3 Integral Steps: How to Use Research to Shape Your Strategic Plan

Conducting thorough research during the planning process allows institutions to pinpoint key institutional challenges and make informed decisions about their long-term strategy. Here are three research strategies to help your institution take its planning to a new level.

- What attributes of the institution will be helpful to the achievement of desired goals?
  - What differentiates you from your peers and competitors?
  - What unique offerings or resources do you have?
- What attributes of the institution will challenge the achievement of desired goals?
  - What expertise or staff do you lack?
  - In what areas do your competitors have an advantage?
- What conditions external to the institution will be helpful to the achievement of desired goals?
  - What external changes in the higher education field present opportunities for your institution?
  - What external changes in your geographic areas present opportunities for your institution?
  - Is there an unmet need in the market that you can fill?
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Although few would argue with the statement that good planning should take into account an institution’s past and present in order to chart a proper course for its future, there is some variation in the extent to which higher education administrators apply thorough research to distinguish what they know about the institution’s standing from what they think they know. In the following paper, we outline three research strategies to help institutions stay ahead of the pack by replacing guesses with informed choices throughout the planning process.

In an era of accountability and financial pressures, the importance of planning cannot be overstated for higher education institutions. Whether conducted through a formal strategic planning process or as a day-to-day habit of deliberate planning, colleges and universities must take care to position themselves for an increasingly uncertain future.

Although “planning” is a commonly invoked term in higher education, not all institutions take an informed, data-driven approach to the process. Research provides the linchpin for sound institutional planning as it provides a comprehensive picture of an institution’s current situation and suggests directions for improvement. As discussed below, this lays the crucial foundation for all subsequent stages in the strategic planning process.

In Exploring Corporate Strategy, Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington identify three components of strategic management: understanding the organization’s strategic position, making strategic choices, and putting strategy into action.\(^1\)

- **Understanding Strategic Position**: Understanding the positioning of the institution by understanding the institution’s purposes, environment, and strategic capabilities.
- **Making Strategic Choices**: With information, how are choices made and strategies and goals determined? Strategic choices include the understanding of the basis for strategic choices and the development of strategy.
- **Putting Strategy into Action**: Putting strategies in practice ensures that strategies are working by structuring the organization to support strategies, enable success, and manage the change that comes along with strategic implementation.

This paper focuses on the first key identified by Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington – understanding the institution’s strategic position. We describe three research methodologies that higher education institutions can use to better understand their position and their market: stakeholder surveys, brand perception and awareness research, and SWOT analyses. These methodologies can be applied as part of a formal strategic planning process, or simply as a way to inform day-to-day activities with a deeper strategic vision. Furthermore, by facilitating stakeholder participation, these recommended strategies will help institutions earn broader trust in and support of the plans they develop.

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**Institutions need to ensure that they are setting goals that most accurately reflect the current state of the institution by conducting research to guide the creation of their goals.**

Source: Johnson, Scholes, and Whittington, 2005
Institutions can better understand their stakeholders’ needs and goals if they involve them in the planning process. Such involvement can also help to build broad support for institutional plans. An open planning process, including stakeholder representation on committees and subcommittees, can ensure that an institution’s diverse constituencies have a voice in setting the institutional direction. However, perhaps the most far-reaching method of involvement is the stakeholder survey. Below, we describe the use of this critical planning tool.

**Elements of the Stakeholder Survey**

A key to soliciting stakeholder feedback during the strategic planning process is to address multiple stakeholder groups. Designed to identify areas of high need and importance for further consideration in the planning process, stakeholder surveys also generate support for the strategic planning process among constituencies. To achieve both aims, surveys ask institution stakeholders a series of questions about the current state and future direction of the institution. The wording of survey items makes explicit the institution’s intent to reflect and act upon stakeholder feedback.

Higher education institutions must consider many constituencies when creating strategic plans. The most commonly identified stakeholder groups include faculty, trustees, alumni and friends, staff, and students. However, in our research, we find that constituencies may be more numerous than these groupings suggest. For example, academic units contain administrators in addition to faculty, and non-academic units may also have administrators with perspectives different from the views of staff. Furthermore, local business and community leaders may also be key stakeholders.

Based on this knowledge of key constituencies and the understanding that the ideal survey population depends largely on the unique needs of each institution, a suggested best practice is to design separate surveys for each constituency: students; alumni and friends of the institution; parents; employers and community stakeholders; and administrators, faculty, and staff. These constituencies are shown in the image to the right.

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**Hanover Perspective**

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*“With online survey and focus group software, it is much easier now to gather feedback from stakeholders on a regular basis than it ever was before. Institutions can use survey data to populate KPIs, or they can use the qualitative information to explore different perspectives. And it’s not just about planning. I think that if the Obama administration does implement a postsecondary institution rating system, institutions with a robust feedback system in place are going to be much more comfortable.”*
Each survey instrument covers three broad domains: mission, goals, and governance and leadership. Survey items within each domain are designed to aid the institution in answering a particular set of questions central to the strategic planning process:

**Mission**

How much does the institution need to change to ensure fidelity to its unique mission? Which elements of the institution’s operations are aligned with its mission, and which are not?

**Goals**

What goals do institution stakeholders regard as the highest priorities? Which goals are prioritized by institutional leadership but not by other stakeholders?

**Governance and Leadership**

Do stakeholders believe that leaders of the institution are responsible stewards of the institution's resources? Do stakeholders trust the institution's leadership to guide the planning process?

Beyond these three domains, the survey for administrators, faculty, and staff should ask respondents to answer questions about the institution’s resources. These items identify the resources and processes that may require review during future phases of strategic planning. The survey instruments for students, alumni and friends, and parents include targeted questions about academic and student life. Finally, the survey instrument for employers and community stakeholders features questions about students’ career preparedness.

Each survey instrument should conclude with questions about respondents’ further participation in the strategic planning process. These items aim to generate buy-in by demonstrating the institution’s commitment to continued engagement with stakeholders. In addition, these items identify individuals who would like to be involved with future phases of planning and enable the institution to determine the best means to communicate with stakeholders about the planning process.

**In summary:**

When using stakeholder surveys as part of a strategic planning process, several key steps must be taken.

- First, identify the key stakeholder audiences. While there are often commonalities among institutions, it is important to explore unique constituencies to ensure that all stakeholder groups are included in the research.
- Upon determining the stakeholder audiences, tailor survey instruments to meet the needs of each group by including questions that pertain to each specific audience as well as ensuring that the language and tone used in the survey will be understood by the target audience.

**Careful planning, including identifying all stakeholder audiences and ensuring that each survey instrument is tailored towards the target audience, ensures that the results of the surveys will be more informative and ultimately beneficial as institutions embark on their planning processes.**

**HANOVER RESEARCH’S ESSENTIAL STEPS TO STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR STAKEHOLDER SURVEYS**

1. Cover three themes for each audience as you design your stakeholder survey: mission, goals, and governance and leadership.
2. Assess your stakeholders’ perceptions about institution resources.
3. Engage stakeholders to participate in the strategic planning process.
A Law School Leveraged its Alumni to Uncover Key Growth Areas

A law school’s strategic planning committee tasked Hanover to conduct a high-impact survey of a key stakeholder group: alumni.

GOAL

To identify key issues and challenges that the institution should address through its strategic plan.

Key topics covered in this alumni stakeholder survey:

- Satisfaction rating of the law school;
- Strengths and weaknesses of the school;
- Identification of key legal skills necessary for new attorneys and how well these skills are developed at the school;
- A profile of the school’s areas of practice, clientele, and common legal tasks; and
- An understanding of how these alumni stay engaged with the school and other alumni

Methodology:

Hanover developed and administered a survey to more than 300 alumni of the school. Hanover’s final analysis presented overall findings, as well as differences between groups of alumni based on the year graduated, legal employment status (currently a lawyer or not currently a lawyer), legal setting (private law practice or other), and respondents’ gender and race/ethnicity.

How the Results Informed the Institution’s Strategic Planning:

Through the alumni survey, the law school discovered several key areas for improvement and growth. These findings were used to inform the school’s strategic planning.

- Results highlighted areas where satisfaction can be improved.
- The school received updated employment data by graduating cohort.
- The survey identified key strengths and weaknesses, which will allow for the promotion of strengths while devoting attention and resources towards areas of weakness.
- The school learned the skill areas in which alumni felt they are lacking and will be able to tailor programming to improve outcomes in those areas.
- Results indicated the ways in which alumni (both new and older) keep up-to-date with alumni activities.

Interested in downloading our free strategic planning stakeholder survey?

Visit www.hanoverresearch.com/strategic-planning-stakeholder-survey
BRAND PERCEPTION AND AWARENESS

In the face of increasing competition to attract prospective students, institutions must now go to greater lengths to differentiate themselves from competitor institutions. In this context, many institutions are paying increased attention to the value branding has to offer. Branding should be used as a development tool that allows organizations to grow, develop, and ultimately deliver better services. In addition, successful branding can help to achieve specific institutional goals, such as increasing enrollment and expanding fundraising capabilities.

There are several key considerations for institutional branding research:

- **Creating a brand identity is a long-term, disciplined activity.** It involves research on market demands and perceptions and how they change over time within certain populations.

- **Responsibility for branding strategies often resides with the public relations department or the office of the president.** However, the process can often benefit from greater involvement by alumni, staff, students, faculty, the business community, and civic leaders.

- **Branding strategy should not be the product of top-down decision-making.** Rather, it should be an inclusive process that uses the opinions of various stakeholder groups.

- **Successful branding initiatives have a clear vision, internal buy-in, and strong leadership support.** Some institutions have noted strong press coverage and synergy with a city or town brand as additional contributors to success.

- **In commerce, branding success often leads to increased market share.** In higher education, the best analogy may be an increased attractiveness to prospective students, faculty, and staff.

- **An institution must regularly assess its brand and how it is being communicated.** This ensures that it is using an effective message and delivery that resonates with prospective students and the community at large.

- **Periodic perception surveys can help an institution evaluate the successes and challenges of a branding campaign.** Such surveys answer the key question: Do perceptions of the institution’s character align with the attributes the university intends to communicate through its brand?
Brand development work requires a planning cycle of its own. Brand perception and awareness studies help institutions understand how brand expression and marketing activities influence consumer behavior.

Van Gelder identifies six distinct components to the strategic planning cycle for defining a brand, which are pictured in the image to the right. While this model was designed for use in the B2B, B2C, and NGO sectors, we have translated its six elements to the higher education context.

**The Business Strategy**

In describing the concept of business strategy, Van Gelder writes that “the strategic plan for a brand starts with an understanding of an organization’s business strategy. Strategizing for business is not something that is exclusive to the business world.” As such, when higher education institutions embark on planning of any kind, a clear articulation of and understanding of the business strategy is necessary to effectively support the subsequent steps in the branding process.

**Brand Expression**

As Van Gelder writes, “It is the task of brand management to translate the business strategy into a brand expression.” Although the “brand expression” captures the essence of what an organization seeks to convey to its constituencies and gives it the tools with which to do so, an organization’s “brand,” in the fullest sense, will reflect many influences, including the perceptions of consumers. Accordingly, research is critical to developing a brand expression, which requires an understanding of these multifaceted influences.

**Marketing**

Institutional marketing initiatives can be targeted towards a number of audiences, including prospective students, parents, faculty members, donors, alumni, media, and public officials. Despite best intentions of communicating with each of these groups, educational institutions, no matter how large, have limited resources for marketing, and the question of how to direct limited resources to achieve maximum results is a nearly universal dilemma.

There is no single, one-size-fits-all model for institutions to design and implement a marketing strategy. Instead, marketing efforts must speak to the unique demands and needs of individual institutions. Research recommends that institutions create mechanisms that transcend organizational structures and form a marketing team from different parts of campus. An advisory board, consisting of individuals from different campus departments, trustees, and community leaders, can identify critical issues, decide on overall strategic marketing plans, and form groups capable of implementing marketing projects.

Denis Rudd, co-author of *Expanding Marketing Principles for the Sale of Higher Education*, notes that regardless of the specific marketing strategy an institution undertakes, there are three marketing principles colleges and universities must keep in mind:

- **Marketing is necessary regardless of an institution’s current stage of development.** Marketing is essential for informing, reinforcing, or reminding the prospective student what the institution has to offer.
- **Marketing must be consistent and ongoing.** There will always be consumers who have not heard about or do not remember hearing about the college or university.
- **Marketing does not provide a magic bullet.** If an institution does not offer students what they want and need at a reasonable value, marketing alone can do little to improve the institution’s appeal.

There are close links between an institution’s strategic planning process and its marketing effectiveness. Before developing a marketing framework, it is critical that postsecondary institutions review their mission statement, vision statement, and strategic plan. Having a well-defined strategic plan, with clear
mission and vision statements, enables institutions to project themselves as institutions that have a clear understanding of what they are and what they want to be in the future. Particularly with regard to the issue of brand development and management, such an understanding is critical to informing the institution’s marketing strategy.

**Brand Perception**

As Van Gelder notes, brand perception is influenced not only by an organization’s own policies and procedures, but also by the lenses through which it is viewed by stakeholders. As institutions plan, it is important to explore the ways in which the institution’s brand is perceived by multiple stakeholder groups.

**Brand Recognition**

A brand serves to both tell the story behind an institution and to distinguish its products or services from others on the market. Brand recognition, or awareness, refers to the way in which an institution’s brand differentiates it from other institutions. A well-developed brand identity does much of the work for stakeholders by simplifying decisions, providing emotional reinforcement, and offering a sense of community. Within the context of higher education, a brand can be described as a name, an image, or a compelling description of an organization that captures the essence of the value that it provides.

**Consumer Behavior**

Students – the consumers – face their own challenges in an increasingly complex higher education marketplace. Deciding which college or university to attend is an extremely complex and often difficult choice for students.

Students typically make this decision based on a wide variety of factors and motivations. They seek reliable information but often base their decisions on a complex mix of factors that may, at times, even seem irrational from the perspective of the courting institution. Given the complexity of the process, higher education institutions will want to present a clear image of what they are and what they have to offer. This can be accomplished by branding, which may speak to the factors students consider, as well as providing clear and reliable information.

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**Expert Insight**

Denis P. Rudd, Ed.D, CHA, FMP
Co-Author of Expanding Marketing Principles for the Sale of Higher Education

When asked to identify the marketing issue that is the most challenging to higher education institutions, Denis Rudd described that many higher education institutions do not view marketing in a holistic manner with well-developed marketing plans. When asked for solutions to overcome these challenges, Rudd responded:

“Higher educational institutions need to understand the three basic tenets of marketing. First, marketing is necessary no matter which stage of development the institution may be in. Whether it is to inform, reinforce, or remind the prospective student, marketing is necessary. The second tenet is that marketing should be consistent and ongoing. There are always consumers who have not heard or do not remember hearing about your institution. The third tenet is that marketing is not a cure all. If a college does not offer students what they want and need at a reasonable value, marketing can do little to improve the student population.

Educational marketing is unique because of the intangibleness of the product. It cannot be stored and is a blend of many independent components and intermediaries play a critical role. Marketing for higher education must, therefore, rely on more streamlined marketing mix for services.”
Facing declining enrollment and a tighter marketing budget, a university realized that the best way to improve the ROI on its marketing spend was to better understand stakeholder perceptions in order to make informed decisions on its go-to-market strategy. The university tasked Hanover to conduct a brand perception and awareness survey as the first step in a longer-term research initiative.

GOALS:
- Examine the stakeholder’s familiarity with the institution and its local competitors;
- Determine and analyze the overall ratings of the quality of the institution on metrics such as the quality of academics or affordability of tuition; and
- Assess the effectiveness of its marketing strategies

METHODOLOGY:
Hanover developed and administered a survey to more than 600 respondents with a connection to the institution. Hanover’s final analysis presented overall findings, as well as the ratings of the institution and peer institutions along with perceptions of the institution’s marketing initiatives and advertising strategies.

HOW THE RESULTS INFORMED THE INSTITUTION’S STRATEGIC PLANNING:
Through the survey, the university discovered several key areas where it could improve its go-to-market strategy:

Brand Perception:
- The university learned the likelihood of selected populations to recommend the institution to family and friends.
- Results also showed how strong its brand awareness was outside of the targeted community.

Winnable Target Segment:
- A cluster analysis revealed distinct segments, enabling the institution to form a profile of the population that regards the institution most highly.

Communications Messaging:
- Respondents rated the institution’s mission statement, giving the institution insights into how powerful and believable stakeholders perceived it to be.
- Survey analysis also uncovered the institution’s most salient selling points.

Promotions Effectiveness:
- Results showed the institution how effective its marketing and advertisement initiatives were within a specific targeted population.
In addition to stakeholder surveys and brand perception research, a SWOT analysis can provide critical insight for institutional planning. The environmental assessment entailed in a SWOT analysis can inform both the determination of institutional goals and the adoption of strategies to achieve them, as an institution takes stock of its own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of its competitors.

A SWOT analysis requires gathering four key categories of information. The first two categories—strengths and weaknesses—assess internal capabilities. The remaining two categories—opportunities and threats—address external factors. Below, we briefly describe each of these four categories.

- **Strengths**: Attributes of the institution that likely will be helpful to the achievement of its goals.
- **Weaknesses**: Attributes of the institution that likely will hinder the achievement of its goals.
- **Opportunities**: Conditions external to the institution that likely will favor the achievement of its goals.
- **Threats**: Conditions external to the institution that likely will impede the achievement of its goals.

The examination of both internal and external factors is a key component to a SWOT analysis. To ensure reliability and objectivity, institutions should seek information from a variety of sources. Through methods such as surveys and focus groups, institutions can gather considerable amounts of information. Such methods should engage a wide variety of institutional stakeholders, to ensure that a full range of views is reflected. Key stakeholder groups to involve in the SWOT process include faculty, staff, administration, students and community members. In addition to surveys and focus groups, institutions should take advantage of their internal capabilities to collect institutional data related to enrollments, course offerings, and requests from faculty and staff concerning issues such as the development of new programming or trends in the market.

The following graphic presents examples of questions that institutions can use to guide their SWOT information gathering process.

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**Figure: Example Questions that Guide a SWOT Analysis**

**SWOT ANALYSIS**

“SWOT analyses and brand studies as well are just as valuable for higher education institutions as they are for corporations or any other organizations. They are powerful tools that help institutions make good decisions and achieve their goals, whatever those goals may be.” – Cam Wall, Hanover Research
Strategy in Action
SWOT Analysis Reveals Insights for a Business School

Concluding that a third-party SWOT analysis was the most impactful way to glean truly objective insights into its strengths and weaknesses, a business school partner tasked Hanover with a SWOT analysis focused on identifying unique attributes of the school. This information will inform the school’s decision making as it allocates its resources, such as investing in areas identified as current strengths, exploring potential opportunities, taking measures to strengthen identified weaknesses, and making informed marketing and communications decisions.

GOAL:
To provide an objective analysis of a business school and its market to inform resource allocation.

METHODOLOGY:
Using a variety of research methods, topics of focus, and sources, we collected and analyzed various attributes of business schools identified by the school as competitors.

Specific information collected and addressed included:
- Strengths of the school, including known strengths as well as ones that are not currently promoted or accentuated, including programs or philosophies that set the school apart from competitors;
- Opportunities to expand programming and values that the school embodies but does not prominently emphasize in its marketing and communications materials;
- Weaknesses where the school is not as strong as competitors; and
- Threats that pertain to outside forces that could negatively impact the school’s current strengths and opportunities, as well as potential, negative effects as a result of current weaknesses

HOW THE RESULTS INFORMED THE INSTITUTION’S STRATEGIC PLANNING:
Through this analysis, the school discovered several key strengths to promote as well as areas for improvement and growth. Results from the analysis highlighted:
- Areas of study that attracted students to the institution;
- The most and least valued aspects of the current program;
- Programming opportunities to emphasize and invest in more heavily based on regional competitors’ offerings;
- The offerings of competitors, including tuition and programmatic offerings; and
- Where and how competitors offer courses

Hanover followed the SWOT analysis with online surveys of various internal and external stakeholder groups, in order to gather information about stakeholders’ awareness and perception of the school. Together, the results of this research identified current brand strengths and assessed recognition among different audiences. The school used this information to plan how to differentiate its unique offerings and strategically allocate resources.
Upon a thorough completion of a SWOT analysis, an institution can articulate how it can capitalize on its strengths, minimize its weaknesses, benefit from external opportunities, and defend against potential threats. Answering such questions is indispensable to the planning process.

Wall urges administrators not to disregard SWOT analysis as a “corporate practice.” According to Wall, “SWOT analyses and brand studies as well are just as valuable for higher education institutions as they are for corporations or any other organizations. They are powerful tools that help institutions make good decisions and achieve their goals, whatever those goals may be.”

THE BENEFITS OF RESEARCH TO DETERMINE THE GOALS OF THE INSTITUTION

Research provides the key to both strategic planning and planning strategically. Whether they are conducting a formal planning process or simply seeking to execute daily functions with more care and foresight, institutions must first understand their internal constituencies and their external environments. As a process of organizational learning, research can reveal to an institution where it stands in the present, so that it may best chart a course for the future.

To obtain more information and case studies about strategic planning and planning strategically in higher education, contact info@hanoverresearch.com or visit www.hanoverresearch.com/?i=higher-education.

References


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In Hanover Research’s follow up paper, we will address Strategy in Action by discussing the value of research in achieving strategic goals.

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