

Thinking Like a Designer in Uncertain Times

David P. Haney
Inside Higher Education (2020)

Remember the good old precoronavirus days of strategic planning in higher education?

The president or provost would assemble an ungainly slate of committees for mission, finance, student success, academics, the physical campus, external engagement and every other area the institution was involved in. After months of work, often with the services of a highly paid consultant, The Plan was produced and praised for its uniqueness and the high degree of campus involvement that produced it.

The plan was full of goals, strategies and tactics meant to increase enrollment, reduce dependence on tuition revenue, analyze academic programs and add some new ones, take care of deferred maintenance, and engage more fully with the community -- all the things every other college or university was promising to do in its strategic plan. KPIs (key performance indicators) and responsible parties were then added so that progress could be tracked.

The plan was then sent to marketing to be dolled up and put on the institutional website -- with pictures of happy students, earnest faculty and random campus buildings surrounded by blooming vegetation -- as well as given a catchy title. (Luckily it is already 2020, so we are free from the last decade's "2020 vision" puns. Ithaca College even got to call theirs "IC 2020.") Then, a month or so before each board meeting, the president would ask their senior staff, "What have we done lately that shows we are making progress on the strategic plan?" And those items would then be dutifully inserted into the board report.

OK, not all planning processes have been this bad, but having been involved in higher ed strategic planning as a faculty member, department chair and senior administrator at five different institutions (large and small, public and private) in the past few decades, I have seen way too much wasted effort of this sort. And in a postcoronavirus world, we can no longer afford any waste.

Does this mean that we should give up on strategic planning, especially now when the future is so unknown that many institutions don't know whether they will fully reopen in fall 2020 and who will show up if they do? Many organizations have moved away from traditional strategic planning in the past 20 years in light of changing economic and social realities, while higher education has too often stuck to a version of the outmoded model caricatured above. Especially as we look to a postcoronavirus future, [commentators are arguing](#) that this may be the time to jettison conventional wisdom, including the traditional, and often generic, strategic plan.

But instead of giving up entirely on planning ahead, we should shift our thinking about it. One of the most promising strategies for planning amid uncertainty is to switch from the idea of planning to the idea of designing -- taking lessons from practices developed in Silicon Valley to design products such as the laptop, the mouse and the smartphone. One of the lessons learned in those practices is that we no longer simply design products but rather human experiences with products.

The very unpredictability of the future and the impossibility of fully rational planning should help us pivot from planning to designing. As Bill Burnett and Dave Evans write in *Designing Your Life*, a guide to adapting the principles of human-centered design to one's own life, "As you begin to think like a designer, remember one important thing: it's impossible to predict the future. And the corollary to that thought is: once you design something, it changes the future that is possible."

“Human-centered design” is now used worldwide for designing everything from organizational pivots in corporations to microloan programs in developing countries, often through the influential work of [IDEO](#), whose chairman Tim Brown wrote *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* over a decade ago. When I used this approach to strategic planning as a college president, I added to the mix a sharp focus on outcomes rather than activities, based on the work of [Hal Williams](#), former CEO of the Rensselaerville Institute. I’ve been fortunate to work with him in higher education administration, and he has helped me see how, despite the recent emphasis on outcomes assessment, higher ed is still burdened with a focus on activities that should be changed to a focus on results.

For example, why do we count student community service hours when we could be documenting the results of students’ community service work? Why do syllabi still list activities to be undertaken instead of results for student to achieve? Why do we have meeting agendas that list the topics to be covered instead of the outcomes we want to see? Why do job descriptions list expected activities (slavishly described as “duties”) instead of what employees should be expected to accomplish? (In fact, if working remotely, where activities are relatively invisible to colleagues, continues in popularity, outcomes [may provide the best and perhaps only way to measure employee performance.](#))

The combination of human-centered design and Hal Williams’s outcomes focus produces what I call “results-based strategic design.” Here are six of the basic principles of this approach and how they can apply to higher education. Much of this involves asking questions that are different from the ones asked in a traditional strategic planning process.

No. 1: Recognize that planners plan and designers solve problems.

Instead of asking, "Where do we want to be in five years," it's better to ask, "What problems do we need to solve?" That helps shift the focus from what we by definition can't know (the future) to what we can do (solve problems and produce results).

For two reasons, it's not always easy to identify the problems. First, we often jump to potential solutions before defining the key issue. For example, "Our enrollment is too low" does not state a problem. Increasing enrollment is a solution to different potential problems, such as unused capacity or most commonly an operational deficit. Increasing enrollment may be a solution to a deficit, but it may also drive up the discount rate and create additional expenses, so it may not be the appropriate solution, or it may need to be considered in concert with other solutions. As long ago as 2015, some colleges decided to address financial problems by [shrinking rather than chasing volume.](#)

Second, we worry too much about what designers call "gravity problems": issues that are not really problems because, like gravity, they are going to be there no matter what. For example, current demographic trends that reduce applicant pools are not problems but rather inevitable facts. A low yield -- too few accepted students who enroll -- can be fixed, and the pool can be increased by looking in new places. (For example, people that would benefit from what you offer but don't know it yet.) But the demographics are facts to be dealt with, not problems to be solved. Balance is key: some leaders resort to firefighting mode and jump to solutions too quickly, while others demand to understand all the variables before acting, and their response is too slow.

The difference between a designer and an engineer is that an engineer has a problem with a single solution: you need to get people across a river, so you build a bridge. Designers solve "wicked" problems: multiple and sometimes ill-defined problems that have multiple solutions. Higher ed is clearly rife with

wicked problems. The problem-solving mentality can filter through the entire process. For example, instead of a strategic planning committee focusing on curriculum, create a design team to identify specific problems in the curriculum and create solutions.

No. 2: Use constraints to encourage creativity. Designers have learned that truly innovative and useful results come not from “blue sky thinking” but from working within a particular set of constraints. A smartphone can only be so big and cost so much, or it won’t sell. The familiar and new constraints in higher ed -- changing demographics, increased competition, public skepticism and now the disruption of an as-yet unknown number of semesters by COVID-19 and the resulting human and economic consequences -- need to be seen not as obstacles to planning but as catalysts for creativity and innovation. The three general constraints on new initiatives that design thinking identifies, and that can spur creativity, are: 1) viability (can it be sustained long-term?), 2) feasibility (do we have the capacity, tools and know-how to do it?) and 3) desirability (does it fit our mission and can we embrace it as an institution?).

For example, an enrollment-related result for one tuition-driven small college in the Northeast, with that region’s declining college-age population, was to attract, retain and serve students who didn’t know they would benefit from attending college in general or this institution in particular. This is potentially viable because it recognizes the decline in population while building on the fact that more students in that smaller pool need what this institution has to offer. It is feasible because there are many ways for an experienced admissions staff to reach to new areas and kinds of schools. (For example, this college started working with technical high schools and inner-city college-readiness programs.) And it is desirable because it will increase revenue as the institution continues to do what it does best -- as opposed to simply lowering standards, trying to increase geographic reach or pursuing

other enrollment-enhancing techniques. Keeping these constraints in mind also makes it much easier to link strategic design to resource allocation, since both viability and feasibility depend on resources.

No. 3: Determine constituents' needs, which may not be what they say they need. This is what is called the empathy stage in design thinking, in which you observe people's behavior in order to find the best solutions. It's not enough to ask them what they need; as Henry Ford probably did not say, but is often quoted as saying, "If I had asked people what they needed, they would have said 'faster horses.'" When your students complain that they face a byzantine bureaucracy, follow some of them around as they leap through the registrar's and the financial aid offices' hoops. Then simulate potential solutions. Or if your value proposition is not getting out through admissions and marketing, observe students' and potential students' responses to current and potential new messages.

I once embedded myself with a summer leadership camp for entering students and discovered that many of the reasons for their choice to attend our institution had nothing to do with what we said in our expensive marketing materials. This is not treating students as customers within a corporate model but simply respecting them as users of the services we offer. (An entire subdiscipline called [user experience or UX has occasionally been recommended for higher ed planning](#).) Especially now that our students are changing from a traditional 18- to 22-year-old cohort to a constituency of all ages with varying and complex life situations -- and will be emerging from the trauma of the pandemic with a host of new and different concerns and needs -- we should carefully observe the quality of their experience. We all pay lip service to the needs of the students we serve, but strategic plans still tend to focus on the self-preservation and growth of our institutions.

No. 4: Engage in prototyping. Too often institutions spend months planning a major initiative and then roll it out with great fanfare, not knowing whether it will produce the intended results. When possible, it's better to prototype by implementing a small-scale, low-risk version of an initiative that can test the critical concepts involved and allow you to readjust according to what works and what doesn't. For example, instead of launching a new degree program, start with a badge or certificate and carefully examine how it plays with students. A prototype can also be a simulation: before creating a new enrollment office, build a mock-up (physical or virtual) and run students and staff through a simulated set of enrollment interactions. This approach can help create a culture of continuous improvement in which new ideas are constantly tested, evaluated and revised.

No. 5: Resource the early adopters, and let consensus follow later. The downfall of many strategic plans is that everybody agrees with them at the outset. If that's the case, then it is probably too general and probably looks like everyone else's plan because it represents the lowest common denominator.

In results-based strategic design, institutions instead provide resources, often minimal, to individuals and groups so that they can try things (prototyping), and then consensus is built around successful or promising results, not prior agreement. (From a slightly different perspective, the higher ed consulting firm CREDO also [advocates abandoning consensus as a goal for the "new university."](#)) The Rensselaerville Institute refers to community members who are energetic early adopters as "community spark plugs." You know who they are on your campus, and they may be administrators, faculty members, staff members or even students -- where they are in the organizational chart is often less important than the energy, creativity and attitude they bring to the table. When other people see that the spark plugs are getting the resources, producing results and having

more fun, the number of early adopters will grow.

No. 6: Don't try to do everything. Too many strategic plans try to cover everything an institution does and therefore sink under their own weight. I prefer Hal Williams's definition of strategy: something is truly *strategic* only if it requires a behavior change when business as usual won't accomplish the desired results. For example, one institution included as a strategy within their plan to review the food service and facilities contracts with external vendors. Do you really need a strategic plan to tell you to do that? If such reviews are not part of business as usual, then you are looking at problems that are not going to be solved by a strategic plan.

Instead, focus on the things that require major behavioral changes. For example, one institution increased both efficiency and organizational health by changing siloed behavior in administrative offices. They cooperated with other offices to ensure student success became a specific job requirement at every level of the institution -- a result that would be evaluated in performance reviews and lauded when it succeeded. That was truly strategic, because business as usual required a sharp behavioral change. Rather than spending the five years of a strategic plan checking off boxes toward the plan's completion, it is more effective to adopt a strategic *design* with recursive cycles of prototyping, learning and improvement.

When I led a strategic design process in 2017 as a college president, and the steering committee had completed its preliminary design for the institution's future, an initially skeptical faculty member gave the process an appropriate endorsement: "This process was messy as hell, but the result is good." The times are even messier now, which makes it even more imperative that we design the future of higher education rather than simply try to plan it.