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# A Guide for Tactical Planners

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SCRANTON

*PLANNING, ASSESSMENT & INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICE*

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## A Guide for Tactical Planners

The University of Scranton considers planning “a conscious process by which an institution assesses its current state and the likely future condition of its environment, identifies possible future states for itself, and then develops organizational strategies, policies, and procedures for selecting and getting to one or more of them” (Peterson<sup>1</sup>). The University has adopted a three-level model to structure its planning efforts.<sup>2</sup>

The first level of this model describes the **strategic planning** process, planning which broadly considers the University as a whole, carefully addresses external environmental factors along with internal observations, and covers a five-year period. The second level, the **tactical planning** process, considers the needs and activities of a specific division or other cross-divisional area of the organization (such as Marketing, Enrollment Management, Diversity efforts, or Human Resources), along with how the division/area supports the broader scheme of institutional strategic planning. **Operational planning**, the third level, occurs within each individual department on an annual basis, and is reflected in the Annual Reporting<sup>3</sup> process. Operational planning is built around the identification and fulfillment of objectives that can be completed within one year. It supports the fulfillment of goals described in tactical plans, and reflects the routine needs of the department. Through their Annual Reports, individual departments report their accomplishments as they relate to the University’s Strategic Plan and any relevant tactical plans. These results, along with pertinent assessment findings, will inform the planning process at each level.

### Tactical Planning

As defined by Norris, tactical planning “consists of the short-term or intermediate-term, regular planning and budgeting activities dealing with administrative and operational activities that unfold within the overall strategic context of objectives established by strategic planning” (9)<sup>4</sup>. At the University of Scranton, a tactical plan contains the priorities, goals, and objectives outlined in a divisional or other campus-wide intermediate range (average 3 years) plan. While strategic planning focuses on identifying broad statements of institutional focus in specific areas, **tactical planning** serves three more functional purposes. First, it helps each division/area identify and commit to ways it can serve the University’s mission and goals, vision, and strategic plan. It also identifies the key priorities of the individual division/area—

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Marvin. “Analyzing Alternative Approaches to Planning.” ASHE Reader on Planning and Institutional Research, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See attached.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Annual Report process, see [http://lynx.scranton.edu/annual\\_report/](http://lynx.scranton.edu/annual_report/)

<sup>4</sup> Norris, Donald and Nick L. Poulton. A Guide for New Planners. The Society for College and University Planners, 1991.

statements which define the nature of the division/area and its relationship with those it serves—, and establishes particular goals necessary to meeting these needs successfully. Third, tactical planning identifies clear and specific objectives for fulfilling these goals, activities that have measurable results.

Tactical planning allows divisions/areas to prioritize their needs and activities over a three year period, ensuring that annual operations consider what relationship exists between decisions/activities made in one year and future goals and events. Though the scope of the plan covers three years, the plan should be reviewed annually to ensure that progress is being made and monitored, that goals and activities remain relevant to the division or administrative area's changing needs, and that the plan is actively supporting the University's Strategic Plan. Tactical planning is not meant to burden divisions/areas with additional work, but rather to organize thinking and planning that often takes place on an ad hoc and less centralized basis. It attempts to emphasize forward thinking in everyday activities, and provide divisions/areas with touchstones to mark their progress.

Tactical planning also serves a very functional purpose – that of providing a process for aligning the University's annual budgeting processes to its planning efforts.

The Planning, Assessment & Institutional Research Office (PAIRO) serves as a support resource for the divisions/areas developing tactical plans. PAIRO can provide research support, facilitate planning meetings, and support other processes that are part of the planning process.

### Building the Plan

**Getting started.** Planning is different from just “thinking ahead.” All areas of an organization consider their needs and aims for the future, but the activities of planning compel persons and/or groups to prioritize and commit to needs for a specific period. It helps to provide some framework for the prioritization and allocation of resources.

Rather than being an exercise that is reactive to market or other business concerns, planning is proactive, attempting to align an institution with its environment, and helping it to capitalize on external opportunities and minimize its vulnerability to threats. It is informed by careful research and analysis, and is kept on track by consistent measurements of progress/success, benchmarking, and the tracking and reporting of results. Rather than any of these steps being end points in and of themselves, as they may be in the more traditional ad hoc processes of “thinking ahead,” each contributes to a continuing process similar to that established by W. Edwards Deming and followed closely by effective organizations: *plan, do, check, and act*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Watson, G.H. Strategic Benchmarking: How to Rate Your Company's Performance Against the World's Best. New York: Wiley, 1993.

**Plan to plan.** Organizing core planning staff is an essential first step of the planning process. This group should consist of persons with management responsibility within the division and its subsequent departments, or key stakeholders in the case of organizational areas. The group should study the University's mission and goals, the Planning and Institutional Effectiveness model, the current University Strategic Plan and, if they have not already, familiarize themselves with the Annual Report process.

**Explore your relationship to the communities in which you do business.**

Tactical planning is designed to support the mission and goals, vision, and strategic plan of the institution. However, it also serves as a very practical way for divisions/areas to strive for success and improvement in their own unique service areas. The group should first discern its role within the University. What is its core mission? Can it articulate a clear vision for what its role will be in the future? Forming answers to these questions and presenting statements that describe the answers will later be important in determining the value of possible tactical goals and objectives. Once these essential questions about its internal role(s) are answered, the tactical planning group must explore its external environment. Environmental scanning is an excellent way to begin this process.

**Do your homework.** Environmental Scanning is defined as “the acquisition and use of information about events, trends, and relationships in an organization's external environment, the knowledge of which would assist management in planning the organization's future course of action” (Choo 84), and is a crucial part of any planning exercise.<sup>6</sup> PAIRO completes environmental scanning reports with a University-wide scope on a regular cycle, presenting analysis of issues that may impact the institution as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The PAIRO office maintains extensive scanning related materials, and can serve as a resource for research on a variety of subjects. To begin the scanning process, determine what critical issues the field/discipline of the administrative area doing the planning will face in coming years from both the macro and micro environments. Look for trends and signs of change. When putting together the final report, be sure to present the issues at hand with an eye to how they will specifically impact the institution and the particular area doing the planning.

Along with examining external trends, the planning group should take a look at their own backyard—the institution which they are part of. Identify key stakeholders, and ask them to consider what needs or issues they see rising in the context of your division/area's tactical plan. Those doing the planning should also consider relevant

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Alstete, Jeffrey. Benchmarking in Higher Education: Adapting Best Practices to Improve Quality. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on environmental scanning, contact PAIRO.

<sup>7</sup> These environmental scanning reports can be accessed via the PAIRO web site, [www.scranton.edu/planning](http://www.scranton.edu/planning).

documents and processes, for example, institutional Periodic Review and Self Study reports and reviewer responses from The Middle States Commission on Education. They may ask themselves what events or issues on campus are clamoring for attention. And, they will want to consider what successes and gains the institution has enjoyed in recent years.

**Engage in critical analysis.** Information is only as valuable as the way in which it is used. After an environmental scan is completed, be sure to share it with the planning group and any other community members or groups who may be able to react to it with insight. Engaging in a SWOT analysis is an essential next step. SWOT analysis is a process whereby an organization considers its internal strengths and weaknesses in relationship to external opportunities and threats. A successful SWOT analysis will demonstrate how well the division/area is or is not aligned with critical factors of its internal and external environments. With these findings in mind, the area doing the planning should be able to identify the issues to which they should and can respond, and determine the way(s) in which that response should be structured.

**Develop Priorities, Goals, and Objectives.** Once the division/area has determined trends, changes, and best practices to which it should respond, it is ready to begin preparing the structure of its tactical plan. Tactical planning both highlights processes and activities that may already be in place, and challenges the division/area to extend its operations to respond to new challenges and directions that will support its improvement. Again, although the tactical plan is the means through which the division/area will support the University's strategic planning process, it also needs to stand on its own as a planning activity for the division/area itself. With these needs in mind, PAIRO has developed the following outline structure to frame a tactical plan:

## I. Priorities

### A. Goals

#### 1. Objectives<sup>8</sup>

**Priorities** are statements (generally, three to five in each plan) which, in collaboration with its own mission and vision, define the nature of the division/area and its relationship with those it serves. These statements are themselves "strategic" in nature; i.e., they consider the environment in which the division/area functions (both internal and external), and are broad in scope. Though the tactical plan itself will recycle every three years, the priorities for the plan are broad enough to remain in place for future planning cycles, should the division/area wish to retain them. These priorities give context to and anchor the division/area's tactical planning goals.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2007, the term "objective" replaced the term "action" to describe this level of activity. The change was made to help planners to more closely align the language of their plans to the language of the University's Annual Report Process, a process by which progress on the plan is reported.

**Goals** are things the division/area intends to accomplish over the coming three-year period. Each goal may be fulfilled through one or more **objectives**, activities which take place at the operational (or departmental) level. Each objective must be measurable, and its result will be reported through the Annual Report system.

Here is an example of how these fit together from the Information Resources Divisional Tactical Plan for 2005-2008:

**Priority:** Technology that supports and enhances the University's teaching and learning environment.

**Goal:** The Division will strengthen computing and technical support resources for students and faculty.

**Objective:** Supplement the classroom experience through delivery of satellite-based programming and events via enhanced cable network.

This sample describes planning that is essential for the continued success of the division. Yet, as it supports the academic mission of the institution at large, it supports the University of Scranton mission and goals, and can support any University strategies which speak to educational excellence.

When developing this structure for your own tactical plan, consider the following questions:

- In what ways can our division/area support the institution's mission and goals, and help achieve its vision?
- What themes and strategies of the University's strategic plan can our division/area support? What goals and objectives can we undertake to help achieve them?
- What are best practices in our field/discipline?
- What are the key priorities of our division/area?
- What things to do we hope to accomplish over the coming three years? Meeting what specific objectives will help us fulfill these goals?
- How will we know we have met our goals? What does each individual goal "look like" if completed? How can we measure this completion?

Also essential in crafting goal and objective statements is considering which departments or groups can be responsible for fulfilling them, in whole or in part. In the cases of those plans which are not divisional plans, tactical planning may reach outside of a specific area to other areas of the organization. If this is the case in your plan, be sure to be in touch with these departments, groups, or persons as early as possible in the tactical planning process.

Once goals and objectives are identified and a draft plan is in place, steps should be taken to share it with the University community for developmental feedback. Tactical planners are encouraged to share their drafts with the University Planning Committee (UPC) so that it may ensure that all strategies of the Strategic Plan are covered by one or more divisions/areas in their tactical plans.

**Plan Approval/Endorsement.** All tactical plans will be shared with the University Planning Committee. Initial presentation will engage both the presenter and the Committee in conversation regarding the tactical plan's relevance to and role in supporting the University's strategic plan. As plans are updated, summaries of key changes to the plans will be shared with the UPC.

Again, two types of tactical plans exist at the University: those which focus on a particular organizational division (Academic Affairs, Institutional Advancement, Finance, Information Resources, Mission & Ministry, Administrative Affairs, and Student Affairs) and those which focus on an operational area which impacts one or more organizational groups or functions (Marketing, Enrollment Management, Diversity, and Human Resources). Responsibility for divisional plans rests with the vice president for each respective division; for those plans which are not divisional in nature, a designated tactical planner, identified by the Vice President for Planning, will manage their respective plan.

Approval authority for each divisional plan rests with the Vice President for the division. At the start of each three-year cycle<sup>9</sup>, the UPC will review each divisional plan to ensure linkage to the University's Strategic Plan, but will not be required to issue and endorsement of it. For the latter type of tactical plan, the UPC will review each for its linkage to/support of the Strategic Plan, and choose to recommend, recommend with reservation, or not recommend endorsement of the plan to the Administrators' Conference.

In each subsequent year, planners are asked to review their plans to identify any changes that need to be made. Copies of each tactical plan will be collected by PAIRO each summer, and shared with the Administrators' Conference, accompanied by brief

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<sup>9</sup> Cycle is three years. First cycle commenced in 2006; the formal review/approval process will next be repeated in 2009. In intermittent years, planners will be asked to review/update plans, but will not be required to seek approval.

analysis of the ways in which the plans collaborate to serve the Strategic Plan, at its annual summer planning retreat.

**Monitor and Report Progress.** There are several ways in which the progress of tactical plans will be monitored and reported. The University's Annual Report process will serve as the central means by which progress on objectives for each tactical plan, and budget requests for the plan, will be submitted. In addition to this administrative tool, planners are asked to build an Institutional Effectiveness (IE) Component into their plans.

The IE Component is designed to provide planners with a multiple-measures process for monitoring general plan progress. A brief appendix to the tactical plan, the component includes a listing of indicators of success (measurable key data points) for each priority of the plan and a listing of items which the planning area intends to investigate in its Administrative Area Survey<sup>10</sup>. Results from this survey will be used to inform the tactical planning process. Tactical planners should use the narrative section of the Annual Report system to report progress on indicators of success. Or, if an indicator is related to a particular objective reported in other sections of the report, progress can be shared in the relevant section(s).

Another activity planning areas may employ to review planning progress is by benchmarking or some other comparative process. Like planning, benchmarking itself closely follows Deming's cycle (Alstete 21)<sup>11</sup>. Benchmarking is a process that involves "analyzing performance, practices, and processes, within and between organizations and industries, to obtain information for self-improvement" (Alstete 20).

**Linking Planning and Assessment.** Assessment at the University of Scranton describes the process(es) by which we discern to what extent we are meeting student learning outcomes. Both academic programs and any administrative department/division that identify student learning outcomes will prepare a plan for assessment. Administrative units which do not contribute to the achievement of student learning outcomes are not required to submit an assessment plan, but are instead asked to engage in review of administrative outcomes via the tactical planning Institutional Effectiveness component.

As illustrated in the University's Planning and Institutional Effectiveness model, assessment results should inform planning at each level. The importance of this connection between planning and assessment is clearly described in the Middle States Commission on Higher Education *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, the

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<sup>10</sup> Administrative Area Surveys are administered for each division/planning area on a regular cycle.

<sup>11</sup> Alstete, Jeffrey (1995).

University's standards for accreditation<sup>12</sup>. Findings from assessment activities can result in the development of objectives(s) that will become part of a department's operational plan; these findings may also impact a division or area's tactical plan by helping planners to determine areas or functions that need improvement, and identifying ways in which this improvement might take place.

At the tactical level, centralized assessment and institutional effectiveness activities, including those used to monitor tactical plans, and surveys of students, or analysis of administrative areas, are conducted by both PAIRO and other departments. The results of these activities may impact goals or objectives in a division/area tactical plan. For example, if one of the goals of a division or area plan is to provide a valuable service to students, the results of a centralized assessment, such as the Senior Survey, may reveal that students are already satisfied with the service, or may show that they are more interested in a different type of service. Finding out the results of this assessment may redirect the tactical plan goals or objectives in some way – perhaps modifying or changing one or more, or adding/subtracting another.

At the strategic level, the results of centralized assessment and institutional effectiveness activities—usually summarized in a larger analysis such as the Self-Study or the results of a University-wide study, like the Campus Climate Study—are incorporated into the development of each new strategic planning cycle.

**Linking Planning to Budgeting.** The University's Planning Committee has endorsed a process designed to link planning needs to annual budget requests:

1. **Vice presidents** will put forward annual requests for funding for tactical planning initiatives through their seat on the Financial Management Committee. This process will funnel through the regular Annual Report Budget Request procedures.
2. For those **plans which are not divisional**, the individual/group responsible for the plan will prepare budget requests related to the plan, funneling these requests through the Annual Report process

For all Annual Report budget requests, the requestor must indicate if the request supports a tactical plan or the University's strategic plan, or both. Budget requests put forward through tactical planning will be given priority in the budget process.

For significant projects (those with expenses of \$10,000 or more) that support a strategy within the University's Strategic Plan, planners may request support from **Strategic Initiatives funding**, a pool of dollars set aside in each year's annual budget to

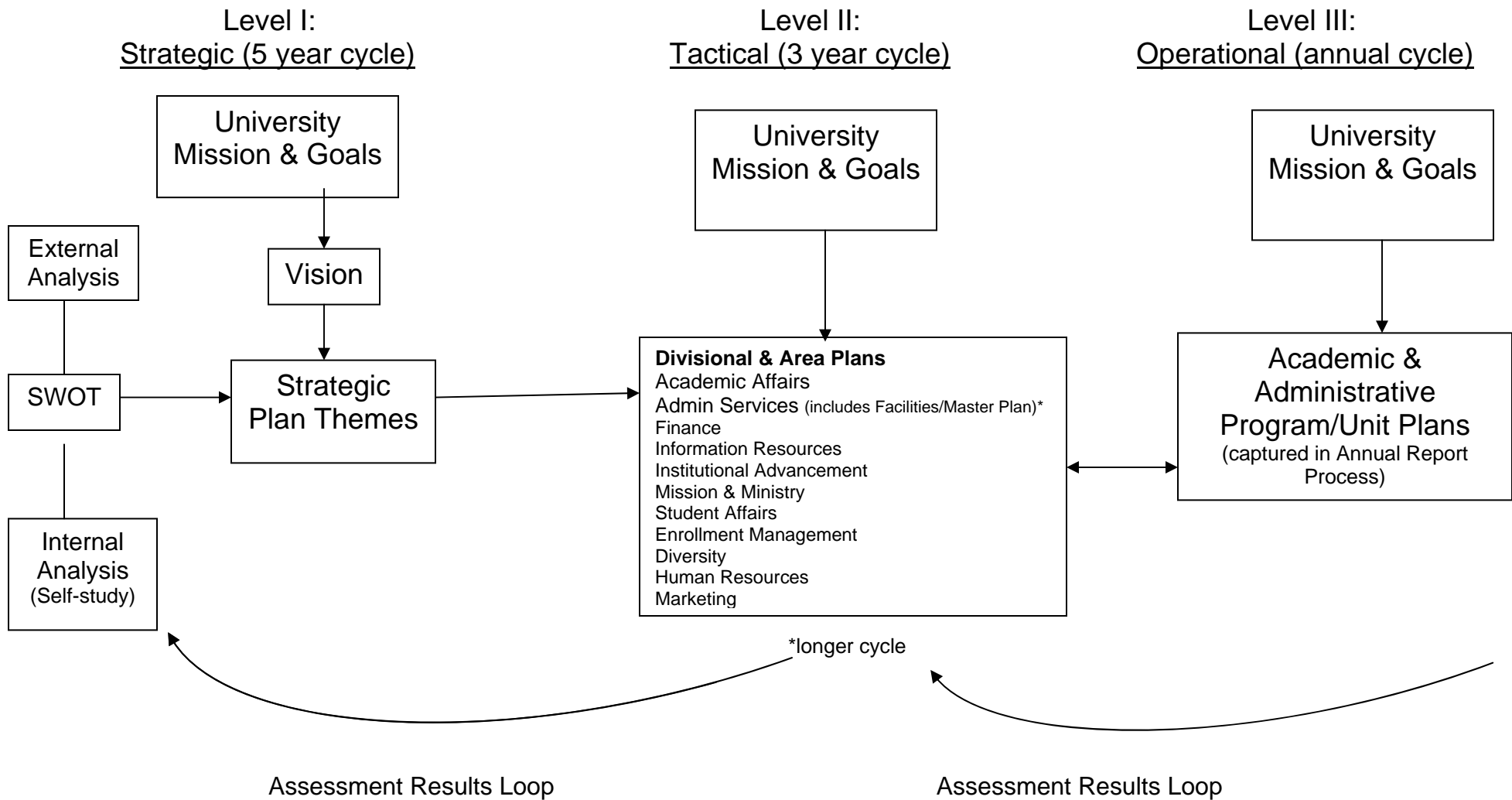
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<sup>12</sup> See: *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, Standard 7: Institutional Assessment. Available from PAIRO.

support innovative, broad-impact projects that directly further the University's Strategic Plan. To request funding from this particular source, tactical planners are asked to prepare proposals that include a brief description of the project, cost estimates and timeline for the project, and rationale linking the project to one or more of the strategies in the Strategic Plan.

In addition to these steps for annual funding, tactical planners will prepare a **three-year cost projection**, cost estimates for any goals or actions in their plan that they anticipate will have expenses of greater than \$10,000. This long-term financial outlook should be submitted to the finance office for use in the development of the University's long-term financial plan.

*For additional questions about the strategic or tactical planning processes, contact PAIRO at 941-6344 or email [planning@scranton.edu](mailto:planning@scranton.edu).*



Adapted from "Decisions by Design: Contexts, Academics, and Strategic Decision-Making and Planning" a presentation by K. Borland, R. Howard, & R. Shirley at the Fall 2003 Middle States Conference.



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