A FORMATIVE TOOL AND APPROACH TO ASSESSING STRATEGIC PLANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

As an alternative to Hunt et al.'s (1997) general guidelines for strategic planning and Chance and William's (2009) summative rubric for evaluating university strategic plans, this article proposes a new rubric, the Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education. The purpose of this new rubric is to provide institutional strategic planning committees with feedback throughout the strategic planning process to help colleges and universities strengthen their strategies and strategic plans. This formative approach is especially supportive of colleges and universities who are seeking to or who are in the process of changing their vision or core strategies. Additionally, the rubric is designed to meet the diverse needs of colleges and universities, including large and small schools, private and public, and community college through graduate programs, who create a similarly wide range of strategic planning products (e.g., websites, booklets, briefs) that serve varied audiences (e.g., administrative teams, faculty and staff, students, alumni, the public) by framing strategic plans into four core components: informative inputs, strategic direction, strategic actions, and design. Finally, the rubric provides institutions with the opportunity to assess their plans holistically or analytically, thereby providing an efficient multi-use tool. By applying this rubric formatively, institutions may improve their strategic plans by gaining added insights to their strategic planning process, strategic thinking, and strategies.

OVERVIEW

For over a decade, researchers, policy makers, business leaders, higher education leaders, faculty, staff, and students have called for change in higher education (Baer & Druin, 2020; Chamorro-Premuzic & Frankiewicz, 2019; Taylor & Machado, 2006). These calls reverberated across colleges, universities, and our society during the multiple crises faced over the past year and several months, including the pandemic, structural and systemic racism, mounting student debt, budget shortfalls due to antiquated funding models, and an overall inability of higher education institutions to quickly respond to changing internal and external environments. As Kurshan (2020) stated, "we now see clearly that the campus model of post-secondary education, with its deep structural problems highlighted by the pandemic, is neither sustainable nor scalable" (para. 1). Strategic planning has been viewed as a catalyst or a vehicle for change in organizations. However, the result has often been an entrenchment and maintenance of the status quo, resulting in institutions that continue to be out of touch with societal needs (Kurshan, 2020). As Taylor and Machado (2006) explained,

> Thus, over time, the HEI [Higher Education Institution] gets farther out of equilibrium with the external reality with which it must interact. In time, this disconnect reaches a point where institutional change becomes inevitable and unavoidable. At this point, a crisis management mode of response is generated. In some cases, it is only partially effective and fails to fully align the HEI with its environment. (p. 153)

The recent pandemic and social crises brought to the breaking point the disconnect and disequilibrium reflected in Taylor and Machado's perspective from 2006. Additionally, strategic planning efforts have been criticized for being too linear, relying heavily on hard data, being too structured, ignoring

context and culture, and discouraging creativity (Bryson, 2018). Furthermore, strategic planning and the resulting processes and products fall short because universities do not communicate plans effectively (Fleuriet & Williams, 2015), do not prioritize stakeholders who are not in positions of power (Falqueto et al., 2020), and tend to minimize bold initiatives and disruptive innovation (Hall & Lulich, 2021). Reviewing these criticisms, one may wonder why higher education institutions should engage in the process at all. The answer is simple: if higher education institutions want to fulfill their mission of creating public value, they must change and evolve. In order to change, they must engage in a concerted, systematic, yet flexible effort that allows the institution to evaluate and respond to challenges. In other words, they must engage in effective strategic planning efforts. With this goal in mind, strategic planning is viewed as a continual process, rather than an event completed at a discrete point in time. In response to the iterative nature of strategic planning, we propose a tool that assesses strategic initiatives and informs this continual cycle of reflection and growth.

The purpose of this article is to provide an alternative rubric to the one put forth by Chance and Williams (2009). They published the *Rubric for Assessing Quality of a University's Strategic Plan* in Educational Planning in response to a dearth of resources specifically assessing the products of the strategic planning process. We agree with Chance and Williams that universities need a tool for assessing the quality of their strategic plans. However, our new rubric, the *Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education,* differs from Chance and Williams' (2009) on three levels. First, this new rubric takes a formative approach to assessment and provides feedback throughout the strategic planning process instead of a summative approach at the end of the process. Second, the rubric strives to be appropriate for a wider range of colleges and universities by framing strategic plans into four core components that should be evident and aligned within the plan: informative inputs, strategic direction, strategic actions, and design. Third, the rubric provides institutions with the option of assessing their plans holistically or analytically, thereby providing an efficient multi-use tool. Ultimately, this new rubric aims to provide institutional strategic planning committees with feedback throughout the strategic planning process to help colleges and universities strengthen their strategies and strategic plans.

FOUNDATION FOR THE RUBRIC

We drew from both the strategic planning and program evaluation literature for the development of our formative rubric to support the strategic planning, implementation, and monitoring processes. From this literature, we based the development of our rubric on three foundational principles: (a) strategic thinking is the core practice of strategic planning, (b) a theory of change undergirds strategic plans, and (c) logic models support the development of a theory of change.

Our first foundational principle comes from Mintzberg's seminal article in 1994 that challenges the very notion that strategy can be planned. Rather, Mintzberg calls for a focus on strategic thinking in which the strategy-making process is creative and fluid. Strategic thinking moves beyond the managerial role of the planning process and engages in strategy development by cultivating an integrated vision for the organization rather than a sequential plan (Mintzberg, 1994). In this sense, Bryson's (2018) description of strategic planning as the clarification of an organization's mission, vision, and goals, as well as the process of formulating and implementing supporting strategies, means that a strategic plan is more about the strategic thinking that leads to and is embodied by the plan, rather than the plan itself. Applied to institutions of higher education, strategic planning, and therefore strategic thinking, can (a) help unify subgroups within colleges and universities by creating a clear identity and (b) lead institutions in the changes needed for further advancement (Taylor & Machado, 2006).

Our second foundational principle for developing a rubric focused on formative feedback is the concept of *theory of action*. A theory of action is an underlying theory upon which a program is created to meet a specific need (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). Another term used to describe theory of action is *theory of change* (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2014). Strategic plans, in and of themselves, are based on a theory of change in the sense that they are created to bring about change in an organization, including institutions of higher education (Baer & Druin, 2020). In any type of endeavor, whether it be the strategic planning process or the creation of a program to meet a specific need at an institution, leaders typically consider the context within which the strategic plan or program is implemented, the resources needed for implementation, the strategies or processes for the strategic plan or program, and the stated outcomes or goals. These aspects of planning, implementation, and monitoring align with a tool often used in program planning and evaluation – the development of a logic model which is the third foundational principle for the development of our formative rubric.

Logic models typically consist of inputs, processes, and outcomes. A theory of action provides a basis for the logic model, and in this case, a strategic plan, as the plan serves as the underlying theory of how the organization proposes to achieve the intended outcomes. In practice, the connection among theory of action, logic models, and strategic planning can help institutions of higher education conceptualize the strategic planning process. For example, if a logic model was layered over the strategic planning process, one might consider the college or university's mission to be an input, their strategic plan to be an output, and the embodiment of their vision to be an outcome. While a logic model viewed from this perspective may help in the planning process in creating a theory of change for the organization, logic models can also serve as an input as they support the strategic thinking a planning team engages in while considering the specific value the organization provides to their stakeholders (Mertens & Wilson, 2018). In this sense, logic models and the strategic planning process are recursive as one continually informs the other.

Given the relationship between strategic planning in higher education and program evaluation, Shufflebeam's (2003) Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) Model serves as an appropriate framework for analyzing and reorganizing the elements of existing strategic planning models into a common, de facto strategic planning model. While *context* would be specific to each organization applying the strategic planning model, *input*, *process*, and *product* are themes common across popular models of strategic planning that have been used over the past forty years (see Table 1; Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson, 2018; Morrison et al., 1984).

While various models propose different steps for navigating strategic planning, we have categorized these steps into three mechanisms: context and inputs, process, and products. *Context* includes the community needs being met by the institution, with the specific community being defined by the institution. *Inputs* are a combination of internal and external factors that influence decisions during the strategic planning process. External factors can include governance, legal, and financial mandates, as well as pressure from collaborative stakeholders, while internal factors can include the institution's mission and values; policies, procedures, and practices; and students, faculty, staff, administrators, and other stakeholders. Taken together, *context* and *input* provide the background and situational factors that must be considered in the strategic planning process. The *process* itself involves (a) reviewing and updating the institution's vision, (b) identifying and prioritizing strategic risks and issues, (c) identifying core strategies, and (d) designing an implementation plan, including goals and means of communicating the strategic plan to stakeholders. Finally, the *products* are generally implied through the monitoring and evaluation steps of strategic planning and include formalized written plans, whether comprehensive or focused, and communications with stakeholders.

Table 1
Reorganization of Existing Strategic Planning Models into Context & Inputs, Process, and Products

Strategic planning models	Context & Inputs	Process	Products
Morrison et al. (1984)	Environmental scanning	Evaluating the issues Forecasting Goal setting Implementation	Monitoring
Allison & Kaye (2015)	Step 1: Set up for Success Step 2: Internal Stakeholder Engagement Step 3: Mission, Vision, Values	Step 4: Environmental Scan Step 5: Theory of Change and Program Portfolio Step 6: Business Model Step 7: Organization Capacity Step 8: Leadership	Step 9: Complete the Strategic Plan Step 10: Use Your Plan Successfully
Bryson (2018)	Step 1 Initial Agreement Step 2 Mandates Step 3 Mission and Values Steps 4a & 4b External & Internal Environments	Step 5 Strategic Issues Step 6 Strategy Formulation Step 7 Strategy & Plan Review and Adoption Step 8 Description of Organization in the Future Step 9 Implementation	Step 10: Strategy and Plan Processes Reassessment

STRATEGIC PLANS: THE PRODUCT OF THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

As the purpose of this article is to propose a new tool for assessing strategic plans, we will focus on the products produced throughout the strategic planning process. One product, or genre of products, may be a formal written plan. For some institutions, this is a comprehensive plan published through a website or booklet, while other institutions may prefer more targeted or concise summary documents. Further, some institutions may prefer to create one document or source that is publicly available to all stakeholders while others create custom documents for various stakeholder groups (e.g., students, faculty and staff, alumni). While the format of these plans may differ, the general purpose is to articulate how an institution will get from where they are to where they want to be (Bryson, 2018). Eckel and Trower (2019) further challenge colleges and universities to develop plans that are meaningful, in that they influence and change the trajectory of the institution. Of equal importance, Allison and Kaye (2015) remind us that plans are not just sets of steps or goals but a

form of communication, so the success of a plan is contingent on how well the design of the plan communicates the intended steps and goals clearly and convincingly to an institution's stakeholders (Fleuriet & Williams, 2015). Therefore, a plan must entail enough detail to provide readers with context, direction, and needed next steps in a way that is approachable, convincing, and actionable.

To meet these expectations, strategic planning experts propose various elements to include in strategic plans. In reviewing these elements, three overarching categories, or components, emerged: informative inputs, strategic direction, and strategic actions (see Table 2; Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson & Alston, 2011; Loria, 2020). *Informative inputs* are similar to the context and inputs examined in strategic planning, like the mission and values of the institution, performance data, and stakeholder input, and they provide context for those reading, analyzing, and applying the plan. A plan's *strategic direction* is composed of elements that indicate the big-picture and overarching goals of the institution, such as the vision statement and core strategies. Together, the informative inputs and strategic direction should allow readers to imply the institution's strategic issues if they are not explicitly stated within the plan. Finally, *strategic actions* are the details a plan provides for achieving the core strategies and implementing the plan, such as goals and objectives, implementation steps, and monitoring and revision schedules.

Table 2
Reorganization of Existing Strategic Plan Models into Three New Components

Models of strategic plans	Informative inputs	Strategic direction	Strategic actions
Allison & Kaye (2015)	Introduction by the board president and/or executive director Executive summary Mission and values statements History of organization (optional) External environmental themes	Vision statement Summary of core strategies	Program portfolio and plans Business model and financial plans Organizational capacity development plans Leadership development plans
Bryson & Alston (2011)	Executive summary Introduction (purpose, process, & stakeholder participation) Mission statement Mandates Environmental analysis	Vision statement Strategic issues Grand strategy statement Issue-specific strategy statements Subunit strategy statements	Goals, objectives, and outcomes Implementation and action plans Other related plans Monitoring and evaluation plans Plans for updating the plan
Loria (2020)	Current state Risks and assumptions	Top initiatives	Future state (SMART goals)

Need for Fourth Component: Design

As stated earlier, the purpose of a strategic plan is to communicate how an institution will get from where they are to where they want to be (Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson, 2018). While the components just discussed illustrate the current state of an institution, its goals, and its intended strategies for reaching those goals, they fail to directly address how the strategic plan will be communicated to various stakeholders. Therefore, we propose a new fourth component: the design of a strategic plan. We consider strategic plans to be products of the strategic planning process that serve as communication platforms. Therefore, we define the design of a strategic plan not as the design process within strategic planning but as the physical manifestation of the strategic plan itself. To address the recommendations of Eckel and Trower (2019), we propose that the design of a strategic plan should provide clear communication that compels stakeholders to support and enact the plan. To accomplish this, we suggest that strategic planners consider the following questions:

1. What are the stakeholder groups that must support the plan in order for it to succeed (e.g., faculty, staff, students, alumni, community partners, media)?
2. How can and should the strategic plan be communicated with various stakeholders?
3. How are various stakeholders explicitly or implicitly addressed within the manifestations of the strategic plan?
4. How should the final product be customized to address the needs of different intended audiences?

By considering and meeting the needs of various stakeholders, we propose that a strategic plan's design should make the plan usable and accessible for the intended audiences.

ASSESSING STRATEGIC PLANS

While evaluating models for both strategic planning and strategic plans, we found consistent references to elements of reassessment, evaluation, and monitoring (e.g., Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson, 2018; Bryson & Alston, 2011; Morrison et al., 1984), and strategic planning models emphasize feedback loops and a non-linear approach to strategic planning (Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson, 2018; Hinton, 2012; Hunt et al., 1997; Morrison et al., 1984). Based on these models, strategic plans are primarily assessed to determine the effectiveness of their strategies, but we support two additional purposes assessment can serve. First, plans should be assessed to determine if they cohesively and coherently direct an institution from point A to point B. In other words, does the plan answer Holcomb's (2008) five questions for navigating change: (1) "Where are we now?" (2) "Where are we going?" (3) "How will we get there?" (4) "How will we know we are there?" and (5) "How can we keep it going?" (p. 2). Second, plans should be assessed to determine if they appeal to stakeholders as the plan will not be successful if stakeholders are not willing to support it and make changes. Therefore, the design and content of an institution's plan must (a) gain the support of key policy actors who can strategically tell the story of the plan, advocate for it, and share it with others (Ball et al., 2011) and (b) build capacity amongst stakeholders by providing skills, clarity, and motivation (Fullan, 2016).

Despite the recommendation to continually engage in feedback and cyclical planning, there are limited specifications on how to monitor and assess strategic plans. Hunt et al. (1997) provided guidelines that may help institutions engage in self-evaluation, such as (a) coupling assessment to the strategies, (b) using efficient tools, (c) providing timely feedback, (d) and responding to changing conditions with flexibility. For a more structured approach to assessing strategic plans, Chance and Williams (2009) developed the *Rubric for Assessing Quality of a University's Strategic Plan* as a means of assessing whether a college or university's strategic plan serves its purpose over

time. As such, institutions can use this tool as a summative evaluation and holistically determine to what degree elements of their strategic plans meet the criteria provided by Allison and Kaye (2015). While some institutions have created their own rubrics for in-house use (e.g., San Antonio College, 2021; the American University in Cairo, n.d.; UNC Greensboro, 2021), there is a need for an additional structured tool that is peer reviewed and meets Hunt et al.'s (1997) and Hinton's (2012) criteria by effectively providing timely feedback throughout the change cycle that is strategic planning.

A NEW RUBRIC FOR FORMATIVELY ASSESSING STRATEGIC PLANS

As an alternative approach to Hunt et al.'s (1997) general guidelines and Chance and William's (2009) summative rubric, we propose a new rubric, the *Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education,* designed to serve as a formative assessment. The purpose of formative assessment is to make informed changes throughout the process, to include the monitoring, implementing, and adjustment making aspects of the strategic planning process. Summative assessment, on the other hand, is an assessment of a point in time to make a judgement without the next step of making changes based on what is learned. In essence, a summative assessment of the strategic plan would best be described as a planning autopsy. In support of a formative assessment process, we define a strategic plan, not as a document published at the end of the strategic planning process, but as formal representation of how the organization will prioritize and navigate changes that is created and evolves throughout the planning process.

Strategic planning experts note the importance of continual review and revision of strategies and the strategic plan through a non-linear, iterative planning process (Allison & Kaye, 2015; Bryson, 2018; Hinton, 2012; Hunt et al., 1997; Morrison et al., 1984). Complementing Mintzberg's (1994) focus on strategic thinking, Frechtling (2007) describes the need for *evaluative thinking* to drive changes based on continual review and assessment. Bryson's model (2018) calls for a specific step focused on assessing and revising strategies and strategic plans. Further, Hinton (2012) advises that strategic planning should be a "self-sustaining process" and to "keep the plan flexible and allow the institution to adjust to changes in the environment" (p. 20). Accordingly, we advocate for formative assessment as it aligns with the need for flexibility and creativity in responding to changing contexts. As such, our rubric can be applied to and provide feedback for all three mechanisms of strategic planning (i.e., context and inputs, process, and products) and strengthen the planning process through that feedback. Figure 1 outlines the strategic planning products that are being targeted and analyzed during each strategic planning process, as well as how the evaluation of each product can be used as formative feedback for continued strategic thinking. First, our rubric can be used to evaluate the previous strategic plan, and the results can serve as feedback for implementing the strategic planning process and as baseline data alongside other input data. Second, the rubric can be used to evaluate drafts of the strategic plan throughout the planning process, and the results can serve as feedback to further develop and align the plan's components. Third, the rubric can be used to evaluate the complete working draft of the strategic plan, and the data can be used as continued formative feedback for refinement or as a summative evaluation of the planning process and products.

Figure 1

Employing Rubrics to the Context & Inputs, Process, and Products of Strategic Planning
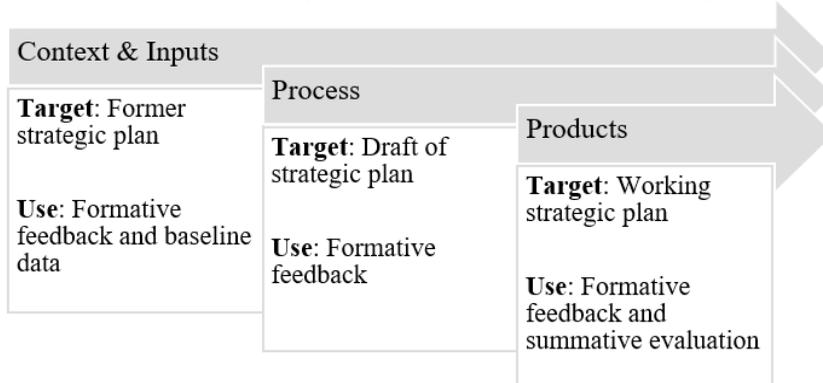
A rubric that can be applied in such a formative fashion is especially supportive of colleges and universities that are changing their vision or core strategies. Following Kotter's (2014, 2018) *8-Step Process for Leading Change*, leaders can (a) demonstrate the need for change using an assessment of the previous strategic plan, (b) strengthen the alignment between their core strategies and vision by assessing drafts of their strategic plan, and (c) remove barriers to goal achievement by continuing to assess and refine their working strategic plans.

Vertical Columns: Rubric Levels of Quality

The *Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education* honors a formative approach by using a developmental scale for scoring criteria. A developmental scale aligns with the formative uses of the rubric as it allows users to see how an element may be improved based on the developmental scale continuum. Scores range from *one* (developing) to *three* (exemplary), without the use of *zero* or *not applicable* as the components and elements of strategic plans have been consolidated and are all considered necessary within this rubric for sufficiently communicating a cohesive and coherent plan that is conducive to driving change within the institution.

Horizontal Rows: Rubric Criteria/Components of Strategic Plans

This new rubric is unique in that it provides colleges and universities the option to evaluate their strategic plan holistically or by analyzing multiple traits. If an institution desires a general description of their strategic plan's cohesiveness, coherence, and ability to conduct change, then a holistic overview can be assessed. If an institute opts for an analytic assessment, this rubric is flexible and also individually measures four traits, referred to here as components of a strategic plan, and eight criteria, referred to as elements. The components and elements (outlined below) have been consolidated from Allison and Kaye's (2015) and Bryson and Alston's (2011) models in order to be applicable to a wide range of higher education institutions, including large and small schools, private and public, and community college through graduate programs. Descriptors within this rubric are intentionally written in general terms and can be applied to a similarly wide range of strategic planning products (e.g., websites, booklets, briefs) and audiences (e.g., administrative teams, faculty and staff, students, alumni, the public). The flexibility between holistic and analytic analysis and the consolidated components and elements strengthens this formative tool as these features make the rubric applicable to more strategic plans than the Chance and Williams (2009) rubric and provide institutions with choices for how and when to apply the rubric to their individual planning process and products.

Component 1: Informative Inputs

An institution's strategic plan should provide readers with contextual information and convey the current mission and values of the institution. The right balance of background information should be provided in order to clearly understand the rationale for the plan. This may include a purpose statement, summary of the strategic planning process, stakeholder participation and input, relative mandates, an overview of the institution's history, current risks, and assumptions, and/or other details as appropriate. Through a formal mission statement or similar construct, the institution's purpose, guiding values, and theory of action should be clearly identifiable and inspiring to stakeholders.

Component 2: Strategic Direction

Additionally, a strategic plan should articulate the institution's vision and core strategies. Through a formal vision statement or similar construct, the institution's vision for success should be clearly identifiable, inspiring to stakeholders, and coherent with both the mission and core strategies. Core strategies should be presented in a way that clearly represents the institution's top initiatives, addresses the institution's strategic issues and vision, and implies what the institution will continue doing, initiate, and discontinue.

Component 3: Strategic Actions

To reinforce the strategic direction, the strategic plan should also include information about specific goals and supports. Goals/objectives should align with the core strategies and be written to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. Through the goals/objectives, a separate narrative, appendix, supplemental document(s), or other such construct, an action plan should clearly indicate how the strategic plan will be implemented and monitored, as well as how coupling between subgroups of the institution will provide resources and supports for achieving the core strategies.

Component 4: Design

Finally, and most importantly, this rubric assesses a plan's design to determine if it is usable and accessible for the intended audience. This component specifically requires assessors to consider each of the other components and elements as they are presented to and might be interpreted by various stakeholder groups. The plan's components and elements should be aligned in a way that is operational, and it should be organized so that each subgroup of the institute knows their role. The plan's elements should be communicated in a way that is easy to understand, creates buy-in, and is organized in a user-friendly, appealing style.

RUBRIC FIELD TESTING

To test the validity and utility of our proposed rubric, we used it to evaluate the strategic plans of two institutions of higher education. Our goals for this field test were twofold. First, we wanted to determine if the rubric could be used to accurately assess strategic plans while helping us, as a mock strategic planning team, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of those plans. Second, we sought to use the rubric with two institutions with substantial differences in order to evaluate the utility of this rubric across diverse contexts. To these ends, the publicly available strategic plans of two institutions were analyzed by each author. We then compared scores and discussed how we came to our decisions across each component of the rubric.

The first institution was a public junior college located in a rural setting and serving approximately 2,500 students. Their strategic plan served a five-year period of time and was communicated through a digital booklet easily accessible through their website. Overall, their plan had strengths in all areas of the rubric, particularly in terms of their strategic direction, and there were opportunities for refinement within all other areas. In terms of informative inputs, their plan included a purpose statement, stakeholder participation and input, and a clear mission statement and values. However, a summary of their strategic planning process and more information about the unique needs of their institution would have clarified and supported the rationale for the plan. Their plan also included clear strategic direction through an inspiring vision statement and explicit core strategies that were measurable and time-bound. Their strategic actions included goals that aligned with these core strategies, but it was not clear who would be monitoring the implementation of the plan nor how success would be evaluated. Finally, the overall design of the plan was very effective. The plan was aligned across all of the components, was easy to understand, included numerous photos that inspired buy-in, and was organized in a logical way. However, the plan could have been improved if the roles and responsibilities for implementation were more explicit for subgroups of the institution. Altogether, the plan had many strengths, and our rubric provided feedback that their strategic planning committee could have used to improve the elements of context, support, and usability.

Our second institution was a public four-year college that is located in an urban setting and serves approximately 20,000 students. Their strategic plan spanned a six-year period of time and was communicated through a digital report available on the university's website. Like the first institution, this plan had strengths in all areas, but it had particular strengths in strategic direction and strategic actions with opportunities for improvements in informative inputs and design. In terms of informative inputs, the plan provided rich background information and context, including a description of their connections with the surrounding community. While the plan did include a formal mission statement and values, the mission could be rewritten to be more inspiring to stakeholders. As with the first institution, the plan included a clear strategic direction through an inspiring vision statement and explicit core strategies. The strategic actions included goals that aligned with these core strategies, and the plan included a transparent, clear action plan, including links and references to multiple supporting documents that stakeholders could use during implementation. Finally, the design of the plan, particularly its usability, was supported through tables that clearly connected subgroups of the institution to elements of the plan. However, this plan was text-heavy, and its accessibility could be improved through the use of photos and graphics. There was also little representation of institution culture, and photos and other representations of their school spirit and culture could improve stakeholder buy-in for the plan and make the overall design more appealing. As with the first institution, our rubric served to provide feedback, specifically about the plan's mission statement and accessibility, that could help a strategic planning committee make targeted improvements.

As we field tested our rubric, we made four overarching observations. First, the process of evaluating a strategic plan was strengthened by taking a team approach. Accordingly, we recommend that strategic plans be analyzed by multiple reviewers as we found that quality improvements can be identified and made through both consensus and disagreement. Second, we noted that each institution, as well as our rubric, used variations of the language for strategies and goals. Despite these differences, it was clear that some initiatives represented overarching core strategies while others represented more focused goals and objectives. Therefore, we recommend that reviewers carefully consider the criteria descriptions within our rubric rather than focusing on particular use

of vocabulary. Third, we want to emphasize the importance of design. Each plan that we reviewed included clearly communicated elements, but there was a marked difference in the overall style of each plan that greatly impacted the plan's appeal to and buy-in from stakeholders. Consequently, we highly recommend that strategic planning teams carefully consider how the overall design of their plans appeals to, can be used by, and will inspire change in their stakeholders. Lastly, we found the detailed formative feedback provided by the rubric and the process of the applying the rubric to be clear, targeted, and beneficial. Therefore, we recommend that institutions try our rubric as a means of engaging in meaningful discussion about their strategic plans throughout the planning process.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three main benefits to using the *Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education*. First, this rubric can be applied to and provide formative feedback to help strengthen all three mechanisms of strategic planning: the context and inputs, process, and products. Second, this rubric strives to serve the needs of colleges and universities with various types of strategic planning products by framing strategic plans into four core components: informative inputs, strategic direction, strategic actions, and design. Third, this multi-use rubric provides institutions with the choice of analyzing their strategic plans holistically or analytically.

Additionally, we offer two considerations for institutions when selecting an assessment tool for evaluating their strategic plans. First, by striving to reach a broader audience, the rubric may not be specific or comprehensive enough for some institutions, especially for those institutions accustomed to more extensive plans and criteria. In these cases, Chance and Williams' (2009) rubric may be a better fit for the institution. Second, each criterion within the rubric is given equal weight, but some strategic planners may prefer to emphasize some criteria over others.

The *Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education* provides colleges and universities with an additional tool for evaluating their strategic plans. By applying this rubric formatively, institutions may improve their strategic plans by gaining added insights to their strategic planning process, strategic thinking, and strategies.

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Rubric for Formatively Assessing Strategic Plans in Higher Education

Component	Element	Exemplary (3 points)	Proficient (2 points)	Developing (1 point)
Informative Inputs	Context This may include a purpose statement, summary of the strategic planning process, stakeholder participation and input, relative mandates, an overview of the institution's history, current risks and assumptions, and/or other details as appropriate.	The right balance of background information is provided in order to clearly understand the rationale for the plan.	Background information is provided, but there is not enough to fully understand the rationale for the plan.	The rationale for the plan is not discernible from the background information provided.
	Mission & Values This may include a formal mission statement, values statements, and/or similar constructs.	The institution's purpose, guiding values, and theory of action are clearly identifiable *and* inspiring to stakeholders. 6 5	The institution's purpose, guiding values, and theory of action are implied but not clearly identifiable, *or* the mission is only marginally inspiring to stakeholders. 4 3	The institution's purpose, guiding values, and theory of action are not discernable, *or* the mission is not inspiring to stakeholders. 2
Strategic Direction	Vision This may include a formal vision statement or similar construct	The institution's vision for success is clearly identifiable, inspiring to stakeholders, *and* coherent with both the mission and core strategies. 6 5	The institution's vision for success is implied but not clearly identifiable, the vision is only marginally inspiring to stakeholders, *or* there is misalignment between the vision, mission, and core strategies. 4 3	The institution's vision for success is not discernable, the vision is not inspiring to stakeholders, *or* there is no alignment between the vision, mission, and core strategies. 2
	Core Strategies	Core strategies are presented in a way that clearly represent the institution's top initiatives, address the institution's strategic issues and vision, *and* imply what the institution will continue doing, initiate, and discontinue.	Core strategies are implied but not explicit, mildly address the institution's strategic issues and vision, *or* imply what the institution will continue doing, initiate, or discontinue, but not all three.	Core strategies are not discernable, do not address the institution's strategic issues or vision, *or* fail to indicate what the institution will continue doing, initiate, or discontinue.
Strategic Actions	Goals	Goals/objectives align with the core strategies *and* are written to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. 6 5	Goals/objectives are misaligned to the core strategies *or* are partially written to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. 4 3	Goals/objectives do not align with the core strategies *or* are not specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound. 2

Component	Element	Exemplary (3 points)	Proficient (2 points)	Developing (1 point)
Strategic Actions (cont.)	Support This may include the goals/ objectives, a separate narrative, appendix, supplemental document(s), or other such construct	An action plan clearly indicates how the strategic plan will be implemented and monitored *and* how coupling between subgroups of the institution will provide resources and supports for achieving the core strategies.	An action plan implies how the strategic plan will be implemented and monitored, *or* how coupling between subgroups of the institution will provide resources and supports for achieving the core strategies.	An action plan for how the strategic plan will be implemented and monitored is not discernable, *or* how subgroups of the institution will provide resources and supports for achieving the core strategies is unclear.
		6 5	4 3	2
Design	Usable	The plan's components and elements are aligned in a way that is operational, *and* it is organized so that each subgroup of the institution knows their role.	The plan's components and elements are misaligned and impact smooth operations, *or* it is organized so that each subgroup of the institution must imply their role.	The plan's components and elements do not align, *or* it is organized so that subgroups of the institution are unclear of their roles.
		6 5	4 3	2
	Accessible	The plan's elements are communicated in a way that is easy to understand, creates buy-in, *and* is organized in a user-friendly, appealing style.	The plan's elements are communicated in a way that is mostly understandable, creates some buy-in, *or* is fairly organized and appealing.	The plan's elements are communicated in a way that is difficult to understand, fails to create buy-in, *or* is disorganized and unappealing.
		6 5	4 33	2
Holistic Evaluation		The strategic plan is cohesive, coherent, and conducive to driving change within the institution.	The strategic plan is generally cohesive and coherent, but there may be areas where this is not the case and restricts the institution's ability to conduct change.	The strategic plan has elements working toward creating change within the institution, but potential change is hindered by a lack of cohesiveness and coherence.
		24 23 22 21 20	19 18 17 16 15 14 13	12 11 10 9 8

Rubric Results

Analytic Assessment		
Identify whether each component was a strength or opportunity.		
Strength	Component	Opportunity
☐	Informative Inputs	☐
☐	Strategic Decisions	☐
☐	Strategic Actions	☐
☐	Design	☐

Holistic Assessment
Identify the overall level of quality for this plan.
☐ Exemplary
☐ Proficient
☐ Developing