor affecting your division?
  - What is the leadership tolerance for ambiguity?
  - Can you create an IT strategic plan with existing resources, or is committed funding required before you start? The CIO needs to engage campus leadership to understand the campus

support for budgeting and funding the projects. The timing may differ on campuses: plan, then ask for budget? Or obtain budget commitment first, then plan within budget?

- How do expectations differ among units? How are they usually resolved? How are decisions made on your campus, and how are decision makers involved in the process?
- What would be the worst outcomes of IT failures?
- What would be the best or most useful successes of IT? If you had a magic wand, what would you do? When has an IT project really flopped? What were the most significant effects of the failure? From this conversation you can begin to understand how the leadership evaluates actions as successes and failures.

## Planning Objectives

To realize the benefits of increased IT visibility and understanding, a strategic plan needs to align IT initiatives and projects with the institution's mission. The initiatives and projects are represented as important planning objectives. How do we successfully identify and document aligned planning objectives?

IT leaders need long-range strategies addressing the cloud, storage, networking, or research cyberinfrastructure. While these items might appear to be tactical (and they could be if your time horizon is short enough), the focal points are strategic in that they contribute to long-term goals. Monitoring change drivers and determining potential game changers may be helpful in identifying intersections and connecting the dots between these trends and IT strategy.

Short-term goals also belong in the strategic plan, particularly if the plan itself has a short horizon. Short-term goals—which may be easier to discover and define—should be included in the IT plan because the work to achieve them will take resources. Without representation, the full resource picture to support all IT objectives will be understated in the IT strategic plan. A benefit of including these goals in strategic planning may be the quick realization of a goal, which can be celebrated and used to build momentum for other later initiatives.

A successful IT strategic plan prioritizes many valid initiatives, both short-term and long-range, without being dominated by bright, shiny new objectives. One approach is to plan from a run/grow/transform perspective:[5]

- **Run:** Goals that support the ongoing operation of mission-critical services. Such goals may be the re-architecture and server change for an existing learning management environment.
- **Grow:** Incremental increases and improvement. IT should not be an obstacle to the institution's growth. Consider that inadequate bandwidth might hamper research, for example.
- **Transform:** New initiatives that change direction, regenerate the process, or provide new adaptability or agility. Goals in this category represent innovation and new approaches that are transformative either for IT, the institution, or both. For example, a goal such as "Faculty will be able to access national-scale high-performance computing using the existing campus infrastructure" might be transformative for faculty.

To be a reliable business and educational partner, IT must meet *run* objectives, and even *grow* objectives. If there is no institutional strategic plan, the IT strategic plan may reasonably focus on run and

grow aspects of IT. There are likely critical operations on which university educational delivery and administrative operations depend; IT strategic planning may focus on keeping those services operating at a high value and, perhaps, lower cost. Existing services may need to expand, improve reliability, or increase in capacity; these growth opportunities can be covered in an IT strategic plan.

Transformational IT projects may need to be postponed until there is a more broadly understood university need. But an IT leader can develop a useful and meaningful IT strategic plan that covers run and grow projects that, if achieved, build goodwill, trust, and IT employee engagement, all positive political capital for future endeavors.

In addition to aligning IT planning with the institution strategic plan and senior leadership objectives, including the president or chancellor's vision, it is becoming common for IT strategic planning to consider industry trends and top issues identified by organizations such as EDUCAUSE and the higher education technology community. Figure 1 illustrates the contributing factors and key stakeholders in IT strategic planning in higher education.

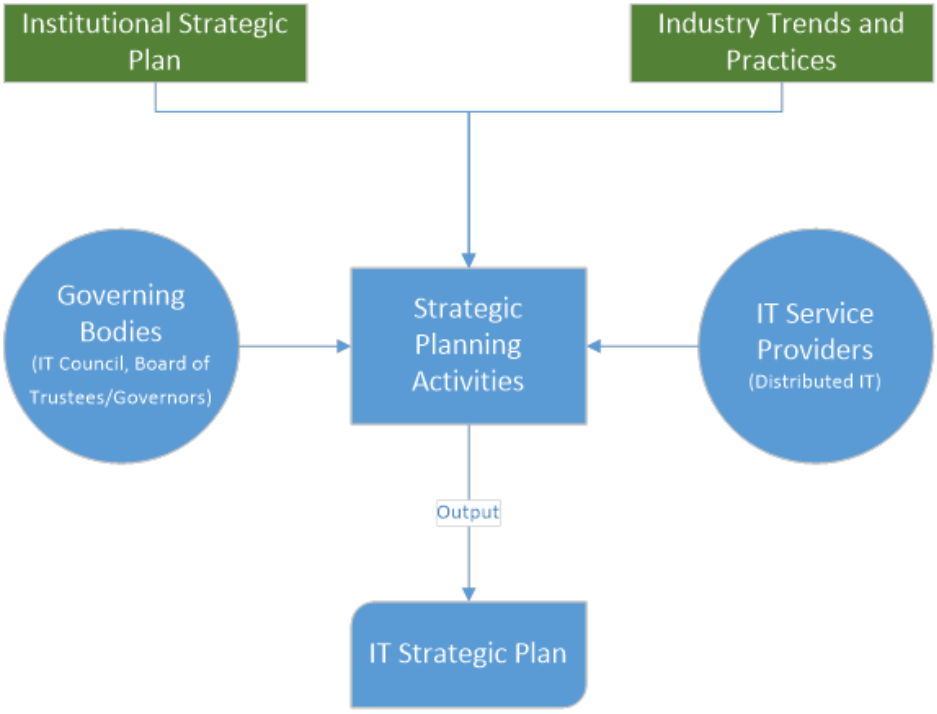


**Figure 1. Strategic planning contributing bodies, key stakeholders, and influencers**

The planning process is based on the generation of quality ideas, which are then represented as goals. But goals cannot come to fruition without resources. When making changes to the IT planning process, the application of a structured planning process can enhance both the transition and the plan. Organizing planning efforts into workshops and including outside mediators and consultants—in addition to broader campus engagement, as previously described—are additional methods that can help. Adoption of a structured planning framework, many of which can be found through professional organizations such as EDUCAUSE,[6] can help focus efforts and produce consistent results.

### Recommendations

- Identify institutional goals and determine whether IT initiatives and projects align with those goals. Conduct an analysis of how IT links to the institutional plan.
- Identify, review, and discuss both internal and external change drivers.
- Review and discuss the run/grow/transform model and the impact on the technology ecosystem.
- Conduct an assessment of IT maturity. The governance matrix in *IT Governance: How Top Performers Manage IT Decision Rights for Superior Results*[7] can help assess IT decision-making maturity. Other existing maturity frameworks include the ECAR Benchmarking Service maturity indices on topics such as IT governance, IT risk management, research computing, and more;[8] the ITIL Maturity Model[9] for service management; and the IT Capability Maturity Framework (IT-CMF).[10]
- Ensure specific IT goals are selected.
- Conduct a reasoned and honest organizational capacity assessment.

## Planning Life Cycle

A common criticism of the traditional IT strategic planning process is the lifespan of the plan compared to the speed of technological change. Some institutions have answered this criticism by transforming their IT strategic planning into an agile and iterative process.

A typical IT plan length has been five years.[11] But these longer-term plans often have difficulty measuring completion and even abandoned goals during that time. The length of time of the IT strategic plan needs to match culture and situation. The timing of your IT strategic plan may be different from that of the institutional plan, or you might not have an institutional strategic plan. Institutional plans often have a longer life cycle—existing for several years or more—due to the slow change of the entire institution. IT strategic plans may have relatively short horizons due to the rapid change of a technology environment.

Shifting to an agile or flexible way of planning, away from more of a rigid/structured, long-term plan, may support limiting allocated resources to planned projects. Changing the length of the strategic plan to a much shorter time frame (two or three years, for instance); including clear metrics for assessing progress; and reviewing, revising, and extending it annually may provide greater flexibility in meeting goals. Three years is common, with a yearly review to make the plan "evergreen" (continually updated). IT governance groups should take part in the review and update of the plan, as should representatives from units that were a focus of the previous year's actions. A report of the evaluation, achievements, and proposed changes to the plan should also be made readily available to the community. Additionally, an annual closure process could be used to evaluate the previous plan and

### Shifting to an Evergreen Plan

Beginning in the 1990s, Oakland University engaged in campus-wide strategic planning with 10-year horizons, which overlapped with university self-assessment for accreditation. This was followed by changes such as a phase of student enrollment growth and technology ecosystem changes. At first, the central IT organization tried to stay the course with IT strategic plans with a fixed-close, five-year horizon but found it difficult to accommodate schedules, blend in market technology shifts, and account for growth and scalability. In 2013, this changed to an evergreen three-year, high-level strategic planning model. The university is always in year one of the three-year plan, looking forward two years. Officials adjust the plan to be agile and responsive, set annual goals, and report annually on progress. Progress is now a never-ending flow.

report achievements. As an example, a three-year strategic plan can be reviewed yearly, introducing a revised three-year plan that extends for an additional year; following this process yearly keeps the plan updated and relevant (see figure 2).


**Figure 2. Three-year evergreen plan with yearly review**

The first-year plan focuses on the present state of IT, its resources, and its projects. The second and third years map out the projects and steps to be taken to achieve the broader goals of the IT strategic plan in support of the institution's overall needs. The plan is revised each year based on evolving funding, departmental/school needs, and changes in institutional priorities.

### Recommendations

- Adopt an evergreen approach. Refresh the traditional fixed-term plan by adding annual reviews, progress assessments, and a process for changing direction without abandoning the goals.
- Give your plan a sufficiently short life cycle to realize the benefits of increased responsiveness to technology shifts and changing community expectations.
- Recognize that tactics may change as circumstances require in order to meet goals, even while goals tied to institutional needs remain fixed.

## Plan Participation and Engagement

A plan is more likely to be successful if the planning process engages participants from all constituencies of the institution. A clear understanding of who is initiating and leading the effort is imperative for success. Besides the impact of campus leadership, other areas of participation should be considered:

- **Cross-departmental inclusion:** When discussing changes to an IT strategic planning process, a common theme is increased cross-departmental inclusion. In recent years, leaders of schools and departments have gained an increased understanding of their technology needs, priorities, and dependencies. The planning process must evaluate the present departmental technology environment and the changes needed to support broader institutional goals. This process helps each department and school create accurate strategic plans in support of the institution, and it also provides input to the IT strategic planning process. In this way, the IT strategic plan can account for the goals of the rest of the institution, which will increase the likelihood of funding and success.
- **Increased technology personnel inclusion:** Current IT strategic planning efforts emphasize a greater inclusion of IT personnel in the process. The complexity of IT use and implementations has increased exponentially. Specialized technology personnel can provide insights into current institutional capabilities, alternative technological approaches, future considerations, and creative perspectives. Departments and schools are no longer simply asking for ubiquitous wireless or a stable LMS; their IT needs are increasingly complex and require input from highly skilled personnel to help develop relevant plans.

- **Engaging the campus:** Broad engagement in IT planning activities is valuable even if we change directions. Even in the most immature environments, including nontechnologists in planning efforts has great payoff by making sure that the right goals are included in the plan and building campus support for implementation of the plan.

Some institutions establish a strategic planning committee to assist in the strategic planning process; others engage senior institution leadership to align the IT strategic plan with the institutional strategic goals. Recent trends show a broader inclusion in strategic planning that covers IT employees, distributed IT, faculty members, and sometimes student representatives.

## Recommendations

Answering the following questions may help you understand how your campus regards planning and change and can lead to broader engagement:

- Determine the audiences for your strategic plan. Who will approve the plan? Who will be expected to align their work with the plan? Who is likely to benefit from the plan? Who is likely to resist changes that appear in your plan?
- Determine planning activities that have succeeded in the past and identify new activities that may work for the future. Talk with both administrative and faculty leaders. How was the activity organized? Was there a sponsor for the activity? What about the activity was a success? What was not?
- Learn if there is a governance group that sets institutional parameters within which IT should work or if there is an institutional strategic plan to determine how your focused team (e.g., the authorship team) works with the existing structure. If no current parameters exist, identify how your planning team would like to work with the current administrative units.
- Gather members of your audience for a roundtable discussion to briefly explain some of the important directions/issues that IT is facing in order to learn how the audience reacts to them. Some additional questions to ask include:
  - What are the most important issues that the campus will be dealing with in the next few years? How should IT be involved?
  - If you could make one change in how IT serves the institution, what would it be? How should you communicate the progress of the strategic plan as it is being developed so that the audience can provide input/feedback?
- Discuss how distributed IT is included in strategic planning. Ask what ways the IT strategic plan can assist departments in including IT in their own strategic planning. The degree to which other departments include IT considerations in their strategic planning will be an important factor to consider in developing the IT strategic plan.

### Notre Dame's Plan to Succeed

Over the past three years, the University of Notre Dame moved to an evergreen planning approach using a simplified model known as Plan to Succeed. This approach uses a four-page document, of which one page ties the IT organization's goals and objectives to its mission and vision and each of the other pages provides a dashboard of progress toward the completion of goals in three strategic areas. This concise format provides an easy-to-understand view of goals and progress; is displayed on bulletin boards and digital signs throughout the IT building; and is regularly shared with customers and university leaders.

For an example of Notre Dame's OIT Plan to Succeed, see the FY2016 plan.

## Authoring the Plan

Who should actually author the IT strategic plan? The authorship team should be ready to tackle the important job of gathering and synthesizing ideas and objectives into a useful presentation that tells a strategic IT story, not just a checklist of goals. By using language and examples that are clear to the plan's audience(s), the authors can increase both the visibility and understanding of IT. Broadly inclusive authorship, even in a small group, may increase goal commitment and a sense of ownership, reducing the risk of goal abandonment. The authorship team should be small enough that it can compose quickly and review and revise promptly. It should also be diverse enough to hear, see, and understand the variety of IT needs and wants across the university. Importantly, the team must be courageous enough to risk presenting unpopular ideas.

A significant change in recent years is the ability to have a group of authors work on a strategic planning document using a collaborative online authoring tool. Committing to a single tool may the first obstacle to creating the plan, but it is an important first step. Plan authors can also help lead the strategic planning effort by using collaborative writing and crowdsourcing strategies.

### Recommendations

- Identify the authors early in the project. They need to know that they are participating in two roles—author and planner.
- Seek authors who can communicate ideas to a nontechnical audience, avoiding acronyms and insider tech-lingo to convey technology initiatives in a way that will be clear to the plan's primary audience(s).
- Avoid oversimplification that leads to "Why is this so expensive?" follow-up concerns.
- Determine an agreed-upon collaborative authoring tool.
- Consider opening the IT strategic planning process with a horizon question, such as "What does IT look like when we are doing our best work?" and crowdsourcing responses of 50 words or less. This anchors the project with ideas outside a specific technical initiative.
- Collaborative writing and crowdsourcing techniques (e.g., multivoting used to prioritize and identify the best wording) are effective approaches to consider.

## Communicating and Assessing Plan Progress

Once a plan has clear goals and resources assigned to it, a regularly scheduled review to assess progress is a useful way to keep the plan on track. As part of this process, component dependencies may be discovered and communicated. In addition, campus constituents should receive regular reports on progress toward the goals. These communications can be shared using a variety of methods, including status reports, stories amplifying transformation, scorecards, or budget reports showing return on investment and examples of achievement of the institution's mission. An IT communications team can be useful in this endeavor, but small organizations can also accomplish a transparent communications goal using simple newsletters or existing committee meetings. The produced plan is usually shared with the stakeholders, IT staff, and accreditation bodies' reviewers; however, it should also be integrated in the IT department's public image and shared with all IT constituents and the public.

Governance should define how funding will be tied to the model. In evaluating the strategic plan, it's important to "follow the money" to see if resources have been allocated in accordance with the plan goals. Actual spending may reveal preferences that are not articulated in IT or institutional strategic plans. For instance, an IT strategic plan may appear to give high priority to academics, but actual spending may show that funds are spent more on the administrative side. How does that happen? Are there hidden goals or a lack of accountability and alignment? Have actual project costs been fairly evaluated? Do the costs of enterprise and administrative activities drive the funding allocation?

No organization can fund all recommended initiatives, even if the initiatives are labeled as strategic. In particular, IT initiatives that do not offer visible benefits for end users or return on mission (such as benefiting the disaster recovery or business continuity stance or even phasing out one IT service in order to pay for another) will require greater effort to demonstrate a clear business case and tie-in to the institutional strategic plan (if any) that justifies the investment of financial and human resources.

### Recommendations

- Document the governance model that answers final plan process approval. How does it become a stable plan on which you can base tactics? Questions to consider include:
  - Who signs off? An IT plan is likely to affect the whole institution. It should be accepted/approved on behalf of the institution.
  - Who bears responsibility for seeing that the plan is followed?
  - Who interprets what the strategic plan means (or was intended to mean) when discomfort, disapproval, or dissention arises?
  - Who evaluates progress toward the goals?
- Document how funding will be requested and tracked through the process.
- Choose methods to communicate plan progress and obstacles to leadership, as well as with campus stakeholders.
- Provide funding and spending information so that the users can see that resources are being used to follow the plan.

## Conclusion

IT strategic planning remains an important activity in support of the higher education ecosystem of products and services. Developing strategic objectives into a plan is far more than listing the next projects for service, IT updates, and technology upgrades. IT is tightly integrated into the fabric of the institution, and the IT organization is responsible for building and maintaining an underlying and complex infrastructure. The best planning efforts will provide a framework of support for a rapidly changing IT landscape and strong expectations for change and innovation. The strategic planning process will be better informed and more successful by incorporating the following:

- Review current and prior IT plans, departmental and divisional IT plans, and the institutional strategic plan. Develop links to the institutional strategic plan if one exists.
- Identify, review, and discuss both internal and external change drivers.

- Involve representatives of all constituent groups in the community from the start; involve the existing governance structure.
- Ensure the plan mates well with institutional culture, both the leadership culture and the more general institutional culture.
- Consider a value framework. Perhaps the best cultural fit is developing a shared framework of values and priorities that will be used when IT decisions must be made. Instead of, or in addition to, a strategic plan describing shared goals, a shared framework of values and principles that guides decision-making processes may be a good solution. This can be particularly useful when allocating funding in alignment with the plan.
- Maintain a clear distinction between strategic goals and the tactical steps needed to reach those goals.
- Develop an evergreen planning process wherein the IT strategic plan is regularly renewed and updated.
- Collect data on technology needs and desires and incorporate those into the plan.
- Be clear and transparent about who is authoring the plan and how its progress will be monitored and assessed.
- Clearly articulate how IT plans support the institution and other departments. Communicate widely and often. Provide plan details, funding, and spending information in transparent communications.
- Keep a broad perspective. Remember that the IT strategic plan is not created to benefit IT but to increase IT's value to the rest of the institution.

# Related Resources

- The STARS (start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment, and sustaining success) framework is described in Michael D. Watkins, "Picking the Right Transition Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2009.
- Peter Weill and Jeanne W. Ross, *IT Governance: How Top Performers Manage IT Decision Rights for Superior Results* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2004).
- EDUCAUSE Library: IT Strategic Planning.
- EDUCAUSE IT Strategic Planning Constituent Group.
- Mark Katsouros, Maria Piret, Jennifer Sparrow, Val Theron, and David Weil, "Aligning IT with the Institutional Mission: Finding the Right Balance (Run, Grow, Transform)," presentation at the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference, Orlando, Florida, September 30, 2014.
- James N. Bradley, Zinna Butcher, and Erin Morgan, "IT Strategic Alignment: The Core of Strategic Planning," presentation at the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference, Orlando, Florida, October 1, 2014.
- Dana O'Donovan and Noah Rimland Flower, "The Strategic Plan Is Dead. Long Live Strategy," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 10, 2013.

## Authors

Special thanks go to the following ECAR IT Strategic Plans Working Group authors of this report:


**Paul T. Allison**
Director, Management Information Systems
Duquesne University

**Edward Aractingi**
Assistant Vice President for Information Technology/Deputy CIO
Marshall University

**Nickolas Backscheider**
Associate Executive Director, Policy & Planning
Auburn University

**Mark I. Berman**
Chief Information Officer
Siena College

**Mike Chapple**
Senior Director, IT Service Delivery
University of Notre Dame

**Michael Corn**
Deputy CIO
Brandeis University

**John W. McGuthry**
Vice President and CIO
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

**Cindy Mitchell**
Associate Chief Information Officer
University of Maine

**Theresa Rowe**
**(ECAR-ITSTRATEGY Co-Chair)**
CIO
Oakland University

**Sherri Yerk-Zwickl**
**(ECAR-ITSTRATEGY Co-Chair)**
Director of Planning & Administration
Lehigh University


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## Notes

1. For more on ITSM in higher education, see the upcoming ECAR Working Group report, *Demonstrating Value Through IT Service Management in Higher Education* (forthcoming).
2. See Marios Katsioloudes, *Strategic Management: Global Cultural Perspectives for Profit and Non-Profit Organizations* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006).
3. See Higher Education TechQual+ Project.
4. See Measuring Information Services Outcomes.
5. EDUCAUSE has encouraged use of run/grow/transform levels in CDS data collections, and these characteristics were also explored in Mark Katsouros, Maria Piret, Jennifer Sparrow, Val Theron, and David Weil, "Aligning IT with the Institutional Mission: Finding the Right Balance (Run, Grow, Transform)" (presentation at the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference, Orlando, Florida, September 30, 2014). These levels may correspond to the Gartner IT Investment Metrics model first shared in 2012.
6. See, for instance, EDUCAUSE resources on IT Strategic Planning.
7. Peter Weill and Jeanne W. Ross. *IT Governance: How Top Performers Manage IT Decision Rights for Superior Results* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2004).
8. See EDUCAUSE Benchmarking Service (beta).
9. Axelos, ITIL Maturity Model.
10. Innovation Value Institute, IT Capability Maturity Framework.
11. Based on a survey of the working group members.