Strategic Action Plans & Alignment

A Guide for Unit Heads

Putting Priorities into Action

Contents

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Introduction

The Brandon University (BU) Academic Plan provides a framework that guides our academic and professional services areas in the development of their unit specific plans. Together, these plans move the University forward on the path to realizing its academic and institutional mission and vision.

Learning Points

We often hear a variety of terms used when we talk about strategy such as strategic thinking, strategic planning, alignment, etc. It can all be a bit mind boggling. In this guide, we provide some clarification around language, process and how this relates to the current task of finalizing action plans with your units or areas, in alignment with our overarching strategy and developing your individual plans.

More specifically, we look at:

- The 3 Critical Phases of Strategic Planning & Management
- The Cascade Effect for Creating Strategic Alignment
- Elements of a Strategic Framework
- Where are we currently in the framework?
- Next steps?

Step 1:   Ensure Completion of your Unit Plan to include your Unit's Vision, Values, Priorities, Objectives, Goals & Actions

Step 2:   Create an Individual Plan based on your Unit Goals & Action

Step 3:   Track your Progress & Accomplishments annually

> *"Early in the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy visited NASA to tour the facilities. When he reportedly asked the janitor, "What do you do here?" the janitor is supposed to have replied, "I'm here to help put a man on the moon."*
>
> -   Society for College and University Planning
> *A Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in Higher Education*

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Three Critical Phases of Strategic Planning & Management

When we talk about strategy, it is helpful to know that there are three critical elements to be familiar with:

Strategy Formulation → **Strategic Alignment** → **Strategy Execution**

1. **Strategy Formulation**
   Looks at developing & communicating an organization's strategy using a balanced strategic plan

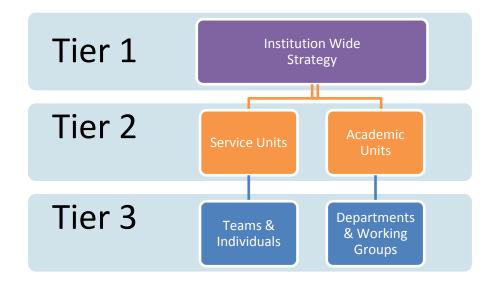2. **Strategic Alignment**
   Aligning unit and individual plans with the larger organizational strategy

3. **Strategic Execution**
   Implementing the strategy with a focus on results for continuous improvement

The performance information and data are important for determining how effective the strategy is in realizing our vision.

Cascading & Creating Strategic Alignment

When discussing strategic alignment, you will often hear people talk about the need for an organization's strategic objectives to *cascade down* to the units or departments, then to teams and individuals, and the importance of *aligning* your unit and individual objectives and goals with the overarching strategic objectives. The following visual helps to illustrate this.

Tier 1 — Institution Wide Strategy

Tier 2 — Service Units | Academic Units

Tier 3 — Teams & Individuals | Departments & Working Groups

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At the top, for us at Brandon University, we have our Institution Wide Strategy, which includes our Mission, Values, Vision, Academic Priorities & Objectives; we will refer to this as Tier 1. At BU, these are found in our *University Mission and What We Value* and the *Looking Ahead: Academic Plan* which provides focus for both our academic and professional services areas in the development of our unit specific plans; which moves us to Tier 2.

The cascade effect is demonstrated when the overarching strategy drives the vision, values, priorities, objectives, goals and actions of your unit. Once you have created your unit specific plans, these then drive the goals and actions of your teams, departments, working groups and people, (Tier 3).

Cascading the strategy down to the individual level is important for:

- Coordination and alignment of efforts and initiatives for meaningful results in relation to the university's vision
- Building clarity and bringing focus to what you are looking to achieve and how you will do so
- Enhancing communication and regular feedback, contributing to a culture of continuous improvement
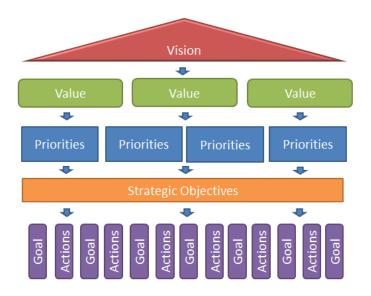- Identifying professional development needs related to the achievement of goals

Cascade Strategy – Strategic Framework

Cascade Strategy, an organization that offers strategic solutions, provides a useful strategic framework illustration that lays out the elements of the strategic process.

Think of the following strategy framework as a flowchart that reads from top to bottom, with each step being mandatory before going down to the next. Your strategy needs to not only cascade down throughout your organization, but it needs to cascade within itself from:

Vision Statement $\longrightarrow$ Values $\longrightarrow$ Priorities (Focus Areas) $\longrightarrow$ Strategic Objectives $\longrightarrow$ Goals

Let's compare this framework to the one reflected in our Academic Plan.

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VISION

At the top, we have our strategic Vision Statement. It is what keeps us focused as an institution and provides us with guidance and inspiration.

VALUES

Next, this framework encourages identifying values.   Values are the 'enablers' to your Vision Statement. Values answer a simple question: How do we do what we do? They define the organization's culture and identity and serve as the core principles for all employees. Our students, customers and stakeholders should experience these through each service and program.

While the Academic Plan does not define our values outright, there are themes that run through it including:

➢ Student-Centred (Student-Centred & Customer Focused for Service areas)
➢ Work together collegially
➢ Embraces innovation
➢ Embodies Principles of Diversity & Inclusion

PRIORITIES (FOCUS AREAS)

Your Vision Statement gives you a degree of focus already; however, your Priorities help to provide that extra degree of clarification on your current thinking about the best way to get there. They can also help to unite your organization behind a common purpose.

Our Academic Plan identifies six (6) priorities and within these priorities are details that guide our strategic objectives.

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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

This framework refers to strategic objectives, which align to one or more of your Priorities.

Strategic objectives state more specifically what you want to achieve, with a clearly stated outcome and deadline.

GOALS & ACTIONS

Goals and actions are what make your plan more than just a statement of intent. Goals are more specific and detailed than the Strategic Objective, including not only a deadline, but also a unit of measurement as well as an assigned owner to ensure accountability.

This is the point where the Academic Plan turns things over to you, as unit heads, to lead the development of your unit plans in alignment with the overarching strategy. To support you in this process, a working document has been created to serve as a template for the creation of your unit plans and individual goal-setting. It is also intended to be a tool for you to be able to track your accomplishments and progress to date for each subsequent year of the plan.

What Next? Developing your Unit & Individual Plans

The purpose of this guide is to serve as a resource that supports you at the stage that you are currently at, whether it is unit plan development, individual goal-setting and action planning, or implementation of your plans.

Following the process laid out in the guide and using the complimentary tools provided in the *Strategic Planning & Alignment Toolkit* helps to ensure that your unit priorities, objectives and actions are aligned with, driven by and supportive of the institution's strategy for success in realizing our vision and mission.

If you are currently developing your Unit Plans, work though the steps below in Section 1.

If you have already developed your Unit Plan, proceed to the Section 2 titled, Individual Goal Setting & Planning.

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SECTION 1: Developing your Unit Plan

Step 1: Prepare a Vision Statement for your Unit (with your Unit)

Prepare a Vision Statement for your unit; with your unit. Engaging the people within your units in creating a shared vision and plan will be critical in gaining their commitment to the implementation of the plan.

> *"Actively seek and encourage a diversity of ideas and multiplicity of perspectives. If we are to solve the many challenges we face in higher education, we need more hearts and minds at the table."*
>
> - Patrick Sanaghan, Consultant & Author
> *Collaborative Strategic Planning in Higher Education*

Cascade Strategy offers the following approach for preparing a vision statement:

I.   Define what you do as an output
II.   Define the unique approach that makes you stand out among others
III. Apply some high-level quantification
IV.   Add relatable, human, 'real world' aspects

An example from a Services perspective (Human Resources):

Human Resources will be valued as a strategic partner in creating a positive and inclusive work and learning environment and high performance culture that supports all faculty and staff in achieving their full potential.

Through the provision of services and programs that consider individual needs, Human Resources will be a trusted and respected resource known for putting PEOPLE FIRST.

See the *Creating a Great Vision Statement* in the Strategy Toolkit for more information.

Step 2: Identify Values for your Unit (with your Unit)

Once again, values are your 'enablers' to your Vision Statement - how you do what you do. Your unit values should be experienced through each service and program by those you serve (faculty, staff, students, visitors, guests).

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Step 3: Identify your Unit Priorities

Once you have identified your unit's values in alignment with our institutional values, it's time to bring focus to what your unit will do to help the institution achieve its vision with a focus on "what are your priorities?".

Depending on whether you are in an academic unit or a services unit, it may be easier for some areas to see how they impact these priorities than others. The service areas on campus are critical to the success of the institution, however, being able to articulate the linkage and alignment to the larger academic priorities may require a bit more effort.

A good starting point is to:
1) review and discuss Priorities A – F and the details within each priority on pages 11 – 16 of the Academic Plan document with your unit;
2) identify the priorities that your unit impacts (directly or indirectly)
3) give consideration to the university's key performance indicators (KPI) for each priority and how the university will measure success

It is important to acknowledge that in addition to the Academic Plan, there are legislative compliance requirements, professional standards, and communities of practice that your unit must also consider when determining your priorities. In addition to identifying the academic priorities that you clearly impact as a unit, it is also important to identify unit priorities that relate to these additional requirements that indirectly support the larger vision and priorities. These are to be entered in the unit objectives section of the tool under the Other Unit Priorities heading.

Considerations when reviewing these:

- Are there just a few or many? How many can you and your unit realistically focus on at a time (considering resources)? Discussions around prioritizing the priorities may have to happen at a unit level but also across units.
- Are there priorities that span across unit areas that require consultation and collaboration?

Once you've identified your unit priorities, check back to ensure they align with both the vision and values of your unit and the institution.

Step 4: For each Unit Priority, identify your Unit Objectives

Once you have identified your unit priorities, generate ideas for how your unit can best support these priorities, articulating these in written unit objectives. It's within these objectives that for the first time, we need to start being more specific. Your objectives will still be fairly high level, but with a clear outcome and assigned timeframe/deadline.
Let's take a look at a couple of examples:

Priority A – iii

Unit Priority: Establish clear requirements for degree completion for all degree programs

Unit Objective: Establish clear requirements for degree completion for all four (4) Education and joint degree programs by August 1, 2017.

Services Area Example (Human Resources):
Priority B – ii

Unit Priority: Strengthen institutional support and recognition for research, scholarly, creative, and innovative activities conducted by faculty, students, and staff across the University (Recognition Part of People Plan – HR in collaboration with other areas)

Unit Objective: Develop and implement a comprehensive reward and recognition program that strengthens support for and celebrates accomplishments by faculty and staff in areas of innovation, leadership, research, teaching and learning, and community engagement and university service by April 2017.

Step 5: For each Unit Objective, write clearly defined goals and actions

For each of your Unit Objectives, write clearly defined goals and actions.

The goals needs to be even more specific and detailed than the objective under which it sits. Not only do you need to have a deadline, but ideally you will have a metric or unit of measurement (such as a $ value or other relevant KPI) that you will use to measure successful achievement of your goals. Remember, what you are measuring should be meaningful and directly or indirectly linked to the institutions priorities and objectives.

A current and popular approach to ensuring results are measured in a balanced way, as opposed to the traditional approach of focusing primarily on financial measurement, is the balanced scorecard. Based on this approach, all goals should belong to one of the following goal types:

Goal Types	Description
Financial	Directly impacts revenue or costs.
Students, Stakeholders & Customers	Impacts students, key stakeholders, and customers.
Programs, Services or Process	Enhances, changes or adds to the programs, services and/or processes in place throughout the institution.
People & Culture	Impacts upon the people of the institutions including faculty and staff.

In the previous examples we had:

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Priority A – iii

Unit Priority:
Establish clear requirements for degree completion for all degree programs

Unit Objective: Establish clear requirements for degree completion for all four (4) Education and joint degree programs by August 1, 2017.

Now, let's take it a step further:

Goals & Actions:
2015/2016
Establish a committee consisting of representation from across departments and partnering faculties (joint programs), to be chaired by the Dean – Faculty of Education, to review the existing requirements, consult with faculty, students, key stakeholders and regulatory bodies (Office of the Minister of Education), and draft a proposal for revisions that align with the needs and requirements identified during consultation by December 31, 2016.

2017
Submit proposal to the Curriculum & Academic Planning Committee for review and recommendations by March 31, 2017.

Forward proposal and recommendations to Senate for review and final approval by June 30, 2017.

Survey faculty, students, key stakeholders and regulatory bodies to seek feedback on the effectiveness of the revised program requirements and develop the program based on this feedback annually.

To ensure completion and accountability, goals should also be assigned an owner (no more than one or two or else you begin to become overly reliant on others to own the goal). That doesn't mean you can't share that ownership with others, however, you are ultimately accountable for achieving the objective.

You may also identify initiatives in relation to the goal.

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Priority B – ii

Unit Priority: Strengthen institutional support and recognition for research, scholarly, creative, and innovative activities conducted by faculty, students, and staff across the University. (Recognition Part of People Plan – HR in collaboration with other areas)

Unit Objective: Develop and implement a comprehensive reward and recognition program that strengthens support for and celebrates accomplishments by faculty and staff in areas of innovation, leadership, research, teaching and learning, and community engagement and university service by April 2017.

Goals & Actions:
2016
Establish a cross-functional committee, to be chaired by the Chief Human Resources Officer, to review existing reward and recognition efforts at Brandon University, identify valued approaches to reward and recognition by consulting with our faculty and staff, partners at other institutions, research from the Education Advisory Board (EAB), and creating a program proposal that includes a budgetary request to be reviewed by members of PAC on December 6, 2016.

2017
Upon approval, establish a sub-committee to coordinate and implement the logistics of the program elements, in its pilot year, by December 1, 2017.

Survey faculty and staff to seek feedback on the effectiveness of the program in meeting the unit objective (supporting and celebrating accomplishments by faculty and staff in areas of innovation, leadership, research, teaching and learning, and community engagement and university service), revise the program based on this feedback annually.

To ensure completion and accountability, goals should also be assigned an owner (no more than one or two or else you begin to become overly reliant on others to own the goal). That doesn't mean you can't share that ownership with others, however, you are ultimately accountable for achieving the objective.

Step 6: Accomplishments to Date & Progress Updates
The progress updates section of the tool provides a place for you to track your progress and achievements for each of your unit goals and related action items. Take a moment to identify and report on your accomplishments to date (for 2015/2016).

As you continue to achieve your goals and complete the related action items, continue to track and report your progress for the duration of the Academic Plan's lifespan (2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020).

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SECTION 2: Cascading Goals to the Individual

The next step following the identification of your unit goals is to cascade these down to the individual level. As a unit leader, you will develop your own individual plan that outlines your goals and actions in alignment with the unit goals.

Using the *Individual Action Plan* template:

1) Identify each of the unit goals and actions that you will either be responsible for or have shared responsibility for and transfer these to your individual action plan.
2) Assign a deadline or timeframe for the completion of the actions.
3) In the feedback conversations column, at a high level, note key discussions or feedback in relation to the progress or completion of the action item.
4) Track and record completion of these actions.

Integration of Unit Plans into a Single Framework

Unit Heads are expected to complete the development of their unit plans and individual plans by January 2017. Following review, discussion and possible revisions to ensure alignment, the next step will be to integrate the academic program and service unit plans into a single framework to support coordination and shared action across Brandon University.

The integration of the plans into a single framework will be followed by the final phase, where progress on the actions taken towards the fulfillment of the priorities and goals is tracked and adjusted as necessary, and feedback of the results is provided.

References & Resources

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