

Aaron L. Brenner, Robin Kear, and Eve Wider

Reinvigorating strategic planning

An inclusive, collaborative process

We often hear strategic planning described as boring, exclusive, and sometimes even out of our control. Such sentiments keep the process and outcomes of planning at a distance from many library staff. But with so much change in libraries happening so quickly, we feel it is crucial that all library staff understand the drivers of change, help shape organizational decisions, and feel ownership of what is put into operation.

This article describes a redesigned inclusive planning process put into place at the University Library System (ULS) of the University of Pittsburgh, a state-related university in Pennsylvania. While we write from the perspective of a large, research library with a staff of 200, we believe that our experience with the principles and practices of participatory planning can apply in many library sizes and contexts.

Our new process is participatory, inclusive, and transparent; it engages the entire organization with planning results; it uses a lifecycle model with distinct stages over the planning year; and it features a mix of continuing and new participants. In the words of one participant, “there’s a process that moves from highlighting lots of individual thoughts to discovering collective concerns.” These collective concerns help to create strategic vision for new connections inside and outside the library.

Core values

An inclusive planning process asks more

of people across an organization, and re-designing planning is a form of organizational change. Like many such changes, it can be met with suspicion, resistance, and disengagement. Asking an organization to go through a new set of actions without an understanding of the values and motivations is a recipe for miscommunication. For this reason, it is paramount to have an articulated set of values associated with an inclusive planning process.

When we began a redesign of our planning process in 2011, we did not start with that articulated set of values. To be sure, the new process contained implicit values, but they were not communicated separately from the mechanisms of the process. Over the course of several iterations of the planning cycle, we began to voice a set of core values whenever we would communicate the planning process to participants and the larger organization. Identifying and communicating these core values has been important, giving a foundation to specific yearly planning activities and giving participants trust in the process and an understanding of the motivations that underlie specific planning activities.

At the ULS, our core values for planning are that it should:

Aaron L. Brenner is coordinator of digital scholarship, email: abrenner@pitt.edu, Robin Kear is liaison librarian, email: rlk25@pitt.edu, and Eve Wider is director, Owen Library and acting coordinator, Regional ULS Libraries, email: ewider@pitt.edu,

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- be participatory, inclusive, and transparent;
- engage all library staff;
- be collectively owned;
- encourage open-mindedness without judgement to avoid the “we have always done it this way,” “that will never work,” “we already tried that,” or “we don’t have the money/staff for that” syndromes; and
 - reinforce that change is welcome and iterations are expected.

The planning process design

We base our annual planning process on a project lifecycle model. Each year’s Planning and Budget Committee (PBC) is shaped by a charter created by the incoming PBC chair and approved by the ULS senior staff. Using an iterative cycle allows us an important flexibility. In every cycle the process can be reconsidered, modified, and made responsive to current issues and realities. The majority of the PBC membership is elected, and membership is split in number between staff and librarians. Following the elections, the PBC chair and senior staff may then appoint additional members for balance or to support areas of particular focus.

The PBC kicks off with a half-day training that orients members to the planning process and begins the development of a team culture. Next, the PBC starts a phase of environmental scans, reading relevant reports, and bringing in speakers. Speakers may come from various places: inside the library system; offices on campus that support student services, faculty, and the community; and experts well-known for creative thinking in the field. In the early fall, a few months into the process, the PBC hosts an all-staff planning event to gather ideas and input from all staff. We have flexibility to focus this event in response to specific issues like a new library or university long-range plan or an outside directive. Additionally, the PBC reviews the status of projects undertaken in the previous planning cycles and ideas that came up before but weren’t adopted.

The PBC then digests all of this information and starts writing strategic options. Our strategic options take the form of one-page documents that detail the idea, including a short background, problem solved or opportunity perceived, obstacles, timing, success criteria, assumptions, constraints, and dependencies. These options are then reviewed by senior staff and selected options turn into actions. These strategic actions are presented back to all-staff at an event in the spring for feedback and communication.

At this point, a draft of the plan is written by the PBC chair and presented for feedback to the committee and senior staff. The past-chair of the PBC leads a separate yearly process keeping track of the progress of approved actions. These two sections, future goals and past accomplishments, comprise our full PBC report. The final report is presented to the staff and the provost.

The people in the process

At the heart of this planning re-energization was the engagement of our people: all staff in all positions in our library organization were invited to contribute and participate. Starting off, we often heard sentiments like “Strategic planning is not part of my job,” or “They won’t listen to what I have to say.” Our director at the time, Rush Miller, responded by reinforcing the idea that planning is part of all of our jobs and that we all needed to contribute to evolve into the best library possible for our community.

There are multiple levels and ways to participate in our planning cycle:

- *As a member of the PBC.* This is the most time-consuming role. During the active part of the cycle, PBC members meet every week to discuss, collaborate, and keep the process on track. Each year’s PBC is a mix of new and continuing members. Elected members serve for two years and appointed members for one year.

- *As a consultant to the PBC.* Consultants within the library are kept in the PBC’s communications loop and are called upon when needed in the planning process.

- *As a participant in all-staff planning events.* All staff are invited to participate in open events to discuss and gather ideas. Do we have 100% participation? No, we don't, but we have had a steady 60% participation over the years.

- *As a former PBC member.* The benefit of ongoing planning cycles means that a PBC alumni network of past members has built itself within our organization. These alumni are called on to help with all-staff events and the writing of strategic options.

Requesting all of this participation means that listening is an extremely important part of the planning process. While it isn't possible to execute every idea suggested by every staff member, it is possible—and essential—to listen, and to incorporate many ideas into existing services. For all of us, the act of speaking (and even venting) through constructive dialogue helps to make small parts of the library better and the big ideas come within reach.

Challenges

A highly inclusive planning process is not without its challenges. An obvious one is the time commitment that such a process places on its participants, particularly the core members of the planning group. Along with weekly meetings for several months of the year, planning group members are also involved in planning and facilitating all-staff events, analyzing the data collected in those events, drafting strategic options, and finally writing approved options into the yearly plan.

In our process, we have found that the time commitment is up to 20% of each member's work time during the planning cycle. We have handled this challenge in part by being clear about the time commitment and presenting it to potential members and their supervisors for consideration, together, before the process begins each year. Using a project lifecycle model, which brings new people into each year's process, also helps to distribute the time commitment across the organization and protects against large time commitments repeatedly falling on a small number of individuals.

Another set of challenges for participants has to do with perceptions of the credibility of the process itself. While we have stressed that inclusivity and participation are core values of our planning process, if planning participants feel that their ideas and contributions are not heard, or don't lead to tangible results, they can feel the messages of inclusivity ring hollow and conclude that participation is not worth the effort. This is a particularly difficult challenge because, for many legitimate reasons, there will always be strategic options and ideas that will not be approved, or are not feasible to become actions in the next year. It is also difficult because tracing the path from an idea raised in an all-staff event to its influence in an eventual strategic action is not a straight-forward or simple task.

To meet these challenges, library leadership should be clear about their strategic priorities and explicit in how they align with larger institutional goals, but also send a message that encourages creativity and signals a receptiveness to ideas that emerge from all levels of the organization. In our process, at the conclusion of each year's cycle, senior staff communicates back to colleagues about the disposition of each option. When options are not carried forward, there is an explanation about why they were not feasible or prioritized for the upcoming year. We have found this step to be a crucial means for communicating across the organization about the library's operations, priorities, and constraints.

Reflecting on the essential elements of inclusive planning

Inclusive planning takes time, dedication, commitment, and work. It is not easy. For us it was a significant culture change. It requires tangible commitment from senior administration. We found it had many unpredictable benefits, including giving new staff a sense of the organization and the opportunity to get to know and contribute to ULS outside of their direct department. Since communication kept coming up as a problem over multiple years, it was addressed during the process and has significantly improved—an example

is the creation of a ULS-wide weekly update email. We also have observed an improved environment throughout the organization where people know more about the current plan and think more about our work as a whole and the direction of the library system.

Our model of inclusive planning does build relationships to the point where flexibility in communication across organization levels is common. It allows for deeper ownership of work and ideas. We continue to see ripples of this planning change, in big and small ways. The strong cohesion formed in the committee and the committee alumni creates a shared experience and language. The environmental scanning, discussion forums, poster sessions, and fresh outside perspectives allow everyone in the organization to step outside of their day-to-day job and ask what is possible. What can make us better

at what we are doing now? What can make us better for next year, the next three years, and the next five years?

Collectively working through these questions has led us to improvements in the operational realm and in strategic direction. Try fostering an inclusive and collaborative strategic planning process to figure out those answers for your library together.

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(“Social justice and Baltimore,” continues from page 26)

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