

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

**ANALYSES AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF
SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE INSTITUTIONS STRATEGIC PLANS**

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A Thesis

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF PLANNING, LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTURE, AND DESIGN AT THE GIBBS COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

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Norman, Oklahoma

2025

A THESIS APPROVED BY THE DIVISION OF PLANNING, LANDSCAPE
ARCHITECTURE, AND DESIGN

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For my Coach, Jay

*Whose unwavering support and guidance have been instrumental in my pursuit of excellence,
always encouraging me to push the boundaries of academia and contribute to the advancement
of the lasting frontier: education.*

*Therefore, the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind
and devised the origin of all things,
In his mercy, he gives life and breath back to you again,
since you now forget yourselves—
—for the sake of His laws*

The Book of Second Maccabees
Chapter Seven, Verse Twenty-Three

Acknowledgment (s)

A thesis is a ‘work’ that a person sets out to do and accomplish. For a Man will walk into an institution with nothing and walk out with a ‘work’—and if not, the question must be asked if his devotion to the ‘lasting frontier’ was worth any tangible result.

A thesis is most certainly a ‘work’—fittingly, so is life. However, this ‘work’ was not done alone. First, I have the deepest appreciation for my advisor, Professor Charles Warnken. His support over the last three years was instrumental to my forward movement in my degree, my research, and this ‘work.’

To Josh and Erin, your commitment and punctuality to waking up with me for those early runs gave me both the time and clarity I needed during the day to keep at this ‘work.’ Your consistency was quiet, mundane, and disciplined, a steady form of support, and for that, I am deeply grateful. To the rest of the guys whom I spent my time ‘jogging’ with, thank you for keeping me grounded and motivated to keep on keeping on.

To Jay, my Mother, and my Father—thank you, I believe a thousand words can be summed up by those two.

To the Catholics—Logan, Nikki, Grace—there are few in the world who truly believe that *faith* is not merely something we do but the very essence of how we live—and consecrate. Your joy in celebrating the consecrated Host, spoken in a language that has been *silent* for over 1,500 years, made every week’s end feel sacred—for just because there is a slaughter does not mean there is a sacrifice.

To, Greg, Lily, Nick and Gabe, and anyone else who is not mentioned but had a massive impact on my life: thank you for being part of this ‘work’—and this life.

Abstract

In the ‘modern’ world, American Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a wretched landscape of declining public trust, value, rising student debt, and shifting demographic and economic trends. Due to this, HEIs are facing increasing pressure to justify their value and adapt to a rapidly evolving landscape. A place where this can be fairly evident is within the Southeastern Conference (SEC), a collection of sixteen flagship, land-grant, and research-intensive Institutions, all of which represent some of the most complex financial and academic colleges within the United States. Best known for its athletic prestige, particularly within American Football, the SEC also stands out as an academic powerhouse. In addition to this, the conference has enormous economic, cultural, and social influence in its state, region, and the broader nation. For these massive institutions, strategic planning has become the primary way of dealing with these existential challenges, charting future priorities, and positioning themselves as leaders in each respective field.

This thesis looks to explore how SEC institutions employ strategic planning. Not as it pertains to the content of such plans but as to how each plan structures an organizational framework that reflects institutional identity, internal governance, and regional imperatives. This thesis, rather than analyzing what these plans *say*, looks to investigate how they are *set up*: typology, logic, and sequencing of priorities. This is done by an inductive, systematic, qualitative document analysis of the strategic plans for all 16 SEC institutions. Three dominant typological structures were identified within all of the plans: the *Top-Down Model*, the *Decentralized Model*, and the *Hierarchical Structure*. All of these ‘models’ differ in how they arrange mission statements, goals, themes, subgoals, and action steps, and are not mutually exclusive. The

models also reflect different planning philosophies that each institution may apply, such as administrative power distributions and stakeholder strategies.

The first model, the *Top-Down Model*, organizes all strategic practices or other goals the institution may have under an overarching mission or branding statement, which emphasizes centralized authority and alignment with executive leadership, such as an office of the president. The second, the *Decentralized Model*, which is similar to the first, allows for autonomous strategic units, or departments, within the institution to develop distinct goals under a shared institutional umbrella. The difference between this and the first is that the institution has elected not to include a broad overarching theme within its structure, although there may be one, it is not defined within its typology. Finally, the *Hierarchical Structure* allows for both approaches, with a layered goal structure, with each goal building upon the other, and then performance indicators that flow rather logically from wider initial values to measure distinctive actions.

Each model reveals different ‘assumptions’ about institutional function, power, and the relationship between vision and execution.

What distinguishes this study and research from other existing literature is the overwhelming emphasis on form over content. While much of post-secondary education focuses on the themes and objectives presented in these plans, this thesis argues that the strategic plan *structure*—how it is visually, thematically, and logically constructed—is equally, if not more, critical than its content. This thesis, by constructing a typology of the structure of strategic plans, allows for a framework in which one can interpret how strategic vision is conveyed and implemented in HEIs. In doing this, it contributes to a deeper understanding of higher education governance, planning theory, and the evolving role of HEIs in the 21st century.

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Abbreviations

Southeastern Conference Institution	Abbreviation
Auburn University	AU
Louisiana State University	LSU
Mississippi State University	MSU
Texas A&M University	A&M
University of Alabama	UA
University of Arkansas	U of A
University of Florida	UF
University of Georgia	UG
University of Kentucky	UK
University of Mississippi	UM
University of Missouri	OM
University of Oklahoma	OU
University of South Carolina	USC
University of Tennessee	UTK
University of Texas	UT
Vanderbilt University	VU

Campus Master Plan	CMP
Fiscal Year	FY
Higher Education Institutions	HEI
Higher Education Act	HEA

“A university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society...It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them.”

— His Eminence, Cardinal, St. John Henry Newman



Chapter 1 Introduction

In an era that is defined by rapid change, technological improvement, and growing public skepticism, the role and perception of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States have seemingly entered a state of crisis. A system that was seen as a strong “cornerstone of opportunity,” and an aspect of the ‘West,’ is now viewed with increasing skepticism about both its worth and its usage (Brown, 2024). A growing number of Americans, particularly those on the ‘right,’ find themselves questioning higher education’s worth and cost (Brown, 2024; Peasley, 2024). In a 2023 Gallup poll, American confidence in higher education had fallen to 36%, much lower than the same poll’s previous readings in 2015 (57%) and 2018 (48%), with 22% of U.S. adults having “very little” confidence (Brenan, 2023).

In addition to falling public support for the ‘institution,’ rising costs and debts are not helping the case for a college degree. In 2014, a college graduate’s average student loan debt was \$33,000, which then grew to \$38,375 in 2024 (Bond, 2015; Welding, 2025). 42.7 million Americans have some sort of student loan debt, with the federal student debt balance at \$1.64 trillion (Welding, 2025). Including private student loans, it’s at \$1.77 trillion, tripling since 2007 (Welding, 2025). HEIs have become accustomed to treating the students they serve like ATMs, with state flagship schools (colleges designed to serve the population of the state) having more revenue than ever, while students face higher-than-ever costs (Warner, 2021, 2023).

Student debt, high cost, and a rather bleak perception of higher education, reinforce this ‘shift in confidence’ in HEIs and what one can gain from attending one (Brown, 2024).

Despite this, the demand for jobs that require a degree obtained from an HEI is growing—rapidly. By 2031, 70% of working-age Americans will need education beyond high school, while the country currently sits at 54.3% (Brown, 2024; Welding, 2025). Currently, over

42 million Americans are now in the category of “some college, no degree.” (Brown, 2024).

With the need for an HEI education growing, yet Americans deciding not to go to college, HEIs are at a roadblock; with the ability to restore trust and confidence in a college education while adapting rapidly, not being a ‘want’ anymore but a need. As enrollment and public confidence decline and student debt rises, the time ahead of HEIs lies in purgatory, with its strategic future growing increasingly uncertain.

Being forced to evolve because of such issues they are facing, today’s HEIs are more than just degree-granting institutions; they are *forced* to have a wide range of responsibilities (Ghosh et al., 2016; Jalal & Murray, 2019). In addition to granting degrees, HEIs contribute heavily to economic, social, and technological development locally, regionally, and nationally. HEIs have been forced to expand their roles beyond traditional academic and research by integrating economic engagement, workforce development, and community service into their core missions (Jalal & Murray, 2019). This transformation has been particularly enduring within larger, more profound university systems and athletic conferences, where institutional identity and financial strategies are deeply intertwined with regional and national economic landscapes. Nowhere is this more prominent than in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), a collegiate athletic and academic powerhouse that exemplifies how HEIs balance their educational missions with their broader societal and economic responsibilities.

The conference, located in the southeastern and plains portions of the United States, is best known for its modern dominance in intercollegiate athletics—particularly American football—but the conference represents much more than just athletic prowess. The conference’s influence extends deeply into higher education.

The SEC member institutions, which include 12 state ‘flagship’ institutions, three land grant universities, and one private research institution, represent one of the most complex investments of financial, human, natural, intellectual, and social capital in post-secondary education. Not only do these institutions educate and train a massive portion of each state’s population, but they also equip graduates with the necessary skills to succeed in a global and online economy. With an overall yearly enrollment of 596,239, the SEC serves as a significant economic anchor for both the region and the nation, with its high visibility and strong brand recognition further amplifying this (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Beyond the field of play, SEC institutions play a pivotal role in shaping, developing, and correcting the educational and economic landscapes of their respective states and the broader region, even though the conference saw revenue of over \$852 million in FY 2023 (Dochterman, 2024).

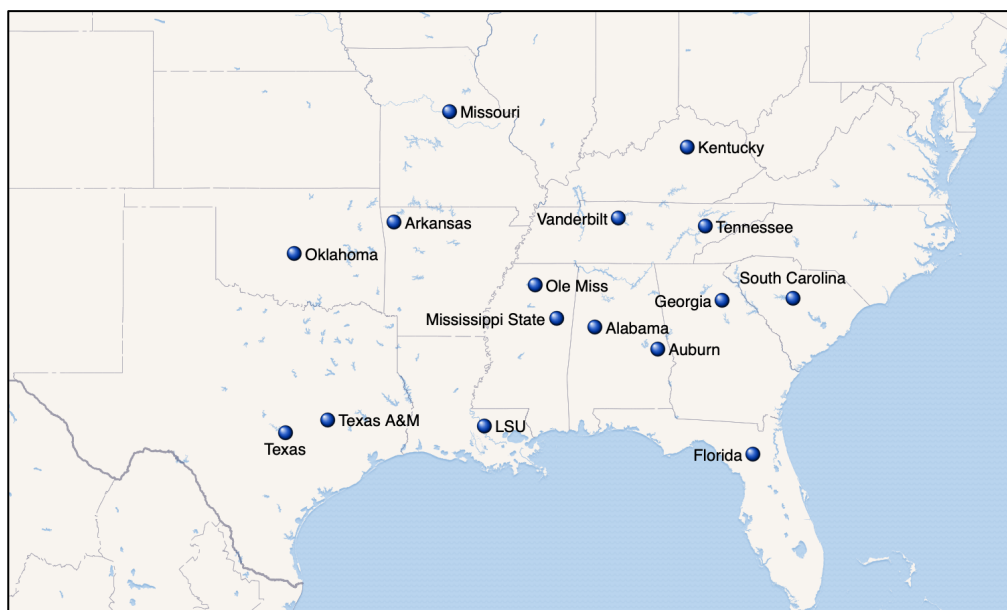


Figure 1. 1.1 Map of Southeastern Conference (SEC) universities across the United States. Base map © OpenStreetMap contributors (www.openstreetmap.org), under the Open Database License (www.opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl).

Table 1: All Southeastern Conference Institutions and Their Following Descriptions. Note. All data from National Center for Education Statistics.

Institution	Location	Joined	Campus Type (NCES)	Campus Setting (NCES)	Enrollment (Fall 2024)	Endowment (FY2023)
University of Alabama	Tuscaloosa, Alabama	1932	City	Midsized	39,622	\$ 2,089,000,000.00
University of Arkansas	Fayetteville, Arkansas	1992	City	Small	32,140	\$ 1,527,000,000.00
Auburn University	Auburn, Alabama	1932	City	Small	33,015	\$ 1,079,000,000.00
University of Florida	Gainesville, Florida	1932	City	Midsized	54,814	\$ 2,337,000,000.00
University of Georgia	Athens, Georgia	1932	City	Midsized	41,615	\$ 1,811,000,000.00
University of Kentucky	Lexington, Kentucky	1932	City	Large	32,703	\$ 1,808,000,000.00
Louisiana State University	Baton Rouge, Louisiana	1932	City	Midsized	39,418	\$ 1,061,000,000.00
University of Mississippi	Oxford, Mississippi	1932	Town	Remote	24,043	\$ 836,000,000.00
Mississippi State University	Starkville, Mississippi	1932	Town	Remote	22,657	\$ 709,000,000.00
University of Missouri	Columbia, Missouri	2012	City	Midsized	31,013	\$ 2,235,000,000.00
University of Oklahoma	Norman, Oklahoma	2024	Suburb	Midsized	29,145	\$ 1,674,000,000.00
University of South Carolina	Columbia, South Carolina	1992	City	midsized	36,579	\$ 952,000,000.00
University of Tennessee	Knoxville, Tennessee	1932	City	Midsized	36,304	\$ 1,600,000,000.00
University of Texas at Austin	Austin, Texas	2024	City	Large	53,082	\$ 44,967,000,000.00
Texas A&M University	College Station, Texas	2012	City	Midsized	76,633	\$ 19,285,000,000.00
Vanderbilt University	Nashville, Tennessee	1932	City	Large	13,456	\$ 9,684,000,000.00

HEIs, such as those in the SEC that are looking at rather concerning trends in modern higher education, are faced with the complex challenge of planning for the future while evolving to remain competitive and meet the demands of an increasingly complex, online, and global job market (Dooris et al., 2004). To help navigate these challenges and the complex, confusing era in higher education, SEC institutions and HEIs, in general, rely on strategic planning as a guiding framework that outlines their priorities, investments, and long-term goals (Dooris et al., 2004; Keller, 1983).

These 16 SEC institutions, which come together at the highest level, both academically and athletically, use strategic planning to balance growth, innovation, and regional impact while adapting to shifting educational, athletic, and social landscapes. By using strategic plans, institutions within the SEC can position themselves to remain competitive and meet the demands of their states and regional contexts.

This thesis explores how public (and private) HEIs within the SEC respond to challenges through strategic planning documents. Instead of examining the content of these plans, this thesis examines *form and structure*. Through this, three distinct organizational typologies—Top-Down Model, Decentralized Model, and Hierarchical Structure—are identified that shape how these institutions frame future goals and allocate power while navigating uncertain times.

This research focused on the qualitative analysis of official SEC strategic plans and it investigated how institutional identity, regional context, and planning philosophy influence the setup of strategic goals and missions. Unlike previous research and literature, which has focused primarily on *what* these plans are and what their *content* is, versus *form and structure*, his study asks how they are arranged and why that arrangement matters.

Ultimately, this thesis and its following discourse contend that strategic planning has not only become a blueprint for academic and operational success but a necessity for the survival of higher education itself.

Chapter 2 Literature Review and Context

2.1 Definition

Due to increased philosophical ideas and practices of post-secondary education in the United States, defining what an HEI *is* can get rather complicated. A ‘Higher Education Institution’ is defined under Title 20 of the United States Code, Section 1001, as:

1. ...an educational institution in any State that-
2. admits as regular students only persons having a certificate of graduation from a school providing secondary education, or the recognized equivalent of such a certificate, or persons who meet the requirements of section 1091(d) of this title;
3. is legally authorized within such State to provide a program of education beyond secondary education;
4. provides an educational program for which the institution awards a bachelor's degree or provides not less than a 2-year program that is acceptable for full credit toward such a degree, or awards a degree that is acceptable for admission to a graduate or professional degree program, subject to review and approval by the Secretary;
5. is a public or other nonprofit institution; and
6. is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association, or if not so accredited, is an institution that has been granted pre-accreditation status by such an agency or association that has been recognized by the Secretary for the granting of pre-accreditation status, and the Secretary has determined that there is satisfactory assurance that the institution will meet the accreditation standards of such an agency or association within a reasonable time.

This ‘legal’ definition delineates a boundary between a recognized academic structure and foundation and informal, non-compliant education (Lurye & Gecker, 2025). This definition determines who may receive federal aid, grant degrees, and be entrusted with the development of ‘intellect’ and civic life (Lurye & Gecker, 2025). All 16 SEC institutions fall into this definition of an HEI and are, therefore, ‘legal’ and recognized academic institutions.

These HEIs conduct higher education, commonly known as post-secondary education, which leads to the “...education leading to academic qualifications such as degrees and diplomas awarded by universities, colleges...(Al-hosaini & Sofian, 2015).” Undergraduate, college, and post-graduate levels are conducted at this level (Al-hosaini & Sofian, 2015). Further, most places that conduct higher education, such as those in the SEC, operate with additional aspects of professional education that primarily cater to vocations and professions (Al-hosaini & Sofian, 2015; Lurye & Gecker, 2025).

2.2 History of Higher Education

While higher education, or at least a form of ‘higher education,’ has existed since the 3rd millennium in Dynastic Egypt with “Pre-Anx” (houses of life), what we would consider ‘modern’ higher education and HEIs, with the sense of a higher-learning and degree-awarding institute, began in 1088 with the University of Bologna (Gaston, 2012; Gordon, 2004). In the United States, higher education began in 1636, with the establishment of Harvard College by Puritan clergymen (Harvard University, n.d.). Since then, HEIs and the broader landscape of higher education have been rather fluid, with multiple phases and directions, and the field being marked by key events that bring it to the present day.

‘Modern’ higher education and HEIs began roughly around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, corresponding with the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862

and 1890; the Morrill Land Grant Act allowed for states to have funds for higher education. The First Morrill Act of 1862 established public colleges funded by federal land grants, emphasizing agriculture and mechanic arts (National Archives, 2021). The Second Morrill Act of 1890 provided funding to establish land-grant institutions for African Americans, leading to several Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs for short (Lawrence, 2022). Furthering the Morrill Land Grant Act, was the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which recognized vocational education in agriculture, home economics, and other trades and fields that could be supported as fields of study through federal funds (Moore, 2017). At the same time, religious orders, especially those of Catholic philosophy, continued to fund private colleges as America expanded westward (Peasley, 2024). In this period, the number of colleges in the U.S. nearly doubled to 977, with enrollment fourfold to 237,592 (Peasley, 2024).

Table 2 List of Land Grant Institutions within the SEC. Note. All data from USDA. (USDA, 2025)

Institution	Land Grant Year
Auburn University	1862
Louisiana State University	1862
Mississippi State University	1862
Texas A&M University	1862
University of Alabama	N/A
University of Arkansas	1862
University of Florida	1862
University of Georgia	1862
University of Kentucky	1862
University of Mississippi	N/A
University of Missouri	1862
University of Oklahoma	N/A
University of South Carolina	N/A
University of Tennessee	1862
University of Texas at Austin	N/A
Vanderbilt University	N/A

By the start of World War II, the number of HEIs in the United States increased to 1,708, a growth rate of more than 75% since the turn of the century, with 1.5 million enrolled (Peasley,

2024). At this time, 5.5% of American men and 3.8% of American women had a degree from an HEI (Peasley, 2024). In 1944, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or the G.I. Bill for short, which allowed veterans to get funds for job training and college education; within seven years, 2.3 million veterans received education benefits for HEIs (Peasley, 2024). In 1958, the National Defense Education Act sought to improve American education, particularly in science, math, and foreign languages, to bolster the nation's defense capabilities in response to the Cold War (Abramson, 2007; Peasley, 2024). In 1965, President Johnson's Great Society program, the Higher Education Act (HEA), was passed; Title IV of the Act allowed for authorized financial aid to students, including grants, loans, and work-study. In 1956, 6 million people were enrolled in an HEI, two-thirds of whom attended a public HEI (Peasley, 2024).

In 1972, Title IX was amended to the Higher Education Act, which prohibited sex discrimination in any program or activity at an institution receiving federal financial aid; nine million students were enrolled in 1972, with 80% attending public institutions (Peasley, 2024).

In 1978, Harvard, the first HEI in the United States, increased its undergraduate admission cost by 18%, over the next decade, it would increase by another 8% (Brown, 2024; New York Times, 1978). Around this time, enrolment would hit 11 million (Peasley, 2024). While elite (mainly private) HEIs followed similar hikes, non-elite (mainly public) HEIs turned to tuition discounting, shifting the burden in complex ways (Bunch, 2022; New York Times, 1978). That same year, with the college enrollment exploding, Harvard officials publicly expressed concern that rising costs were squeezing out middle-income students, creating an experience that would only leave the wealthy with an HEI education (Bunch, 2022; New York Times, 1978; Peasley, 2024).

In 1989, the University of Phoenix would offer the first full degree online (Peasley, 2024). During this time, college enrollment would increase to 13.5 million, with the average student loan balance at graduation for bachelor's degree being \$6,760 (Peasley, 2024). By 2010, enrolment in HEIs would increase to 21 million, an all-time high; President Obama famously called for every person in the United States to have an education beyond high school during this time (Peasley, 2024; The Associated press, 2009).

2.3 The Current State

By 2025, an uncomfortable truth had begun to form about HEIs and the higher educational system in general: American higher education is cracking and beginning to fail. This is due to several reasons, including, but not limited to, rising tuition, staggering debt, misalignment with the job market, and a growing sense that higher education is more focused on selectivity, being 'elite,' and rankings than student success (Brenan, 2023; Brown, 2024).

In fact, college enrollment peaked around 2010 and looks to be headed for a very sharp decline (Welding et al., 2025). Between 1985 and 2010, college enrollment increased at an average rate of 2.2% a year; from 2012-2022, enrollment decreased at an average rate of 1.4% a year; in 2022, college enrollment was 14.8% below peak enrollment in 2010 (Welding et al., 2025). In 2025, fewer people are going to college than in recent years, with trends only looking bleaker (Brenan, 2023).

Why college is becoming less popular remains hard to say, yet it remains very clear that college definitely isn't becoming *more* popular (Brenan, 2023; Brown, 2024; Reyell, 2024). After a gradual increase over the decades, the college enrollment rate has stopped growing. One factor causing this, however, that will affect HEIs in later years is the so-called "enrollment cliff." This is 'slang' for the shrinking U.S. birth rate, which will force the college-aged

population to shrink by 2025 and beyond (Marcus, 2025). By 2039, there will likely be 650,000, or 15%, fewer people enrolling in college than there are now (Marcus, 2025).

Because of this, HEIs are increasingly turning to long—and short-range planning as a means of survival and adaptation. HEIs, such as those in the SEC, now use complex strategic plans to figure out how to move forward with fewer students, increasing costs, and a lower positive view of a college education. Strategic planning is massively important to SEC institutions simply due to the sheer scale of their specific operations. Their operations encompass large student enrollments, billion-dollar endowments, and nationally prominent athletic programs. They are complex and important, and strategic planning is the only answer in long-range planning.

The SEC HEIs often serve as flagship institutions for their states. They educate tens of thousands of students annually, spend millions on research, and often act as major economic engines for their regions. Because of these financial, academic, and athletic responsibilities, strategic planning helps SEC schools align their own institutional goals/priorities while managing complex resources and staying competitive nationally. In essence, without strategic plans, the coordinated execution of these massive undertakings would be unsustainable.

2.4 What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic Planning is the complex process of using existing knowledge to develop a structured, complete, and organized plan for the future. Strategic planning, as a process, typically focuses on an organization, business, or other institution and what that specific establishment should do to improve its performance in the future (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987). In this process, thinking about the future and identifying challenges and opportunities are required (Cote, 2020).

Strategic planning is ongoing and fluid, meaning it can change as new information becomes available or a situation evolves.

Strategic planning is used by organizations, businesses, or other institutions to determine their decisions, direction, and resource allocation. It is also widely used in post-secondary education. In the context of higher education, strategic planning enables institutions to adapt, reform, allow for technical advancements, and plan for financial constraints (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987).

2.5 History of Strategic Planning Within Higher Education

While strategic planning serves as a guiding framework for organizations to set goals and allocate resources effectively, its adoption and implementation have evolved over time (Moran, 2020). More specifically, strategic planning is a new practice in higher education and was not always standard.

Strategic planning, which considers long-term growth, was first practiced in the mid-1950s by large corporations and companies planning for future growth (Dooris et al., 2004; Steiner, 1979). The practice's relationship to higher education begins in a similar way. The first instance of strategic planning in higher education was the 1959 summer program attended by twenty-five campus planners at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with this group eventually founding the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) (Dooris et al., 2004). Before the 1980s, however, most institutions of post-secondary education relied on long-range budget planning rather than setting institutional goals; long-range planning in budgets did not require the same level of coordination and goal-setting compared to strategic planning in the corporate setting (Keller, 1983).

A shift toward implementing strategic planning in higher education began in the 1970s and 1980s in response to changing student demographics, fluctuating enrollments, and uncertain funding (Brown, 2024; Dooris et al., 2004; Keller, 1983; Warner, 2023). The rising costs of higher education consistently outpaced inflation, and public support for higher education began to show signs of strain (Brown, 2024; Dooris et al., 2004; Keller, 1983; Warner, 2023).

During this period of time, accrediting commissions and government agencies pushed institutions to have greater accountability, leading them to adopt strategic planning as a way to align their missions with measurable outcomes (Dooris et al., 2004; Keller, 1983). However, early attempts to adopt a style similar to corporations faced challenges, as academic institutions resisted a model that seemed incompatible with their decentralized and loosely structured nature (Cohen & March, 1974). It was not till the publication of George Keller's *Academic Strategy* in 1983 that colleges and universities began to take a more structured approach to strategic planning. During the 1980s, institutions increasingly adopted structured models of strategic planning. Institutions would follow a series of steps to define and achieve goals, using methods such as stakeholder identification, environmental scanning, situational analysis (e.g., SWOT), and strategy formulation (e.g., TOWS) (Dooris et al., 2004; Keller, 1983).

These models gained traction would gain traction across academia, influencing frameworks like the Baldrige Educational Criteria for Performance Excellence and the Balanced Scorecard, which continue to shape strategic planning in higher education today. (Kaplan & Norton, 1996)

Over the last few decades, strategic planning has evolved from a novel concept used in corporations to essential and required practice in higher education. What began as a focus on

physical campus planning in the 1960s grew into a comprehensive approach to institutional management by the 1980s and onward.

2.6 Literature Review on HEI Strategic Plan Structure and Form

The literature on HEI strategic plans, particularly their setup, remains thin at best. The typology of strategic plans specifically, for HEIs, is a very lightly studied area (Fumasoli et al., 2015). While the literature has often emphasized what is in strategic plans ‘content-wise’ (student outcomes, equity measures, and research goals), a relatively small amount of attention has been paid to the setup and structure of such plans (Jalal & Murray, 2019). With that said, the structure of such plans plays a vital role because the structure eventually shapes how strategic goals are framed, communicated, and interpreted (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987; Jalal & Murray, 2019).

Cohen and March (1974) described universities as “organized anarchies,” where loosely coupled systems make centralized implementation difficult (colleges, departments, etc.). As such, a plan’s structural organization can offer insight into how an HEI attempts to progress into the future (Cohen & March, 1974; Cote, 2020; Keller, 1983).

The basic structure of HEI strategic plans is a “key procedure” in higher education that defines vision and mission statements, establishes goals and objectives, involves stakeholders, and ensures collaboration (Kayyali, 2024). Three key components set up the structure of an HEI strategic plan. Firstly, almost all strategic plans have a “Vision” or “Mission” statement (Kagaba, 2024; Kayyali, 2024). These are considered foundation aspects of the plan and articulate the HEI’s purpose as well as their aspirations, guiding the plan and all strategic initiatives. Below this are usually the goals of the plans, set up into different levels (Zechlin, 2010). As Zechlin (2010) writes:

The top level, for the normative management, contains statements referring to the long-term social gains to which higher education should contribute (vision and mission) and the associated underlying values by which to proceed. The middle level, the strategic management area, includes mid- to long-term goals and objectives, as well as the strategies to be followed in order to reach them. Finally, the operative management area is found at the third level, where the actual actions for change (projects) are taken in order to accomplish the plans within the 5–10-year reference period (Zechlin, 2010).

While strategic plans for HEIs often follow similar structural phases, such as aiming at growth or financial stability, their specific typologies can vary significantly (Zechlin, 2010). Each HEI may and will organize its ‘mission statement’ and ‘goals’ differently for a multitude of reasons, any of which are valid in the HEI’s eyes. This reflects the unique priorities and strategic initiatives of each HEI. For example, one HEI might structure its strategic plan around a rigid, top-down approach, while another may adopt a more flexible strategy with goals that seem fluid. Despite these differences in organizational setup, all HEIs have a common framework: long-term goals and objectives alongside short-term goals and KPIs (Zechlin, 2010).

Chapter 3 Methods and Methodology

3.1 Goal

The primary goal of this research is to investigate how all 16 SEC institutions structure their campus-wide strategic plans. Rather than focusing on the content of these plans, this research in turn looks at the organization, presentation, typography, and sequencing of priorities, seeking to develop a typology of strategic planning structures.

3.2 Research Design

As HEIs continue to navigate an era marked by enrollment decline, rising skepticism, and a massive call for reform, the strategic plan of the HEI has emerged as a crucial piece of institutional effectiveness, identity, priority, and future direction. These documents are important for a plethora of reasons, but most importantly in the context of this study, not for *what* they say—but for *how* they are structured. The setup of an HEI strategic plan, its goals, themes, and mission serve as a core blueprint for how an HEI organizes its vision, allocates power and funds, and frames its mission to internal and external stakeholders.

To study the structure and form of HEI strategic plans, specifically those within the SEC. This study employed a systematic qualitative document analysis of official strategic plans published by all sixteen member institutions of the SEC. In addition to the strategic plans, campus master plans (CMPs) were included where available to provide further context. Although the CMP analysis is not the point of this study, they were briefly included for content that was applicable. This was due to the available insight that they might be able to provide in the institution's broader planning goals. This inclusion was supplementary background information at most. Only CMPs that the university had officially published and that were publicly available

were used. CMPs that were incomplete or lacked clear structural elements were excluded. If an institution did not have a CMP, they were not ‘penalized.’

These documents (strategic plans), or websites in some cases, were selected because, as noted by Cote (2020), they serve as central frameworks for guiding development and aligning academic priorities. Both strategic and campus master plans are the best option for looking at how an HEI looks to move forward. Including these documents is in line with Dooris et al. (2004), who emphasize the importance of strategic plans in shaping the future direction of educational institutions.

The goal of the study is not to evaluate plan content (e.g., goals related to equity or innovation) but to develop a way to classify the structural form in which these goals are organized and presented. This process aligns with other qualitative research traditions that prioritize pattern recognition, categorization, and conceptual modeling over generalization (Fumasoli et al., 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study typology evolved and emerged through a multistep process, following a grounded approach commonly used in education and organization studies. Following guidelines by Braun & Clarke (2006), the process consisted of several methodological steps.

3.2.1 Data Analysis Process

Firstly, each SEC institution’s strategic plan was read in full (in addition to other important documents, such as campus master plans) to understand structure, language, and formatting patterns comprehensively. In reading each document, patterns in goals and priorities were identified, as well as underlying structures noticed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This practice is in line with Merriam and Tisdell’s (2015) description of qualitative document analysis, in which the goal is to find patterns and themes, rather than generalizing. The qualitative document

assessment was inductive, meaning categories emerged from the data, rather than being deductive (applying predefined categories to the data).

Inductive qualitative assessment is particularly suitable for research such as this. The structural form of strategic plans is complex, using inductive quality assessment over deductive, and an in-depth understanding of how institutions conceptualize, organize, and prioritize their goals can be captured. This approach allows for flexibility in interpreting complex data, offering insights into organizational behaviors and the underlying values reflected in the documents (Fumasoli et al., 2015). The documents selected were all the most recent strategic plans published to ensure the relevance of the data. The strategic plans were obtained from publicly available sources on each institution's website. Some institutions had a physical document for a strategic plan, while others just used a simple website. An institution was not 'penalized' for a specific form that they so happened to use. They were selected based on their official status, as all documents were official plans of each institution. Institutions that did not have publicly accessible strategic plans, such as the University of Florida, were excluded because they did not have anything. The goal was to include the most recent plans for the most recent research.

Repeating organizational logic, such as thematic ideas, mission alignment, and cross-unit distribution, was then flagged across plans. Plans were then clustered into broader thematic categories that indicated how institutional strategy was visually and logically arranged. These themes were then consolidated into three overarching organizational types, with each type reflecting a distinct approach to institutional structuring and goal setting. The strategic plans were analyzed manually without the use of any software or coding. Finally, a typology was developed, and the three models—the Top-Down Model, the Decentralized Model, and the Hierarchical Structure—were finalized.

The decision was made to focus on structure, rather than content, due to the belief that organization of a plan is a key indicator of how an institution prioritizes its goals and allocates resources (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987). This approach is in line with Cote (2020), who highlights the importance of examining the organization rather than the content.

The structure of such plans provides insights that are often not found within their content, such as internal governance and relationships between leadership, departments, and stakeholders (Fumasoli et al., 2015). By focusing on the *how* rather than the *what*, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how universities organize and communicate their strategic vision in an increasingly complex HEI landscape.

3.2.2 Limitations

While this research provides comprehensive and in-depth analyses of structure and typology, certain limitations exist. To begin with, the sheer size and scope of some plans can be overwhelming, and too great for a report of this nature. With this being said, some details of such plans are not included. This can be due to various factors such as the length of text, complex numbers, or infographics that are too consuming for this report. Additionally, the availability and comprehensiveness of the plans varied across institutions, with some plans lacking detailed financial projections or specific implementation strategies. Some plans had not been refreshed in quite some time, others had been refreshed as recently as this year; this can create a slight bias, as some plans have new research and progress.

Additionally, some institutions did not provide complete campus master plans. These limitations were considered in the analysis, and as noted by Bryson and Einsweiler (1987), future research could explore the evolving nature of strategic planning. Furthermore, while the typology developed here is based on observable structures, it does not account for the processes behind the

creation of these plans. This process can often illuminate the decision-making and governance strategies at play.

The resulting typology, ‘models,’ shows a complex and conceptually saturated categorization rather than a complete, conclusive, and exhaustive classification system. This typology is not intended to suggest or confirm that these are the only ways HEI structures its plans. Instead, it offers a practical lens through which one can interpret the strategic vision and institutional priorities across a key conference of flagship and land-grant institutions within the SEC.

3.3 Models

This thesis proposes that the strategic plans across SEC institutions can be understood through three distinct structural models.

1. The Top-Down Model
2. The Decentralized Model
3. The Hierarchical Structure

Each of these models can provide insight into how each specific SEC institution has decided to conceptualize its identity and communicate priorities for its future.

3.4 Model One: Top-Down Framework

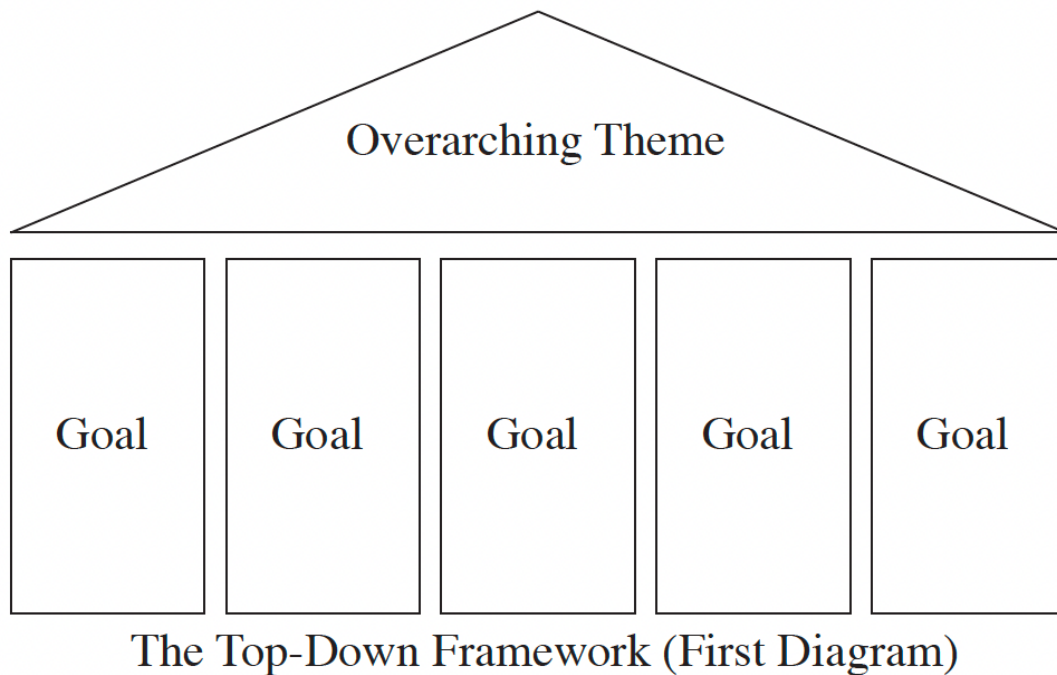
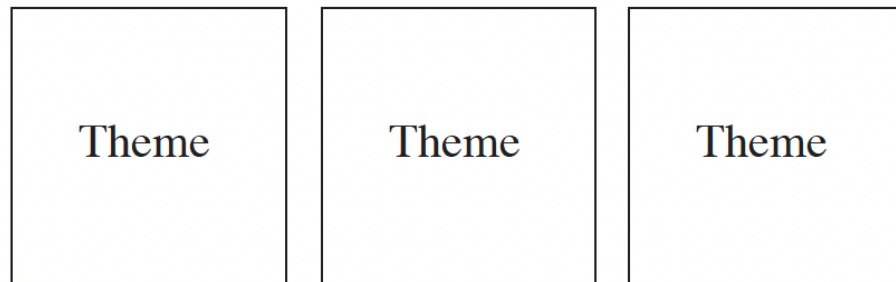


Figure 3.1 Model One: Top-Down Model; with an Overarching Theme.

The first, the Top-Down Model, organizes strategic plans into primary institutional goals beneath an overarching theme. This overarching theme is often a broad mission statement that aligns with everything the institution is looking to accomplish with the plan (Zechlin, 2010). Strategic plans only qualify with an overarching theme *IF* the plan makes a specific effort to outline an overarching theme. This is due to many, if not all, HEIs having some sort of mission statement; just because you have a mission statement does not mean you have an overarching theme for your strategic plan (Zechlin, 2010). There needs to a specific typology attempt to an overarching theme for a plan to count towards this model. Top-down Model plans often then have minor goals within the major goals, which cascade downward into themes, sub-goals, and initiatives. These are often aligned with the institution president's office, the athletics department, or branding. The top-down structure reflects a unified, command-oriented vision in which all objectives stem from central institutional priorities, which allows for vertical coherence, where

every department or initiative can trace its relevance back to one of the central goals, and the overarching theme (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987; Keller, 1983).

3.5 Model Two: Decentralized Model



The Decentralized Model (Second Diagram)

Figure 3.2 Model Two: The Decentralized Model

Unlike the Top-Down model, the decentralized model features a much smaller structure. This type is often organized around a theme without an overt hierarchical ranking or an overarching theme. Each unit, college, division, theme, and goal is separate from the other. These can often intertwine, but are not required to (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Each unit, college, or division may additionally have its own strategic sub-plan that generally aligns with a broad institutional vision but retains considerable autonomy (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Planning is often much more horizontal in a sense, emphasizing and allowing specific areas of collaboration and local ownership between academic units, offices, or colleges (Cohen & March, 1974). Goals are often distributed across various divisions, and plans are less linear and more modular. This model favors flexibility and local responsiveness over rigid institutional control (Jalal & Murray, 2019).

3.6 Model Three: Hierarchical Structure

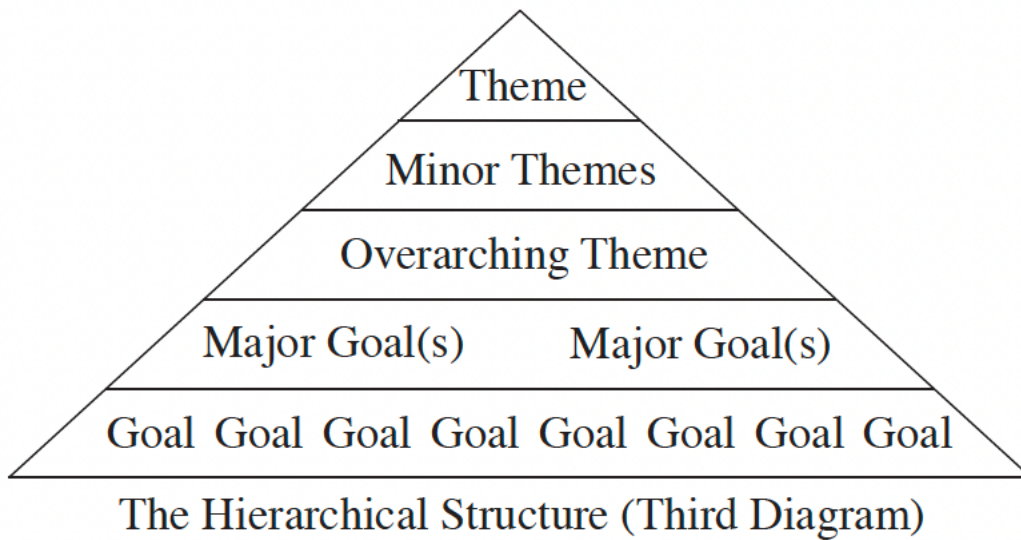


Figure 3.3 Model Third: The Hierarchical Structure.

The final model blends aspects and elements of both previous types but emphasizes the idea of a multi-tiered organization (Zechlin, 2010). This is the idea that each goal is ranked or ‘nested’ through logical substructures, which all find themselves under some sort of theme, mission statement, or overarching theme (Keller, 1983; Zechlin, 2010). This model is rather fluid and is based more upon the structure of the plan rather than what the plan uses to describe each step in the ladder of goals: thematic areas lead to major goals, which lead to objectives, tactics, and metrics, and so on—each level often linked with explicit performance indicators (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). In the Hierarchical structure, there is a clear chain of logic and accountability, often resembling a corporate strategy map or performance matrix, which allows for careful measurement and tracking, appealing to institutions focused on accreditation or outcomes-based evaluation (Zechlin, 2010).

3.7 Final Insights

This study employs a straightforward approach of qualitative document analysis of strategic plans from all sixteen SEC institutions, focusing on how these plans are structured rather than on their content. The typology developed—Top-Down Model, Decentralized Model, and Hierarchical Structure—offers a framework for understanding how strategic priorities are organized within and for HEIs. The following chapter will present the detailed findings of this analysis, providing an in-depth exploration of each HEI, their use of a model, and how it reflects the broader trends and priorities within SEC institutions.

Chapter 4 Strategic Plans of Institutions in the Southeastern Conference

Table 3 List of strategic plans of Southeastern Conference Institutions.

School	Strategic Plan Title	Type	Date
Auburn University	<i>Strategic Plan 2035: Grounded & Groundbreaking</i>	Decentralized	Fall of 2023
Louisiana State University	<i>Louisiana State University Agricultural and Mechanical College 2023-2024 through 2027-2028 Strategic Plan</i>	Hierarchal	2022
Mississippi State University	<i>Transforming MSU (2023-2028)</i>	Top down	April 2023
Texas A&M University	<i>Strategic Plan 2020-2025</i>	Decentralized	2020 (updated 2023)
University of Alabama	<i>The UA Strategic Plan</i>	Decentralized	2022
University of Arkansas	<i>150 Forward Strategic Plan</i>	Decentralized	Decemebr 2023
University of Florida	N/A	N/A	N/A
University of Georgia	<i>2025 Strategic Plan</i>	Decentralized	2020
University of Kentucky	<i>The UK-Promise</i>	Decentralized	October 2021
University of Mississippi	<i>2022-27 Empower Now: Accelerating Discovery, Growth & Success</i>	Decentralized	September 2022
University of Missouri	<i>Achieving Excellence Together 2024-2030</i>	Decentralized	2023
University of Oklahoma	<i>Lead on University: The Next Phase</i>	Decentralized	March 2025
University of South Carolina	<i>Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028</i>	Top Down	May 2023
University of Tennessee	<i>It Takes a Volunteer</i>	Top Down	June 2021
University of Texas at Austin	<i>Change Starts here</i>	Top Down	June 2022
Vanderbilt University	<i>Academic Strategic Plan</i>	Decentralized	2014

4.1 Auburn University (AU)

4.1.1 Introduction to 2035 Strategic Plan Grounded & Groundbreaking

Auburn University's (AU) strategic plan, titled *2035 Strategic Plan Grounded & Groundbreaking*, aims to set forth an ambitious plan for the Institution moving forward across the next decade. With a prioritization of the student experience, impacts of research, and the promotion of excellence, strengthening community engagement and embracing its distinctive "Auburn Creed" (Auburn University, 2024b, pp. 3-5). *Grounded & Groundbreaking* features an extensive timeline of development, with transparent sections on how it was created, reviewed, and published. *Grounded & Groundbreaking* began development in the Fall of 2023.

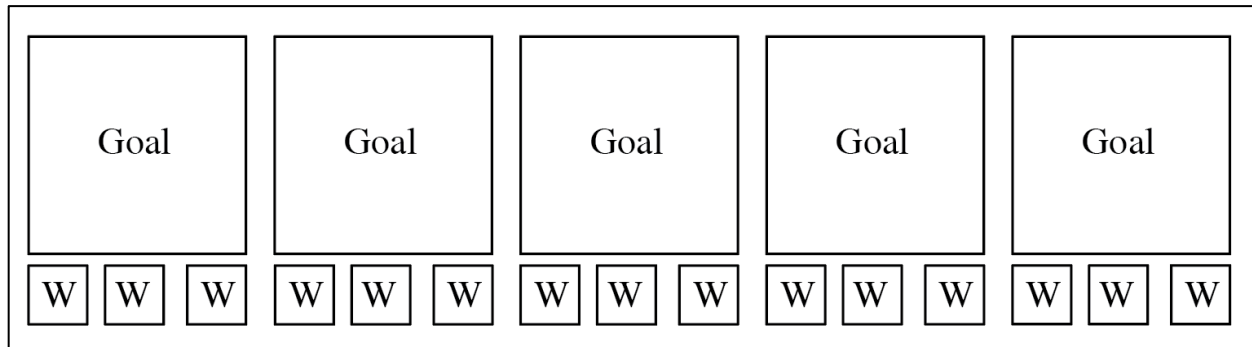


Figure 4.1 The structure of Auburn's strategic plan, with its five main "Goals" and the following "We Wills," "Action Items," and other KPIs, are not included for simplicity.

4.1.2 Grounded & Groundbreaking and Model Selection

Grounded & Groundbreaking fits into the ***Decentralized Model***, due to its priorities and points being separated into five main "Goals" without a distinctive Overarching Theme (Auburn University, 2024b, p. 5). These goals are very broad, with very basic names, but with broad implications; they are as follows:

1. Exceptional Student Experience
2. Impactful Research and Creative Scholarship

3. Commitment To Excellence and Innovation
4. Catalytic Engagement
5. Distinctively Auburn

(Auburn University, 2024b, p. 5).

Within each “Goal” are sub-points, or smaller ‘goals,’ *Grounded & Groundbreaking* calls these subpoints “We Wills.” These subpoints are less broad and more specific than each ‘Goal’ and describe how the university will accomplish each “Goal.” Within each “Goal” are usually 3-5 “We Wills” and are each about a different topic. “We Wills” are lettered A, B, C, D, or E. In *Grounded & Groundbreaking*, these five “We Wills” are rather long and extensive when it comes to text; for this report, they have been summarized; for a full-length title and description, visit *Grounded & Groundbreaking* (Auburn University, 2024b).

4.1.3 “Goals” and “We Wills” of *Grounded & Groundbreaking*

1. Goal One: Exceptional Student Experience (Auburn University, 2024b, pp. 5–9)
 - a. Deliver rigorous, robust, and relevant academic programs as the foundation of the Auburn Experience.
 - b. Attract, hire, mentor, reward, and retain world-class educators who contribute to the Auburn Experience.
 - c. Provide an extensive array of high-quality student success services and programs that are signature contributors to the Auburn Experience.
 - d. Emphasize that every student creates their own distinct Auburn Experience.
 - e. Offer a vibrant campus culture with on and off-campus experiences, intercollegiate athletics, and extra-circular activities.

- f. Make the Auburn Experience accessible to exceptional graduate and undergraduate students from the state, the nation, and the world by strategically recruiting, enrolling, retaining, and graduating students.
- 2. Goal Two: Impactful Research and Creative Scholarship (pp. 10–13)
 - a. Double overall research output and creative works.
 - b. Increase extramural funding through grants and contracts.
 - c. Attract, mentor, reward, and retain exceptional faculty scholars and research professionals of national and international renown.
 - d. Amplify the transition of research across the state, region, and nation.
 - e. Communicate research and scholarship and create works for internal and external stakeholders effectively.
- 3. Goal Three: Commitment to Excellence and Innovation (pp. 14–17)
 - a. Create a culture of excellence.
 - b. Foster an environment of welcomeness.
 - c. Enhance programs to attract, mentor, and reward high-performing employees; create opportunities to further education.
 - d. Continuously improve institutional processes and systems.
 - e. Build, maintain, and upgrade physical technological infrastructure.
- 4. Goal Four: Catalytic Engagement (pp. 18–21)
 - a. Be a premier resource for providing impactful solutions to social, health, technological, economic, and environmental challenges through Auburn’s assets.
 - b. Build synergistic partnerships.
 - c. Drive innovation and economic advancement in the region.

- d. Employ next-generation extension and outreach approaches to increase the delivery of forward-looking programs that inform and educate the public and engage with the citizens of Alabama.
 - e. Broaden and deepen Auburn’s engagement with the local community.
5. Goal Five: Distinctively Auburn (pp. 22–25)
- a. Promote Auburn’s traditions and values to internal and external audiences.
 - b. Build national and international visibility through comprehensive branding, marketing, and communications.
 - c. Strengthen and grow the Auburn Family by sharing institutional pride.
 - d. Expand philanthropic efforts through a transformational capital campaign

4.1.4 “Action Items” within Grounded & Groundbreaking



Figure 4.2 Example of Grounded & Groundbreaking’s “Goal(s)” “We Will(s),” and “Action Items.” Note. From Auburn University (2022b, p. 10).

“We Wills” take up the bulk of AU’s strategic plan. Yet, AU has then further developed “Action items,” which correspond to specific things the Institution will try to accomplish to accomplish its “Goal.” The “Action Items” are numerous, with between three to seven for each “We Wills,” and often include extensive directions, making it fairly impractical to present them fully within this

report. For a full list of these “Action Items,” readers are encouraged to visit the *Grounded & Groundbreaking*. For each “Goal,” *Grounded & Groundbreaking* keeps a list of KPIs, allowing

the Institution to keep track of how well it is progressing in each “Goal.” These are updated every FY. These can be found at the end of every “Goal”, or in the Appendix (Auburn University, 2024b, pp. 32-35).

4.1.5 Other Insights

Grounded & Groundbreaking presents notable strengths and weaknesses that shape its impact upon Auburn and the State of Alabama, respectfully. The plan’s immense amount of KPIs makes tracking progress easy. The KPIs are set up for easy reading and make future predictions for the AU’s ‘health’ accessibility. Auburn does have a CMP, titled *Auburn University Comprehensive Campus Master Plan Update 2013*, but being that it dates from 2013, it is in need of a refresh (Auburn University, 2013). Over the years, much has changed on the campus, deeming the plan successful (Auburn University, 2013). However, much has also changed in terms of the institution's growth, priorities, and the surrounding community, and the current plan no longer reflects these values (Auburn University, 2013).

With that being said, there are several weaknesses to the plan. One such weakness is the plan’s budget transparency, which could hinder its future effectiveness (Auburn University, 2024b, p. 24). The next drawback is generalized language, which hurts the plan. Each “We Will” can seem fairly repetitive, with ‘dreamy language’ all over the plan, filling it with ‘fluff’ that is unnecessary. This makes certain objectives harder to measure or implement effectively and allows for a lack of specificity, which could result in difficulty tracking progress or achieving outcomes. Additionally, there is a clear overemphasis on branding and marketing; the plan itself is a product of this, with generalized language and ‘fluff’ detracting from more impactful academic and student-focused initiatives central to the mission.

Grounded & Groundbreaking presents a rather ambitious roadmap for the next decade in Auburn, Alabama. The strategic plan has significant strengths, such as its student-centered approach, research expansion, and stakeholder engagement. However, the plan could be strengthened by providing detailed financial information and ensuring greater specificity while reducing fluff. With the strategic plan's focus on growth, tradition, and innovation, Auburn University has the potential to become a leader in the SEC with *Grounded & Groundbreaking*.

4.2 Louisiana State University (LSU)

4.2.1 Introduction to *Louisiana State University Agricultural and Mechanical College 2023-2024 through 2027-2028 Strategic Plan*

Louisiana State University (LSU), strategic plan, titled *Louisiana State University Agricultural and Mechanical College 2023-2024 through 2027-2028 Strategic Plan* articulates LSU's vision to be a leading research institution and fulfill its mission as a land-, sea-, and space-grant (Louisiana State University, 2022, p. 2) The starting plan looks to provide a comprehensive roadmap for the Institution, forecasting its development and demonstrating its commitment to the state of Louisiana (Louisiana State University, 2022, pp. 2, 11, 12).

It also sets ambitious goals, primarily centered on achieving student success, ensuring accountability, improving student outcomes, increasing graduation rates, and expanding educational opportunities. Something unique to LSU's plan is its grounding in Louisiana state law, specifically Act 1465 of 1997 (Louisiana State University, 2022, pp. 2, 11, 12). This law adds an additional layer of compliance and reporting requirements (Louisiana State University, 2022, pp. 2, 11, 12). LSU does not include much information about how the plan was developed, but it does mention that the process involved discussions and debates among faculty, staff, students, and friends of the institution (Louisiana State University, 2022, pp. 2, 11, 12).

4.2.2 Goals and Objectives

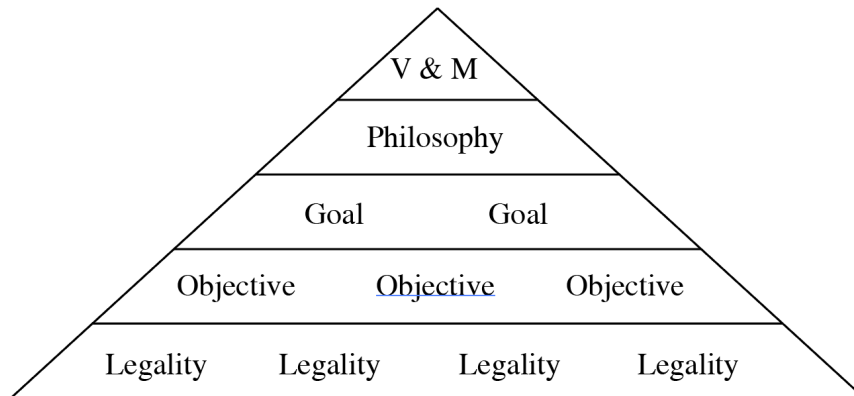


Figure 4.3 The structure of LSU's strategic plan, including its vision and mission statements, "Philosophy Statement," "Goals," "Objectives," and finally, the legal concerns.

The plan fits into the **Hierarchical Model**. This is due to separate goals and following subpoints, without an overarching theme, that each builds off each other. LSU's strategic plan is very different and methodically organized to convey the institution's strategic direction. First, the plan begins with articulating LSU's vision and mission statements, followed by a philosophy statement defining LSU's role (Louisiana State University, 2022, p. 2). The plan's central framework is built upon "Goals" and their following 'subpoints' which LSU labels "Objectives." They are as follows:

1. Goal I: Increase Opportunities for Student Access and Success (p. 3)
 - a. Objective I.1: Increase fall headcount enrollment by 3.7% from the baseline level of 37,129 in fall 2021 to 38,500 by fall 2026.
2. Goal II: Ensure Quality and Accountability (p. 4)
 - a. Objective II.1: Increase the percentage of first-time in college, full-time, degree-seeking students retained to the second fall at the same institution of initial enrollment by 1.6 percentage points from the fall 2020 cohort (to fall 2021) baseline level of 83.4% to 85.0% by fall 2026 (retention of fall 2025 cohort).

- b. Objective II.2: Increase the percentage of first-time in college, full-time, degree-seeking students retained to the third fall at the same institution of initial enrollment by 1.9 percentage points from the fall 2019 cohort (to fall 2021) baseline level of 75.1% to 77.0% by fall 2026 (retention of fall 2024 cohort).
- c. Objective II.3: Increase the institutional statewide graduation rate (defined as a student completing an award within 150% of "normal time") from the baseline rate (fall 2014 cohort for all institutions) of 72.2% to 74.0% by 2025-26 (Fall 2019 cohort).
- d. Objective II.4: Increase the total number of baccalaureate degree completers in a given academic year from the baseline year number of 4,665 in the 2020-21 academic year to 5,300 in the 2025-26 academic year.
- e. Objective II.5: Increase the total number of graduate degree completers in a given academic year from the baseline year number of 2,098 in the 2020-21 academic year to 2,200 in the 2025-26 academic year.
- f. Objective II.6: Increase the total number of undergraduate degree completers age 25+ in a given academic year from the baseline year number of 382 in the 2020-21 academic year to 500 in the 2025-26 academic year.
- g. Objective II.7: Increase the total number of minority degree completers in a given academic year from the baseline year number of 1,425 in the 2020-21 academic year to 1,700 in the 2025-26 academic year.

Each “Objective” has “Strategies,” which are further points in the plan. “Strategies” are particular action items or approaches designed to achieve the stated “Objective.” These break down the objective into actionable steps, allowing for a roadmap for implementation. They

describe what LSU will do to pursue its objective, having several strategies for each objective; it ensures a multi-faceted approach. Each “Objective” has around one to eight “Strategies.” Due to the “Strategies” lengthy section, they are not included in this report; for a full breakdown, they can be found in the full plan (Louisiana State University, 2022, pp. 3-10).

4.2.3 Legality

Due to the need to comply with Act 1465 of 1997, LSU’s strategic plan includes very specific components, such as a description of the strategic planning process and explanations of how duplication of effort will be avoided. These are often not presented in other plans created under different legal requirements. For example,” LSU’s plan contains the following for each “Objective.”

1. An Indicator Name (e.g., Number of students enrolled in fall full term).
2. Indicator LaPAS PI Code Number (e.g. 15352)
3. Type and Level: (e.g., Output, Key)
4. A Rationale
5. A Use Description (e.g. a definition)
6. Clarity (e.g., a further detailed description of the previous definition).
7. Validity, Reliability and Accuracy Statement
8. Data Source, Collection and Reporting Statement
9. Calculation Methodology
10. Scope Statement (e.g., for LSU only)
11. Responsible for data collection, analysis, and quality Statement
12. “Caveats? Limitations or weaknesses? Does the source of the data have a bias or agenda?”

13. Responsible Person (e.g., an Individual responsible for the “objective”)

4.2.4 Other Insights

LSU's strategic plan is highly detailed, clear, and accountable, distinguishing it from many other plans. A major strength lies in its grounding in Louisiana state law, specifically Act 1465 of 1997, which mandates the inclusion of reporting, which is rarely seen in other states.

Furthermore, LSU's plan is structurally coherent and simple, with an easy-to-read outline that moves from vision and mission to goals, objectives, and legality. The document itself is not fancy at all and is straight to the point.

However, the plan's weaknesses are equally noticeable. It lacks transparency in the actual development process; although it mentions stakeholder involvement, it provides little to no detail on how this input shaped the plan or what edits or revisions it went through. In addition to this, while its framework is heavily metrics-driven, it also risks overemphasizing compliance and output metrics. The plan's bureaucratic complexity, particularly with LaPAS metrics, may also hinder its adaptability or limit broader public engagement, for it does take some understanding to read the 'legal' portions of the plan. In sum, LSU's strategic plan excels in structure, accountability, and legal compliance. Yet, it could benefit from a more inclusive development narrative and a balance between rigor and educational vision.

4.3 Mississippi State University (MSU)

4.3.1 Introduction to *Transforming MSU* (2023-2028)

In April of 2023, Mississippi State University (MSU) President Mark E. Keenum announced the Institution's new 'blueprint' for the institution. The new strategic plan, titled *Transforming MSU* (2023-2028), looks to “reimagine the role and impact of a national university in solving the world’s most critical challenges, starting in our own backyard (Mississippi State University, 2023a).” MSU looks to have *Transforming MSU* continue the mission of the Institution, which is to provide access to all sectors of Mississippi’s population, foster commitment to its land grant mission, and embrace its role as an economic developer in the State of Mississippi and beyond (Mississippi State University, 2023b). There is no timeline of development mentioned for the plan. However, MSU states that the reason the institution needs a new strategic plan is because “(MSU) is committed to continue building on the progress of the last plan by transforming the way we deliver our mission (Mississippi State University, 2023c).”

4.3.2 Transforming MSU and Model Selection

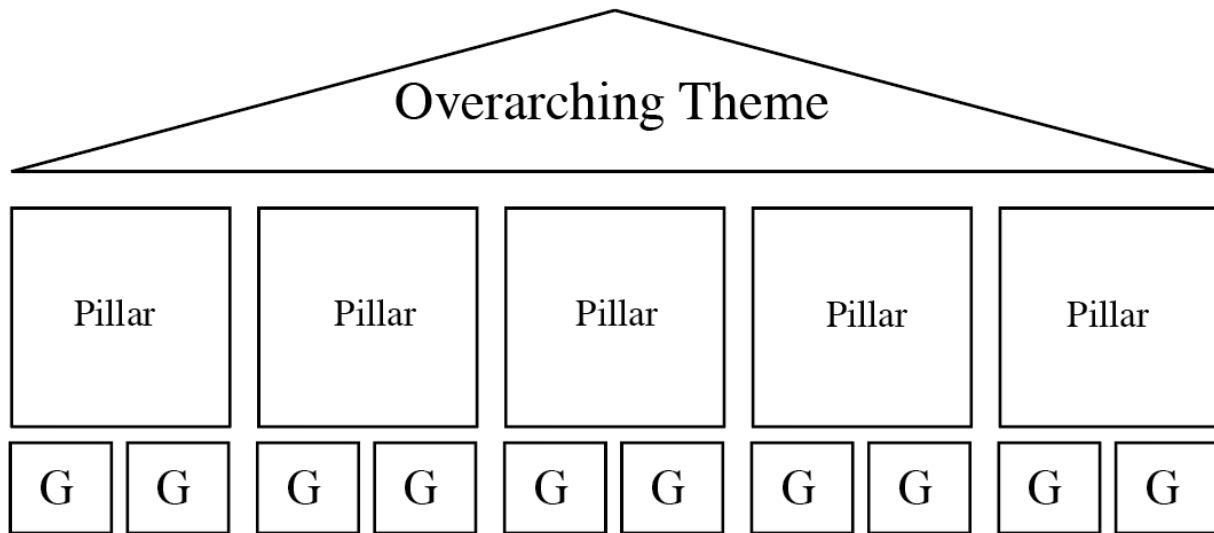


Figure 4.4 Mississippi State University strategic plan structure; "North Star Vision" as overarching theme, and the following "Pillars" and 'goals.'

Transforming MSU charts a new vision for MSU and, in doing so, sets itself into the **Top-Down Model**, with an overarching theme and following sub-points. Its overarching theme, which is named the “North Star Vision” is rather lengthy but details what the plan looks to do; it is the following:

At Mississippi State, we're redefining the role of a Land Grant university. We provide an innovative, hands-on learning experience, meeting all students where they are and equipping them for a world that needs their talent. We're working to help our communities prosper while exploring cutting-edge solutions to the world's biggest challenges. Together, we're taking care of what matters in the 21st century - starting in our own backyard (Mississippi State University, 2023b).

Following this, there are five “Pillars” that guide MSU through transformation (Mississippi State University, 2023b). Each “Pillar” is a different focus of MSU and an essential area of transformation (Mississippi State University, 2023b). Following each “Pillar” are ‘subpoints’ with no official name. These detailed actions and steps are what MSU will take to achieve its “Pillars.”

4.3.3 “Pillars,” ‘description of’ and following ‘subpoints’

(Note. All of the following are found at Mississippi State University (2023b), as well as other information.)

1. Pillar One: Serve the Whole Student

- a. Help students thrive through innovative academic programs and memorable experiences while ensuring a holistic focus on student well-being.
 - i. Provide a supportive, vibrant campus environment that allows students to enjoy meaningful learning, research, and service activities during their MSU experience.
 - ii. Prepare all of our students with the tools to live healthy and productive lives.
 - iii. Incorporate new academic content and teaching methods that enable students to use their knowledge and to lead fulfilling careers.
 - iv. Help student achieve their academic goals by providing services that enable them to graduate on-time and with distinction.
 - v. Expand experiential learning opportunities for students so that we may instill a hunger for lifelong learning in all of our graduates.

2. Pillar Two: Strengthen Our Bonds (Mississippi State University, 2023b)

- a. Grow and nurture relationships that further enhance our vibrant community.
 - i. Increase opportunities for employee development and advancement.
 - ii. Deepen the bonds we have with alumni to support their connection to MSU and the value of the degree they have earned.

- iii. Expand partnerships with industry and employers to create new opportunities for students and ensure the education they are receiving is relevant for tomorrow's workplace.
- iv. Build and enhance our networks with community and government leaders and with peer organizations to create pathways for mutually beneficial goals.
- v. Grow fan affinity and engagement through innovative experiences on and off campus.

3. Pillar Three: Ignite Innovation (Mississippi State University, 2023b)

- a. Foster life-changing research and creative endeavors to advance our society.
 - i. Grow recognition for MSU's role in completing life-changing research in areas that matter to our state, region, and world.
 - ii. Expand programs for faculty and staff researchers so that they have the support they need to be successful.
 - iii. Renew our commitment to supporting entrepreneurship in all forms, especially in developing a strong workforce for Mississippi and communities like ours.
 - iv. Double down in our research and scholarly activity that promotes solutions in areas that matter like community health, child and youth development, and sustainability and resiliency.

4. Pillar Four: Elevate Our Community (Mississippi State University, 2023b)

- a. Serve our communities with the knowledge and experience that address critical challenges and unique opportunities.

- i. Expand outreach activities that allow us to apply the life-changing solutions evident in our research.
 - ii. Expand opportunities for service learning to inspire a continued commitment to serving our communities as MSU students, alumni, faculty and staff.
 - iii. Create more “on-ramps” for members of our communities to receive the knowledge and skills they desire through micro-credentials and stackable credentials.
 - iv. Grow capacity in communities that fosters economic development and social mobility.
- 5. Pillar Five; Tell Our Story (Mississippi State University, 2023b)
 - a. Grow awareness and shape the perception of MSU by amplifying the stories, impacts, and excitement of our community.
 - i. Grow our brand recognition beyond Mississippi and the southeast region
 - ii. Engage more individuals in experiencing all that MSU has to offer through our teaching, research, and outreach missions
 - iii. Celebrate the real value of MSU’s efforts in Mississippi and communities like ours

4.3.4 Other Insights

MSUs Strategic Plan: *Transforming MSU* is a simple but forward-thinking plan. The strategic plan, which is structured around its overarching theme, “North Star Vision” is designed to guide the Institution’s transformation (Mississippi State University, 2023b).

One of the strengths of *Transforming MSU* is its clear articulation of MSU’s mission and vision: clear, simple, and to the point (Mississippi State University, 2023b). *Transforming MSU* has a large focus on its students, with a particular emphasis on their well-being and success. In addition to this, *Transforming MSU’s* emphasis on engagement and partnerships within its large mission as a land-grant institution highlights the value of strong relationships with various stakeholders within and outside of MSU (Mississippi State University, 2023b). MSU’s commitment to innovation and research is additionally strong within the plan, as outlined in the “Ignite Innovation” pillar (Mississippi State University, 2023b). *Transforming MSU* plan explicitly acknowledges the Institution’s land-grant tradition, mission, and commitment with the goal of extending its resources for the benefit of the State of Mississippi and the world. *Transforming MSU* speaks to “redefining our (Mississippi’s) role” as a land-grant institution in the 21st century (Mississippi State University, 2023b).

In addition to its strategic plan, MSU has a complex, comprehensive, and beautiful CMP that outlines the future development of the campus, titled *Mississippi State University Campus Plan 2022*. The CMP is designed to create a vibrant, inclusive, and welcoming environment, campus, and surrounding area that reflects the Institution's mission, history, and traditions (Mississippi State University, 2022, p. 1). The CMP serves as a “living document,” allowing the institution flexibility in campus planning and infrastructure development (Mississippi State University, 2022, p. 1). The CMP is based upon a projected increase in headcount from 22,986 in Fall 2020 to approximately 26,600 students within 10 years (Mississippi State University, 2023d, p. 1,14). While no plan mentions the other, *Transforming MSU* outlines the Institution’s vision and “Pillars” for future development, while the CMP translates these broad aspirations into concrete physical strategies.

MSU's plan for the future, *Transforming MSU*, outlines a complete yet simplistic and broad vision for the future, allowing the Institution to have a student-centered focus with an emphasis on engagement and commitment to innovation.

4.4 Texas A&M University (A&M)

4.4.1 Introduction to *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*

Texas A&M University's (A&M) strategic plan for the future, *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, is a comprehensive document that outlines the Institution's history and development into a world-class Institution. As stated in its introduction, the plan centers around its mission and history.

What began as an all-male, military, land-grant university tailored to educating rural students would mature and develop along a strategic pathway of progress over the next nearly 150 years to become a dominant force for prosperity and global impact while earning distinctions that positioned it to become one of only 17 institutions in the nation to hold the rarefied federal land-, sea-, and space-grant designations (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 2).

A&M is one of the largest public institutions in the nation, with over 77,000 students, attending class across 5,200 acres; the *Strategic Plan 2020-2025* most certainly reflects that, offering a comprehensive outline focusing on the minute details that each student may encounter (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 2).

The 33-page document, first published in 2020, was later updated in 2023 and attempts to embody A&M's orientation towards the future, all while being centered around A&M Systems' four strategic pillars: "Transformational Education, Discovery, and Innovation, Community, and Impact on the State, the Nation, and the World" (Texas A&M University, 2023a, pp. 2, 3). A&M does not list much on the development of the plan or how it was created, but it states the following: "The priorities within the plan were identified through committee work from a diverse group of administrators, faculty, students, staff, industry leaders, and community members (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 3)."

4.4.2 “Priorities” and ‘key components’

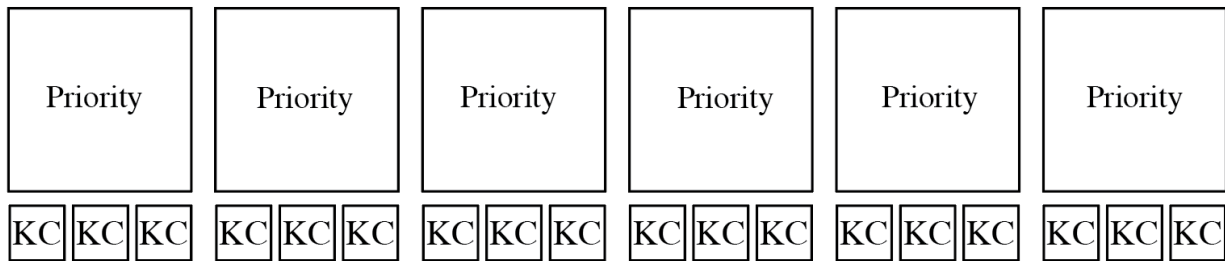


Figure 4.5 Texas A&M's strategic plan, with its “Priorities” and the following “Key Components.” Note. The sub-points are not included in this figure.

The strategic plan is very long and can be hard to read. With this being said, it finds itself in the *Decentralized Model*, with six main “Priorities” that look to “guide the university and plan for the years ahead (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 3).” Within these are ‘key components’ or subheadings; these are the broadest of the goals for A&M and are key areas of focus that A&M will focus on achieving within each “Priority.” These do not have an official name in *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*. Finally, under each ‘key component’ are ‘sub-points’, which are more specific action items or strategies; these additionally do not have a name and are the concrete steps that A&M plans to take. The six “Priorities” key components are as follows:

1. Enhance Transformational Education and Student Success (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 4-9)
 - a. Develop Pathways For Successful Admission
 - b. Increase First-Year Retention
 - c. Increase Graduation Rates
 - d. Foster Lifelong Success
2. Elevate Graduate and Professional Education (pp. 10-14)
 - a. Develop a Globally-Recognized Graduate and Professional School

- b. Build a Culture of Inclusive Advising, Mentoring, and Professional Development
 - c. Cultivate Academic Innovation in Graduate and Professional Programs
- 3. Strengthen and Harness Our Research Enterprise (pp. 15-18)
 - a. Increase the Breadth and Scope of Our Research
 - b. Expand the Importance and Impact of Our Research on Texas, the Nation, and the Planet
- 4. Grow and Support Our World-Class Faculty (pp. 19-22)
 - a. Invest In and Retain Our Current Faculty
 - b. Recruit Exceptional Faculty
 - c. Support Career Progression for All Faculty
- 5. Be a Best Place to Live, Work, and Learn (pp. 23-26)
 - a. Prioritize Physical, Emotional, and Social Well-Being
 - b. Strengthen Leadership Capabilities
 - c. Amplify Employee Growth and Development
- 6. Engage Texas and Beyond to Enhance Our Impact (pp. 27-30)
 - a. Embrace and Refine Our Mission as a Land-, Sea-, and Space-Grant University for the 21st Century
 - b. Accelerate Commercialization and Entrepreneurship
 - c. Become The University for Texas by Extending Our Engagement in Rural and Urban Communities
 - d. Measure Aggies' Impact on Our Communities and the World

Due to the large number of ‘sub-points’ and their respective descriptions, they are not included in this report but can be found in the full *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, between pages 5 and 30.

4.4.3 KPIs

Strategic Plan 2020-2025 contains a wide selection of KPIs that A&M will use to measure values and track progress toward the plan’s “Priorities.” Each “Priority” has several KPIs located at the end of each section. These KPIs provide a clear way to assess the effectiveness of the “Priorities” and their following ‘key components’ and ‘sub-points.’ The number of KPIs A&M has is much too large for a report of this nature; for a full list, they can be found at *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*.

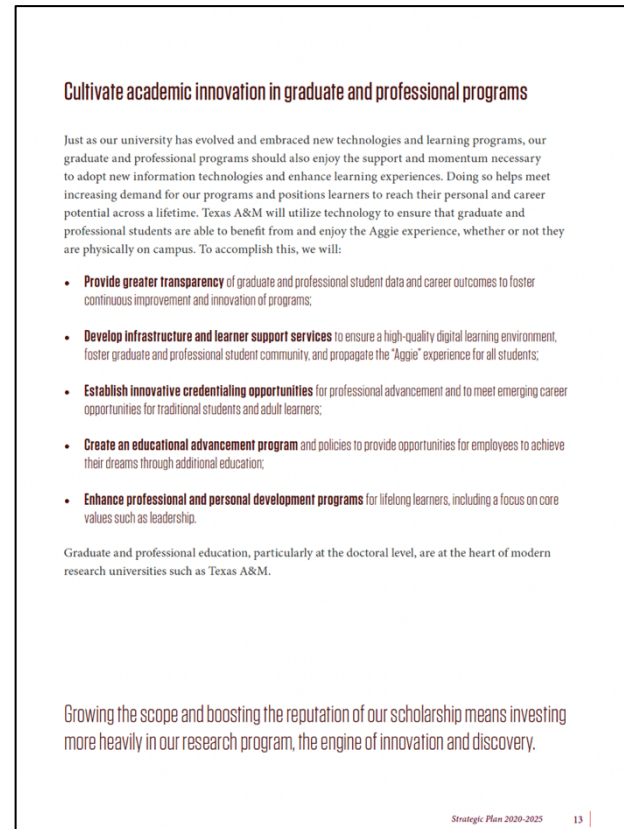


Figure 4.6 Example of page from *Strategic Plan 2020-2025* (Texas A&M University, 2023a, p. 13).

4.4.4 Other Insights

Strategic Plan 2020-2025 provides a complex and in-depth framework for A&M developments across multiple domains, such as education, research, faculty, and community engagement (Texas A&M University, 2023a, pp. 4-9, 19-22). The entirety of A&M’s *Strategic Plan 2020-2025* can be boiled down to this: it aims to strategically position Texas A&M University for continued excellence and global leadership as a leading land, sea, and space-grant research institution.

A&M, in addition to its *Strategic Plan 2020-2025*, also contains a world-class 460-page CMP. Titled *2017 Campus Master Plan*, it is one of the most comprehensive CMPs in the nation, if not the world. With it being that intensive and lengthy, it is much too large to summarize in a report of this nature completely. The CMP started the creation process in August 2015 and underwent several phases of development before being released in early 2017 (Texas A&M University, 2017, pp. 10,11).

A&M aligns its alignment of six strategic priorities with the A&M system's four strategic pillars, showing a broad recognition that A&M is much bigger than one singular campus and that the institution cares about Texas and beyond. A&M is also very concerned with not just a plan on paper but the effectiveness of the plan as well. A large assortment of KPIs demonstrates a clear priority to effect progress without the loss of resources, as well as a commitment to data-driven decision-making, accountability, and transparency (Texas A&M University, 2023a, pp. 9, 14, 18, 22, 26, 30). A major strength of the A&M plan is the massive influence of infrastructure and campus development, as well as the guiding influence of the world-class CMP. *Strategic Plan 2020-2025* acknowledges the critical role of infrastructure, including human resources, space magnet, technology, campus layout, and infrastructure, and financial resources, in supporting A&M's strategic goals (Texas A&M University, 2023a, pp. 32-33).

While it attempts to identify possible revenue streams, their ability and availability may pose a challenge. While comprehension and detail are its strengths, it also presents a challenge in terms of implementation and coordination. The sheer number of KPIs, 'key components' and 'subpoints,' and an over 400-page CMP, can make it difficult to find answers to specific problems or follow along with progress. *Strategic Plan 2020-2025* will require effective management to avoid fragmentation and ensure successful execution.

Strategic Plan 2020-2025 is a fantastic Decentralized Model strategic plan, with its only drawback being its sheer size and scope. However, for an institution the size of A&M, this size and scope may be necessary in the long term, even if it creates short-term problems. With its focus on its six “Priorities,” A&M looks to enhance education, research, and service in Texas and beyond.

4.5 University of Alabama (U of A)

4.5.1 Introduction to Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase

The University of Alabama’s (U of A) strategic plan, *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase* (2022-2027), hopes to align the Institution by positioning itself to build upon past success while becoming a regional and national leader in academic excellence, research, innovation, and campus development. *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase* builds upon its last strategic plan, published in 2016, aptly named *Advancing the Flagship*.

In September 2021, it was announced that a refresh of the old plan, *Advancing the Flagship*, would take place (University of Alabama, 2022d). The plan was developed by a committee that comprised faculty, staff, and students (University of Alabama, 2022d). Members discussed how they were to build upon past success and identified new areas for growth (University of Alabama, 2022d).

4.5.2 Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase and Model Selection

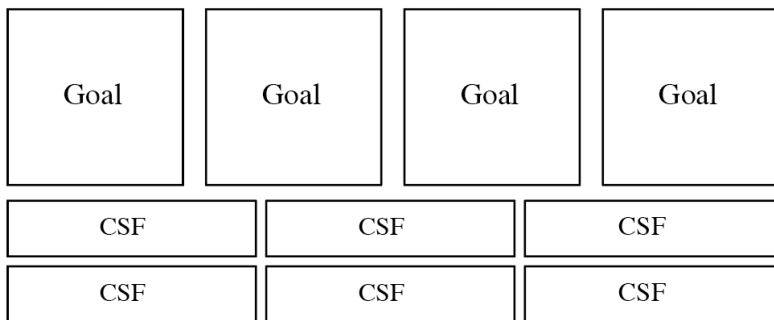


Figure 4.7 The structure of Alabama’s strategic plan with its main “Goals” and the “Critical Success Factors.”

Advancing the Flagship: The Next

Phase looks to continue its

predecessor’s previous success

with four refreshed and primary “Goals” (University of Alabama, 2022a). These “Goals” are similar to U of A’s peers in the SEC, with the four of them being aimed at fostering educational excellence, expanding scholarly research, promoting inclusivity, and enhancing faculty support (University of Alabama, 2022b). With *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase*, using four main

“Goals,” it separates itself *into* the ***Decentralized Model***. It lacks an overarching theme to be considered a Top-Down Model. These “Goals” are as follows:

1. Provide a premier education that enhances the lives of our students, graduates, and the communities they serve (University of Alabama, 2022b).
2. Increase the University’s productivity and innovation in research, scholarship and creative activities that impact economic and societal development.
3. Enrich our learning and work environment by attracting, welcoming, and supporting all faculty, staff, and students.
4. Foster an environment that will aid in the recruitment, retention, growth, and support of outstanding faculty and staff.

The “Goals” in U of A’s *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase* have similar strategies between them. U of A calls these strategies “Critical Success Factors.” they are as follows

1. Embraces the dreams of our campus (University of Alabama, 2022b).
2. Is high-level and consistent with a dynamic university committed to accelerating its accomplishments.
3. Ensures the vitality inherent in attracting the best and brightest scholars.
4. Reflects a focus on moving our research, creative activities and performance achievements forward in a substantial way.
5. Prepares our students for the globally connected world they will be a part of as they graduate and effect change in the world.
6. Provides an unmatched teaching and learning experience for all students.
7. “Instills a comprehensive view of opportunities, connections, and success for our campus (University of Alabama, 2022b).”

4.5.3 Other Insights

One of the *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase* strengths, is its emphasis on broadening educational excellence while expanding research, which aligns well with the Institution's overall mission of improving post-secondary education in the State of Alabama. Using the Decentralized Model allows for U of A to have flexibility in implementation, with each 'goal' having distinct but congruent areas of improvement. This enables the Institution to address specific challenges within various departments and with various stakeholders to adapt strategies and accomplish goals.

These "Goals" remain rather ambitious for the growth of both the State of Alabama and U of A. To attain all its "Goals" and the following subpoints, the Institution employs a multi-faceted implementation framework. The Institution uses very broad and awfully selective KPIs to track progress on "Goals," such as metrics on student success, research output, and employee satisfaction. These KPIs are sprinkled into *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase* with no vague rhyme or reason (University of Alabama, 2022d). The absence of more specific methods and/or benchmarks for achieving subpoints and "Goals" reflects a difficulty in measuring the strategic plan's success and holding stakeholders accountable. While the Decentralized Model that U of A uses provides flexibility, it also makes its own implementation rather complex and particularly vague, especially when balancing the needs of different stakeholders such as students, faculty, and staff.

Combined with these overall and scholarly "Goals" and subpoints is U of A's 2024 *Campus Master Plan*, which focuses on the outcome and effectiveness of the campus rather than the 'Institution' itself. U of A's CMP is both a 138-page physical document and a website. The

CMP outlines a flexible, in-depth, and long-term vision for campus development from 2024 to 2029 (University of Alabama, 2022e).

U of A's *Rising Tide Capital Campaign* plays a crucial role in the accomplishment of its "Goals," with its funding allowing for most of the required commitments needed for success in these "Goals" and its further subpoints. For example, the funds for scholarships, faculty endowments, and infrastructure improvements are often subsidized through *the Rising Tide Capital Campaign* (University of Alabama, 2022a; University of Alabama, 2022c; University of Alabama, 2022d).

U of A's strategic plan, *Advancing the Flagship: The Next Phase*, stands out amongst strategic plans in the SEC for its clear and simple goals. Its strong emphasis on academic excellence and economic impact allows for fluid and complete growth. Its data-driven framework, with measurable KPIs, promotes transparency and accountability for all stakeholders involved. Despite its strengths, the plan has some fundamental limitations, particularly in its lack of emphasis on long-term technological advancement and global engagement, as well as clear-cut financial motivations and intentions. The plan falls short in addressing the need for modernization, particularly in a time that is a whirlwind for education. The plan has no mention of modernized learning models, such as hybrid or digital classrooms, and lacks a comprehensive strategy for technological infrastructure growth.

4.6 University of Arkansas (UA)

4.6.1 Introduction to 150 Forward Strategic Plan

The University of Arkansas (UA) looks to become a prominent leader in the SEC with its *150 Forward Strategic Plan*. The strategic plan, which looks to set a course for the Institution over its next chapter, builds upon its tradition and its history of the land-grant mission of education, research, and service (University of Arkansas, 2023a). Announced in December 2023, after several years of development, the small document and expansive website look to position the institution for success, for all stakeholders (University of Arkansas, 2023a). UA's strategic plan is centered around three core values, which all involve the tradition of the Institution being an 1862 Morrill Land Grant Act school.

Since 1871, our fundamental purpose as a land-grant institution and state flagship remains unchanged — to serve the state of Arkansas as a partner, resource, and catalyst by (1) Providing access to comprehensive and internationally competitive public education and fostering student success across a wide spectrum of disciplines. (2) Utilizing research, discovery, and creative activity to improve the quality of life, develop solutions to the challenges we face, and drive the state's economy. (3) Contributing service and expertise through outreach, engagement, and collaboration (University of Arkansas, 2023a, p. 3-4).

The *150 Forward Strategic Plan* had been in development for over a year before its release. The planning process began on November 16, 2022, when the Institution's current chancellor, Dr. Charles F. Robinson, was appointed (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 10-11; University of Arkansas, 2023b). Over the course of that year, an extensive, collaborative process that involved faculty, staff, and students took place, including things such as campus-wide events, town hall meetings, listening sessions, goal-setting workshops, and a partnership with EAB, a higher education research firm. After a full year of this, the final strategic plan was announced in December 2023 (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 10-11).

4.6.2 150 Forward Strategic Plan and Model Selection

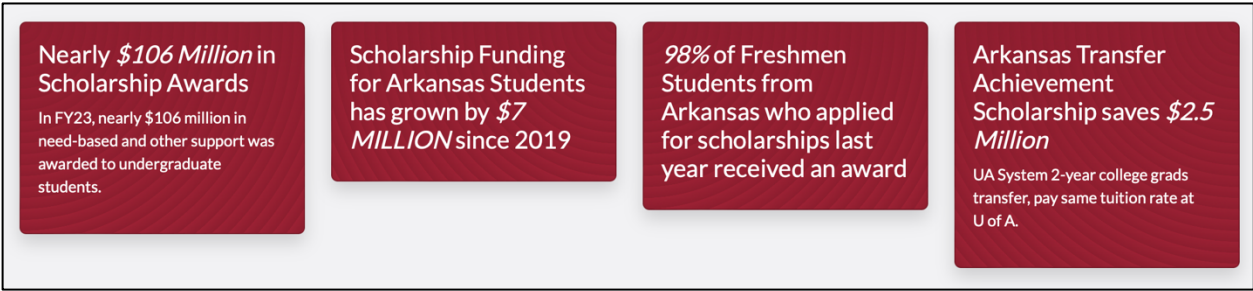


Figure 4.8 Example of Pillar one, Student Success’ achievements. Note. From the University of Arkansas (2023c).

150 Forward identifies three key “Strategic Pillars” for its ‘goals’: Student Success, Research Excellence, and Enhancing the University’s Status as an Employer of Choice. These ‘goals’ are structured around other, “strategies and tactics that will be developed across the institution” but allow UA to have key areas of focus (University of Arkansas, 2023b).

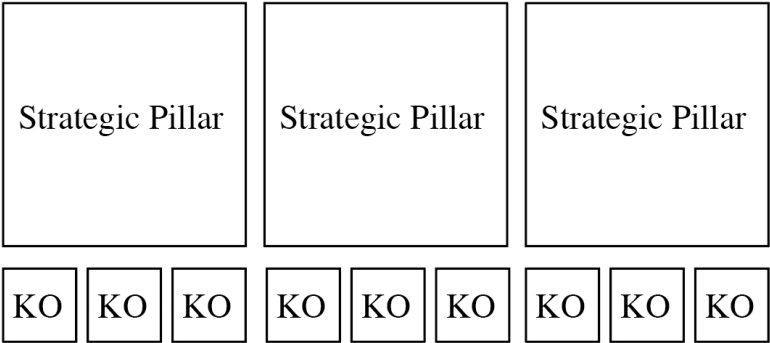


Figure 4.9 Structure of the University of Arkansas strategic plan, with its “Strategic Pillars” and its “Key Objectives.”

These “Strategic Pillars” format the plan into the *Decentralized Model*. Through these “Strategic Pillars,” the Institution seeks to allow for academic growth, expand research, and create a dynamic campus environment. Each individual “Strategic Pillar” has a short debrief of its ‘goals’ and “Key Objectives” that the Institution will examine to determine progress, efficiency, and effectiveness (University of Arkansas, 2023a). The “Key Objectives” are the subpoints for the plan. While not in the plan itself, the plan’s website details a list of achievements in each “Strategic Pillar.” These are things that have been accomplished in the past that fit into one of the ‘Strategic Pillars.’ For example, the first pillar, “Student Success,” lists things such as 87% of recently graduated students reporting that they are working full-time and that 98% of Arkansas

freshmen who apply for scholarships receive an award (University of Arkansas, 2023c). In addition to this, each “Strategic Pillar” has a list of metrics accompanied by graphs that show the trends over time (University of Arkansas, 2023c).

4.6.3 “Strategic Pillars” and “Key Objectives” of *150 Forward*

At the heart of the *150 Forward* is its first “Strategic Pillar,” “Student Success,” which offers access to a holistic education designed to help Arkansas students grow and contribute to the State of Arkansas. The “Key Objectives” for the first pillar, “Student Success,” (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 6-7). They are as follows:

1. Retention and graduation rates across demographics including narrowing of gaps between populations.
2. Increased number of graduate students.
3. Increased financial support for all students and particularly in meeting cost of attendance for students in need.
4. Improved time-to-completion rates for doctoral students.
5. Increased success rates for historically dropped, withdrawn and failed courses.
6. Growing percentage of students served by career coaching, student involvement and participation in high-impact practices
7. Continuous reporting of post-graduate plans and outcomes by majority of student body.

UA’s second “Strategic Pillar” is “Research Excellence,” which pairs well with its mission as a land-grant institution (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 8-9). While not explicitly mentioned in the *150 Forward* document, the website has three metrics to keep track of its success or failure: total research expenditure, sources of research expenditure, and the number of doctoral degrees

awarded (University of Arkansas, 2023d). The “Key Objectives” for the second “Strategic Pillar” are as follows (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 8-9):

1. Increase research expenditures, particularly in signature and federal priority areas.
2. Increase scholarly productivity percentile, an algorithm that combines citations, books, chapters, patents, and trials among other measures relative to the size of the faculty.
3. Regularly attain highly prestigious faculty awards.
4. Increase patent production-to-expenditure ratio and technology transfer.
5. Improve retention of faculty.
6. Increase the number of graduate and doctoral students.

Finally, “Employer of Choice” is the last of the three, which attempts to recognize the commitment...

...to fostering a work environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging, works toward a meaningful purpose, and has the data, resources, connections, and foundation of support to be most effective, grow and advance their careers (University of Arkansas, 2023a, p. 8-9).

This is the smallest of the three “Strategic Pillars.” Its “Key Objectives” are as follows (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 8-9).

1. Completion and adoption of employee value proposition
2. Continual high employee engagement/satisfaction.
3. Reduction in annual turnover rate.
4. Depth, quality and diversity of applicant pools.

In addition to these main “Strategic Pillars” for UA’s *150 Forward Strategic Plan*, it also has several actions and initiatives, all of which are aimed at enhancing the day-to-day experiences of students. Some of these are blended with the plan “Strategic Pillars” but can be excluded to show a more significant emphasis on other areas of development that the strategic plan looks to

accomplish (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 3,4,5-7). These include improvements in wellness, affordability, and student engagement (University of Arkansas, 2023a, pp. 5,4,6).

4.6.4 Other Insights

150 Forward is built on three “Strategic Pillars:” Student Success, Research Excellence, and Employer of Choice; its strength lies in its clear structure and easy-to-read format. The physical simplicity of both its overall text and layout, as well as its “Key Objectives,” uplifts UA’s vision by allowing for a quick and painless read of the plan.

UA distinguishes itself from other institutions in the SEC by explicitly tying its “Research Excellence” pillar to its land-grant mission. This allows the Institution to focus heavily on federal priority areas and public-serving research, meaning UA’s research will directly affect the State of Arkansas first. The emphasis on expanding doctoral programs and research facilities positions.

However, the plan also reveals several key weaknesses that are significant compared to its Peers in the SEC. Despite a wide and broad scope, the strategic plan contains a significant amount of fluff, or flowery language and abstract promises, that have no detail or concrete actions or KPIs. For example, the “Employer of Choice” pillar lacks specific faculty retention strategies and fails to outline tangible steps to achieve its ‘goals.’ It also has no common, local, and national KPIs to verify the “Strategic Pillars” results.

UA’s *150 Forward Strategic Plan* lays out the institution’s future plans in a simple and cohesive way. With post-secondary education in the United States changing rapidly, this plan serves as an example of an institution using its resources to create a plan for a ‘scary’ future. Whether the plain, simplistic style will be its downfall is yet to be seen, with the lack of focus on non-academic campus enhancements (such as housing, dining, and recreational facilities)

leaving a noticeable gap in addressing the everyday student experience, which can affect its broader mission.

4.7 University of Florida (UF)

The University of Florida does not currently have a strategic plan (as of Spring 2025). This is mainly due to the institution's struggle with its president, Ben Sasse, having to resign and former president Kent Fuchs stepping in as interim president (University of Florida, 2024). However, UF has a serious amount of planning already accomplished. Particularly with its CIP, *titled University of Florida Strategic Development Plan*, which looks to shape the campus, as well as its surrounding community's future over the next 40 to 50 years, forming the "New American City" (University of Florida, 2017). Due to there being no strategic plan, the effect of the CMP will not be covered in this report.

4.8 University of Georgia (UGA)

4.8.1 Introduction to 2025 Strategic Plan

The University of Georgia's (UGA) *2025 Strategic Plan* is a five-year, comprehensive document that aims to shape the Institution through 2025 (University of Georgia, 2020a, p. 1). The plan builds upon the foundation of previous achievements for the Athens campus and aims to help with the Institution's evolving needs. *The 2025 Strategic Plan* builds upon UGA's last strategic plan, which concluded in January 2020, and looks to "set the course for future success and achievement (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 1)." *The 2025 Strategic Plan* development process was a very structured and methodical process, which began in July 2017 (University of Georgia, 2020a, p. 6). This letter came off a 2017 midway review of the Institution's previous strategic plan (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 6, 8-10). The Standing Committee recommended several changes to the next plan, such as a shorter plan term, easily assessed preface indicators, and operational plans to support the implementation of others (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 6, 8-10).

The Strategic Planning Committee then followed a three-phase process: discovery, goal development, and completion (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 8, 9, 10). The completion phase focused on creating the final product and the public unveiling of the plan during the January 2020 State of the University Address (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 9, 10).

4.8.2 “Strategic Directions,” “University Goals”

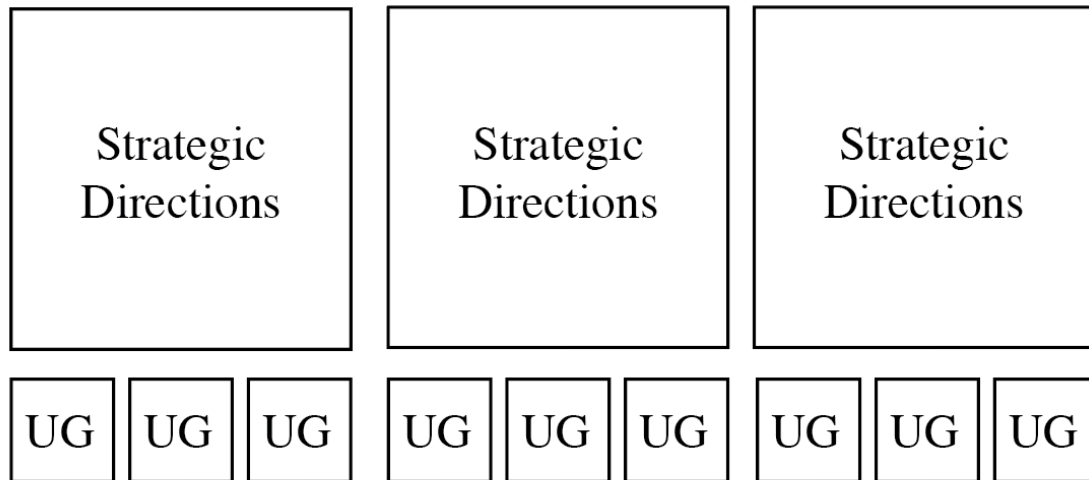


Figure 4. Field 10 University of Georgia's "Strategic Directions" and its following "University Goals." Note. No KPIs in the figure.

UGA has identified three different “Strategic Directions” to guide the institution, which falls under the **Decentralized Model**. These are pretty broad “mission-centered” goals (University of Georgia, 2020a, p. 3). Within these are “University Goals,” which are based on the themes created from data, benchmarking, and stakeholder input (University of Georgia, 2020b, p. 2). Each one is under the umbrella of the three “Strategic Directions.” Each “Strategic Direction” and their following “University Goal” are as follows:

1. Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 4-7).
 - a. Expand experiential learning opportunities for all students.
 - b. Enhance training, support, and recognition for all who provide instruction.
 - c. Enhance infrastructure and support for evidence-based teaching methods across the curriculum.
 - d. Promote academic access and success for all students, with particular consideration for underrepresented, rural, first-generation and other underserved students.

2. Growing Research, Innovation, And Entrepreneurship (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 7-9).

- a. Provide resources, support, and incentives to nurture a diverse and inclusive culture of excellence in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship.
- b. Promote collaboration among academic units and between these units and external organizations to drive interdisciplinary research and commercial activity.
- c. Align the human and physical capital of the University to expand the research enterprise and fuel innovation and entrepreneurship at all levels of the organization.
- d. Enhance communications about the University's strengths in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship and the impact of those activities on local, state, national, and international communities.

3. Strengthening Partnerships With Communities Across Georgia And Around The World (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 10-14)

- a. Increase collaborative, community-focused research, scholarship, technical assistance, and training in Georgia, across the nation, and world.
- b. Strengthen UGA's role in economic development across the State, with a particular emphasis on underserved communities.
- c. Broaden opportunities for students to engage with the diversity of communities in Georgia and across the nation and world on locally identified needs and issues.
- d. Develop high-impact global partnerships that engage and support UGA areas of research and service excellence.

- e. Strengthen communications regarding how UGA sustainably supports and benefits communities through research, teaching, and public service.



Figure 4.10 Example page from 2025 Strategic Plan (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 5-6)

4.8.3 KPIs

Within each “University Goal” are KPIS and metrics that will monitor progress over the next five years. These KPIs look to provide UGA with concrete measures. Each University Goal has between 3-7 KPIs; due to the overwhelming amount of them for each “University Goal,” they are not included in this report. A complete list of them can be found in the *2025 Strategic Plan* (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 6-14).

4.8.4 Other Insights

UGA's *2025 Strategic Plan* is a comprehensive roadmap for the institution's future. It builds on UGA's strengths as a land-grant institution and its excellence in teaching, research, and service. With UGA students' academic profile stronger than ever, proper planning for the years beyond 2025 was and still is essential, as stated in the plan's introduction (University of Georgia, 2020b, p. 2).

“...UGA's reputation as a premiere public research university has spread across the nation, while our position on a number of key rankings has climbed even higher. Against this backdrop, the UGA 2025 Strategic Plan sets the course for continued success and achievement grounded in three broad, mission-centered strategic directions...(University of Georgia, 2020b, p. 2).”

The overwhelming strength of the UGA plan is how connected and laid out it is. It has a clear, transparent development process that shows exactly how and what steps it went through to get to where it is today (University of Georgia, 2020b, p. 2). The *2025 Strategic Plan* is very well structured and fits the Decentralized Model extremely well, with an effective outline of strategic ‘priorities’ and ‘goals’ for the next five years. This structure provides a clear roadmap for UGA and also provides plentiful KPIs that allow for easy monitoring of progress. Each ‘goal’ of the plan is designed to be overarching, therefore encompassing all major academic and administrative units, as well as nonacademic practices, an alignment that allows progress towards the same goal.

UGA and its strong idea of “Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning” highlight the institution's commitment to a university's traditional educational role. This is a great emphasis within the plan; even with UGA trying to become a world-class institution, it has not forgotten about its roots. UGA also emphasizes the success of “underrepresented, rural, first-generation, and other underserved students (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 3).” Its second

strategic pillar, “Growing Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship,” direction sets ambitious goals for research while also emphasizing the need to “nurture a diverse and inclusive culture of excellence in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 5,7).” In its final “Strategic Pillar, UGA reaffirms its commitment to its land-grant mission, as well as being a “Public” institution (University of Georgia, 2020b, pp. 8).” All three work well together and broadcast a clear and concise plan with multiple avenues of development.

Despite its strengths, it also has some weaknesses. For example, the plan has no mention of athletics or what athletics can do for the Institution. This is fairly surprising given the Success of UGA athletics over the years. UGA does not have a CMP but has a collection of documents that support the growth and improvement of infrastructure on campus. Additionally, the *2025 Strategic Plan* does not discuss unforeseen circumstances or challenges, such as budget or financial issues. However, the plan does emphasize aligning unit-level operations with Institution-level operations (a common theme in the plan), which looks to ensure effective resource allocation (University of Georgia, 2020a, pp. 4, 13, 21).”

Although a refresh is happening in the near future, the plan’s thought format will continue to move the institution forward through the coming years. With a focus on the core mission of teaching, research, and service while setting ambitious yet achievable ‘goals,’ UGA is positioned to become a leading R-1 institution.

4.9 University of Kentucky (UK)

4.9.1 Introduction to *UK-Purpose*

The University of Kentucky's (UK) strategic plan, *Uk-Purpose: The Strategic Plan to Advance Kentucky 2021*, is an outline and comprehensive document, as well as a website that is aimed at propelling the institution into the future, all while maintaining its mission as an Morrill Land-Grant institution (University of Kentucky, 2021b). The strategic plan was developed in 2021 after their previous plan, titled the *University of Kentucky Strategic Plan 2015-2020: Transforming Tomorrow* (University of Kentucky, 2021a). The current one builds upon its predecessor (University of Kentucky, 2021a). The strategic plan was first adopted in October 2021 by the UK Board of Trustees and developed through a very collaborative process involving input from stakeholders, such as faculty, staff, administration, students, and external and community partners. The plan seeks to position the State of Kentucky as a leader in sectors from agriculture to industry, serving as a catalyst for the UK's socio-economic progress.

4.9.2 *UK-Purpose* and Model Selection

UK separates *UK-Purpose* into "Five Principles and Key Objectives." These are the plan's five main 'goals' and its following subpoints; due to this, it is separated into the *Decentralized Model*.

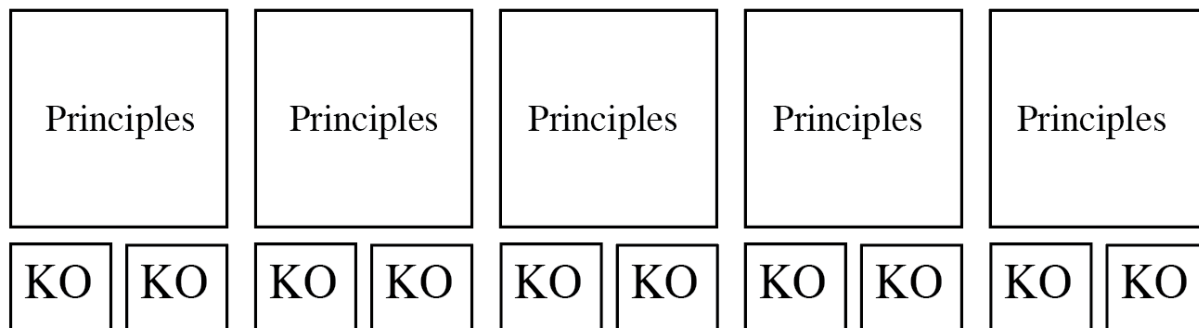


Figure 4.11 University of Kentucky's "Principles" and "Key Objectives." Note. "Metrics" not included.

In *UK-Purpose*, each of the “Principles” is broken down into smaller “Key Objectives,” which represent specific goals and initiatives (University of Kentucky, 2025b). Additionally, within each “Key Objective” are actionable steps, referred to as “Initial Tactics,” which outline the measures needed to achieve the objective (University of Kentucky, 2025b). This structure allows for a clear, checklist-style framework, making the plan easy to follow and track. The “Five Principles and Key Objectives,” along with their underlying missions, are as follows

1. Putting Students First (SF): They are why we are here. Whether it is maintaining and enhancing a modern curriculum that prepares all our students for success, providing appropriate support for graduate students or ensuring that doctoral students start and complete their programs successfully, we must put students first (University of Kentucky, 2021b, p. 5)
2. Taking Care of Our People (OP): We will only accomplish our mission of advancing Kentucky when our people — those who work with us and those we serve — are cared for holistically: their health, their safety, their well-being and their ability to prosper. (p. 6)
3. Inspiring Ingenuity (II): How do we embed innovation and discovery into every aspect of our institution? The breadth and depth of programming and offerings available on one campus makes us distinctive in higher education. How do we incentivize the spark of ingenuity throughout our campus. (p. 6)
4. Ensuring Greater Trust, Transparency and Accountability (TTA): We are Kentucky’s institution. And that mantle holds with it heightened responsibilities of accountability and transparency. But we need to do more to instill a sense of trust in each other in everything that we do. (p. 7)

5. Bringing together Many People, One Community (MPOC): UK is among the most diverse communities in the Commonwealth. Our students will enter a world riven by divisions, but more interdependent than ever before. How do we model unity amidst diversity for our state. (p. 7)

4.9.3 Metrics and Monitoring

Although *UK-Purpose* is similar to other strategic plans, it does happen to stand out amongst its peers with its clarity and monitoring tactics. The significant difference between UK's strategic plan and other strategic plans is its commitment to progress that is based on hard facts and to make sure that any progress made is innovative and goal-oriented, with the Institution and its stakeholders benefiting directly from the plan.

Within each "Principle" and its corresponding "Key Objectives" and "Initial Tactics," there are performance metrics and KPIs that the Institution will follow to evaluate the success of the plan; these are simply referred to as "Metrics." For the sake of space, they are not included in this report.

4.9.4 Other Insights

UK's strategic plan, *UK-PURPOSE*, is a focused and metric-driven plan for growing the Institution and moving the State of Kentucky forward.

The university, as the flagship institution, plays a critical leadership role for the Commonwealth by contributing to the economic development and quality of life within Kentucky's borders and beyond. The university nurtures a diverse community characterized by fairness and equal opportunity (University of Kentucky, 2021b, p. 4).

UK-Purpose is detailed, goal-oriented, and reflective of the Institution's past, present, and future. Its structure is built upon its predecessor, taking a more refined and measurable approach. It

uses “Key Objectives” and “Initial Tactics” to define and track progress within the strategic plan’s broader “Principles” (University of Kentucky, 2021b).

The difference in *UK-Purpose*, which is additionally their strength, is the plan’s heavy reliance on data-driven metrics. UK emphasizes specific and quantifiable KPIs for *UK-Purpose* and tactics for each “Objective” and its broader “Principle.” For example, “Principle One: Putting Students First,” which quite literally means putting the Institution’s students first, is backed by tangible KPIs such as enrollment rates, first-to-second-year retention, and six-year graduation rates (University of Kentucky, 2021b, pp. 13-14). Additionally, the immense amount of “Initial Tactics” for each “Objective” is outstanding, with multiple different avenues, efforts, and pathways that UK can use to achieve each “Key Objective” and “Principle.”

This ‘data-centric’ approach allows UK to be accountable and transparent with all of its stakeholders, with flexible monitoring practices. It also ensures that the university can adjust its tactics based on performance outcomes.

The University of Kentucky and *UK-Purpose* are also missing a detailed campus master plan, which can and will limit the effectiveness of its objectives and could have long-term effects and consequences. Although UK has an existing campus plan created in 2013, it is outdated and no longer fully reflects the Institution’s needs.

UK-Purpose effect outlines the plan for UK's future, with clear and effective KPIs. With a structured vision that prioritizes student success, institutional transparency, and innovative research, UK looks to become a leader in the SEC. Its reliance on KPIs and performance indicators only further strengthens the strategic plan. Additionally, aligning all of this with its land-grant mission, the Institution further reinforces its commitment to not only its students and staff but the entire State of Kentucky.

4.10 University of Mississippi, Ole Miss (OM)

4.10.1 Introduction to *Empower Now: Accelerating Discovery, Growth & Success*.



Figure 4.12 “Priority Focus Areas” of *Empower now*. Note. From the University of Mississippi (2022c, p. 3).

In the Fall of 2022, the University of Mississippi (OM) released its strategic plan titled *Empower Now: Accelerating Discovery, Growth & Success*. The plan, which seeks to build upon “key institutional priorities” from its previous plan, *Flagship Forward*, looks to be a foundational commitment to excellence in Oxford, Mississippi (University of Mississippi, 2022a). Developed in previous years after success with the last strategic plan, *Empower Now* looks to have a cause-and-effect relationship with the institution from 2022 to 2027.

The development timeline for *Empower Now* remains largely undocumented, and available information on the creation process is slim at best. The plan itself does not contain anything about how it was made or who was involved with it; the plan website only mentions dates (University of Mississippi, 2022d). However, the process of formulating a new plan after the success of their previous strategic plan, *Flagship Forward*, began in the Spring of 2022; the whole strategic plan was published in the Fall of 2022 (University of Mississippi, 2022d).

4.10.2 Model Selection.

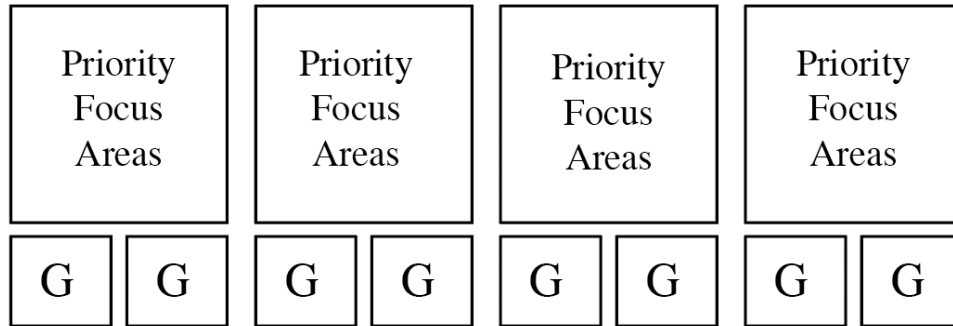


Figure 4.13 University of Mississippi "Priority Focus Areas" and "Goals." Note. "Objectives" are not included.

Empower Now is based upon four key "Priority Focus Areas." These, all of which start with the letter "E," are 'goals' the institution has centered itself around. They are as follows:

1. Enrich: Instructional Excellence & Student Success, Graduate Education (University of Mississippi, 2022c, p. 3)
2. Engage: Community-engaged partnerships, Athletics Excellence (p. 3)
3. Explore: Embrace New Areas of Expertise & Engagement, Impactful, Innovative Research & Creative Achievement (p. 3)
4. Empower: Prepare Graduates for Careers of the Future Economic Development (p. 3)

With four "Priority Focus Areas" and no Overarching Theme, *Empower Now* naturally fits into the **Decentralized Model**. Each "Priority Focus Area" is divided into specific and independent 'goals' with equally significant objectives. This allows OM to pursue parallel initiatives, allowing each "Priority Focus Area" to evolve independently in response to different challenges and opportunities, maximizing its impact.

To better operationalize and translate the "Priority Focus Areas," OM has identified and delineated specific "Goals" within them (University of Mississippi, 2022c, p. 4). The "Goals" are

spread across the four “Priority Focus Areas,” with “Enrich” and “Explore” having three, and “Engage” and “Empower” having two (University of Mississippi, 2022e). Each “Goal” represents OM’s ability to see beyond an abstract idea and implement concrete strategies for improvement.

Further refining these “Goals” allows for an ensured practical application. OM does this by including “Objectives” within each goal (University of Mississippi, 2022c, p. 4). These “Objectives” are more granular, representing the specific tasks and milestones that are deemed necessary to achieve each goal. There are several “Objectives” within each “Goal” (University of Mississippi, 2022c, p. 4). These “Objectives” range from “expanding efforts to provide equitable access to both curricular and co-curricular engaged learning opportunities throughout the student experience,” “promoting intersectional work that facilitates meaningful growth opportunities for all students,” “and establishing a consistent methodology for tracking and evaluating community-engaged partnerships” (University of Mississippi, 2022c, pp. 4, 6, 7). Due to the sheer amount of text associated with the “Objectives,” they are not included in this report; for a full breakdown, they can be found in the physical plan document (University of Mississippi, 2022c).

While no information on either the *Empower Now* website or the physical plan itself shows how the “Priority Focus Areas,” “Goals,” or “Objectives” were developed, they still serve as the operational backbone of the plan, outlining tangible actions the institution will undertake.

4.10.3 “Priority Focus Areas,” “Goals”

(Note all data from, University of Mississippi, 2022b.)

1. Enrich

- a. Goal 1 - Instructional Excellence & Student Success: The University of Mississippi is committed to expanding its investment in a culture of continuous improvement that fuels an environment where all students succeed.
- b. Goal 2 - Graduate Education: A vital Graduate School provides advancement opportunities to existing students and attracts new kinds of students to the university. To support quality and growth for our graduate offerings, we will identify areas for growth and engagement within the Graduate School and dedicate resources to building those out.
- c. Goal 3 - Athletics Excellence: Ole Miss Athletics fulfills its purpose of cultivating a vibrant athletics culture through community engagement and commitment to excellence. To be an effective agent of change and positive community impact, UM Athletics programming must be grounded in integrity, academic excellence, competitive success, and inclusion.

2. Engage

- a. Goal 4 - Community-Engaged Partnerships: Community-Engaged Partnerships Community engagement advances the university’s mission, while benefiting society through the discovery, development, and dissemination of knowledge that ultimately improves the lives of individuals and communities.
- b. Goal 5 - Support Economic Development and Innovation through Industry Engagement and Community Partnership: Throughout its history, the University

has produced leaders equipped with the skills to drive positive change and expand access to economic opportunities. We will continue to magnify ways in which the university supports economic opportunity in the state of Mississippi and beyond.

3. Explore

- a. Goal 6 - Embrace New Areas of Expertise and Engagement: As an institution of higher learning, the university is tasked with preparing its graduates for challenges and opportunities that may not yet exist. To deliver on that promise, UM will commit resources to support new degree programs and make data-informed decisions on expansion in areas of study that are responsive to innovation and the advancement of knowledge, as well as the evolving needs of our students, our state, and the region.
- b. Goal 7 - Impactful, Innovative Research and Creative Achievement: The University's academic reputation is founded upon the creativity and groundbreaking scholarship of our outstanding faculty and, increasingly, UM students. It is our obligation to commit resources to activities and endeavors that focus on empowering individual and collaborative scholarship and magnifying its impact.
- c. Goal 8 - Prepare Graduates for Careers of the Future: At the University of Mississippi, our students hone their career skill set inside and outside of the classroom. Through intentional design and organic learning community engagement, the entire UM experience becomes a dynamic incubator that invigorates exploration and prepares students for future success.

4. Empower

- a. Goal 9 - Alignment of Resources to Maximize Organizational Efficiency and Effectiveness: In service of maintaining our institutional excellence over time, we must commit to alignment of organizational resources that will maximize our overall efficiency and effectiveness. This means clarifying and aligning existing roles and accountabilities to foster clear, effectual communication, boost efficiency, and minimize components of our infrastructure that impede collaboration and creativity.
- b. Goal 10 - Strengthen Pathways to Success: To foster pathways to excellence, we commit ourselves to expanding access, supporting personal and professional growth, advancing collaborative partnerships, and nurturing a respectful and welcoming environment. By strengthening pathways to success, integrating opportunities for lifelong learning, fostering innovation through collaboration, and promoting mutual respect, we empower every member of the UM community to excel while upholding a culture of accountability and engagement.

4.10.4 “Equity”

At the end of the physical document, there is a section titled “Equity,” which aims to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion activities and practices at the Institution. Although “Equity” is not one of the four “Priority Focus areas,” it still acts as one, with ‘goals’ and ‘objectives.’ Using this “Equity” section, OM looks to create an inclusive campus culture, as well as an advanced institute of equity (University of Mississippi, 2022c). The “Equity” page states the following,

The University of Mississippi embraces the transformative nature of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) across all levels of the institution, addressing challenges to DEI at

every corner of our institution by combining contextual understanding with internal and external expertise (University of Mississippi, 2022c, p. 14).

4.10.5 Other Insights

OM's strategic plan, *Empower Now*, is a refreshing look at the institution's future with its "Priority Focus Areas," "Goals," and supporting "Objectives." While the plan is 'trusted' and rather beautiful in several regards, as well as presenting a structure for advancement, the document is marked by vague language and a lack of concrete, actionable tactics. Instead of providing a clear roadmap for achieving its goals, *Empower Now* relies heavily on aspirational statements and generalized intentions.

For instance, under "Goal 1: Instructional Excellence & Student Success," OM lists objectives such as "Expand efforts to provide equitable access" and "Continue to prioritize resources," which completely lack specific details on how these aims will actually be accomplished or measured (University of Mississippi, 2022c, pp. 4-5). In a similar fashion, "Objectives" related to research and innovation focus on "rewarding innovation" and "articulating a reward system," but then proceed to not define what constitutes innovation or how the reward system will be structured (University of Mississippi, 2022c, pp. 8-9).

These broad and 'fluffed-up' statements create an impression that the plan was created more to fulfill a requirement than to serve as a genuine strategic guide.

The strategic plan, and the strategic plan's website for that matter, offer little evidence of a well-defined rationale or KPIs for the chosen "Priority Focus Areas," "Goals," and supporting "Objectives." Instead, the plan emphasizes surface-level goals, providing no practical strategies necessary for their attainment.

Finally, the framework does not specify project timelines or dates for implementation, relying instead on broad, long-term commitments (e.g., expanding graduate programs and fostering partnerships). These are without milestones or steps to achieve along the way.

In addition to its strategic plan, OM has a CMP titled *The University of Mississippi 2017 Master Plan Update*. The CMP builds upon the previous CMP, which was released in 2009 (University of Mississippi, 2017, p. 8). The CMP is now certainly outdated and in need of a refresh. The extended amount of time since 2017, as well as a new strategic vision for OM, signal that a new master plan is needed to guide the campus's future.

OM's strategic plan outlines a forward-thinking, long-term vision for the institution, structured around four key "Priority Focus Areas" that promote academic excellence, community engagement, research innovation, and career readiness. While *Empower Now* strongly commits to DEI and driving growth, it suffers from vague language and a lack of concrete, actionable strategies. However, its long-term effectiveness will depend on the implementation of clear, measurable tactics and consistent accountability.

4.11 University of Missouri (U of M)

4.11.1 Introduction to Achieving *Excellence Together* (2024-2030)

The University of Missouri's (U of M) strategic plan, *Achieving Excellence Together*, lays out a vision for the Institution that it will follow over the next six years (2024-2030). The plan, which focuses heavily on preparing for the future, aims to extend research, learning, engagement, and economic development beyond Colombia (University of Missouri, 2023a). In addition to this, *Achieving Excellence Together* articulates and acknowledges the challenges of the present while emphasizing the opportunities the Institution has ahead of itself.

Many see the challenges our society faces. But at the University of Missouri, we see opportunities. Opportunities for energy innovations for a sustainable future...for tailor-made precision health treatments...for agricultural breakthroughs...to enhance the understanding of our world both...to embrace civil discourse, leadership and intellectual pluralism...and opportunities to educate well-rounded leaders... (University of Missouri, 2023b, p.2).

U of M is the State of Missouri's flagship school and land-grant institution (University of Missouri, 2023b, p.2). It is also a member of the Association of American Universities (University of Missouri, 2023b, p.2). *Achieving Excellence Together* was not developed with the idea of being brand new but instead built upon the foundation laid by its 2018 predecessor, *The Flagship of the Future* (University of Missouri, 2023b, pp. 4-5). This previous plan looked to align the Colombia campus with the U of M System's goal for achieving excellence. The plan does not state how it was created, what process it went through, or what steps it was required to undergo.

4.11.2 “Themes” and “Strategies & Tactics”

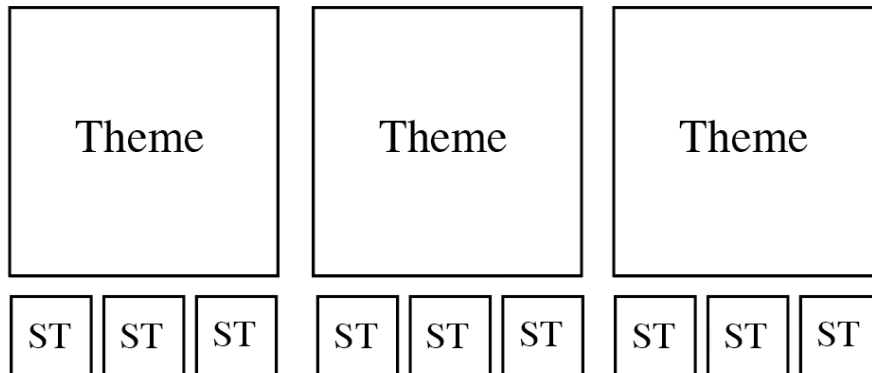


Figure 4.14 Structure of the University of Missouri plan, with its three main “Themes” and “Strategic Tactics.”

Achieving Excellence Together is a very complex document with different ‘goals’ and strategic ‘avenues’ and ‘tactics.’ First, the plan is divided into three main “Themes,” which are “consistent with the core missions of a public, land-grant research university (University of Missouri, 2023b, pp. 4-5). They are as follows,

1. Promote Student Success
2. Elevate High-Impact Research, Scholarship & Creative Works
3. Foster Meaningful Outreach & Engagement

With this, the plan separates itself into the ***Decentralized Model***, each theme being its own ‘pillar’ for the institution. Each “Theme” has its specific subpoints, which are called “Strategies & Tactics.” Each “Theme” has four to six “Strategies & Tactics.” Within these are “Goals” or specific KPIs and metrics to track progress and see if the plan is moving forward or backward. There are five to nine “Goals” for each “Theme.” U of M also provides unique descriptions for each “Strategies & Tactics,” basically explaining what steps or ideas would have to be completed in order for the six “Strategies & Tactics” to be accomplished. Due to the large amount of text associated with these, they are not included in this report; they can be found in *Achieving*

Excellence Together, pages 12 through 23. The “Themes” alongside the name of “Strategies & Tactics” are as follows:

1. Theme 1: Promote Student Success (University of Missouri, 2023b, pp. 12-23).
 - a. Strategy 1: Enhance Student Experience & Success.
 - b. Strategy 2: Enhance Programs to Support Financial Wellness.
 - c. Strategy 3: Enhance Proactive Advising.
 - d. Strategy 4: Increase Post-Graduate Outcomes.
 - e. Strategy 5: Expand Student Recruitment Efforts.
 - f. Strategy 6: Enhance Marketing Material & Campus Visit Experience.
2. Theme 2: Elevate High-Impact Research, Scholarship & Creative Works
 - a. Strategy 1: Complete Signature Research Infrastructure Projects & Address Additional Research Infrastructure Needs.
 - b. Strategy 2: Leverage Mizzou Forward as a Strategic Initiative through 2030.
 - c. Strategy 3: Develop & Diversify Research & Scholarly Initiatives Across Campus.
 - d. Strategy 4: Increase Funding & Support for Graduate Students & Postdoctoral Scholars.
3. Theme 3: Foster Meaningful Outreach & Engagement
 - a. Strategy 1: Support Agricultural Partners in the State of Missouri through Education, Research & Outreach.
 - b. Strategy 2: Improve Community Health for Missourians.
 - c. Strategy 3: Expand Educational Programs for Missourians.
 - d. Strategy 4: Support Economic Development for Missourians.

- e. Strategy 5: Leverage *The Connector* to Provide Opportunities for Researchers to Share Their Work with Campus & Community Partners to Increase Knowledge

4.11.3 Other Insights

U of M's strategic plan, *Achieving Excellence Together*, is a complex but forward-thinking document that stresses the importance of continuing experience in Missouri and beyond. The plan builds on the success of its predecessor, *The Flagship of the Future*, and looks to continue major success in key KPIs and other metrics (University of Missouri, 2023b, p.2, 4).

In addition to a comprehensive strategic plan, U of M also contains a comprehensive CMP titled *University of Missouri Campus Master Plan 2024*. The plan is structured around three main "Planning Priorities." It seeks to guide actions and investments, in tandem with *Mizzou Forward*, the 10-year, \$1.5 billion investment focused on student success, research productivity, and infrastructure improvements (University of Missouri, 2023b, p. 9; University of Missouri, 2024, p. 4).

Achieving Excellence Together is organized around three core "Themes" (University of Missouri, 2023b, pp. 10, 16, 22). All of them are separate but work together to move the Institution forward. These "Themes" reflect the traditional mission of a land-grant institution; they additionally serve as important pillars of goals, strategies, and tactics, ensuring a cohesive and actionable framework for U of M. *Achieving Excellence Together* is practical, with plentiful KPI and metrics that can show attainable progress. Its successful use of the Decentralized Model, moving from broad themes to specific and measurable tactics, enhances its practicality across different units and levels of the Institution (University of Missouri, 2023b, pp. 11-15, 18-20, 22-24). While the plan is fairly aspirational with lofty goals for U of M, it ground its ambition in

specific goals and KPIs, minimizing ‘fluff’ by focusing on actionable steps and measurable outcomes; it connects values to tangible outcomes. It is also visually compelling and a very transparent roadmap for any stakeholder to read. With an accessible layout and a strong commitment to clarity with its use of charts, graphs, and data visualizations (University of Missouri, 2023b, p. 7-4).

Achieving Excellence Together does have some minor drawbacks, such as a lack of transparency when it comes to how it was developed, with no involvement of stakeholders or key leaders in the project creation. Additionally, given the changing landscape of post-secondary education, *Achieving Excellence Together* needs to include different and separate mechanisms for regular review and revision as years move forward. Finally, while the three “Themes” provide a clear structure, a needed emphasis on the interconnectedness between them could unlock different inter-college activities and progress while also providing a holistic and healthy approach for the institution, particularly being a land-grant institution.

U of M’s strategic plan, *Achieving Excellence Together*, is a robust framework with clear “Themes,” a balanced commitment to core values and mission, and a forward-looking vision for growth and impact.

4.12 University of Oklahoma (OU)

4.12.1 Introduction to Lead On, University: The Next Phase,

The University of Oklahoma's (OU) strategic plan, *Lead On, University: The Next Phase*, is a bold and comprehensive continuation of the Institution's vision for the future. OU's strategic plan builds upon its initial strategic plan, titled *Lead On, University*, which was first adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (University of Oklahoma, 2025a, p. 7).

OU's main priority with this new strategic plan (or continuation of it) is "to position OU for even greater success and ensure we continue to change lives for generations to come (University of Oklahoma, 2025a, p. 4)." The refreshed plan builds upon the success of its last strategic plan, *Lead On, the University*. In it, OU achieved record-breaking freshman enrollment for four consecutive years and increased its 6-year graduation rate from 67% to 75.3% (University of Oklahoma, 2025a, p. 10).

In Spring of 2024, the current president of OU, President Joseph Harroz, announced a refresh of the plan, which would lead the institution from 2025 to 2030 (University of Oklahoma, 2025b). The creation of the plan was a multi-phased process that involved broad community engagement, data analysis, and stakeholder input (University of Oklahoma, 2025b). By early



Figure 4.15 Example from *Lead On, University: The Next Phase* (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, p. 23).

2025, the refresh plan was presented to OU's board of regents for final approval, approving it in March 2025 (University of Oklahoma, 2025b).

4.12.2 Lead On, University: The Next Phase and Model Selection

Lead On, University: The Next Phase is structured around the ***Decentralized model***. The plan is separated into five different “Pillars,” each with its own goal and outcomes. Each “Pillar” will define how the University will fulfill its Purpose. They are equal in importance (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, p. 20). They are as follows:

1. Lead as a Top-Tier Public Research University
2. Empower Students for a Life of Success, Meaning, and Impact
3. Ascend as ONE-OU, Unified by our Purpose, Values, and Strategic Plan.
4. Lift the Health of Oklahoma
5. Shape the Future Through Discovery Creativity, and Innovation

Although the plan has “Fundamental Commitments,” which is the institution’s purpose, “We Change Lives!” and its values, “Excellence, Opportunity and Success, Boldness, Freedom of Expression and Civility, Civic Commitment,” these do not qualify the plan to be a Top-Down Model (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp.19, 20-21).

Each “Pillar” has further subpoints called “Strategies” and “Tactics.” OU describes “Strategies” as “The Strategies articulate the key areas on which we will be focusing our efforts to help deliver on our Purpose. Strategies separate Pillars into manageable parts and key areas of focus, and “Tactics” as “they accelerate OU’s progress toward its goals. Tactics are where the

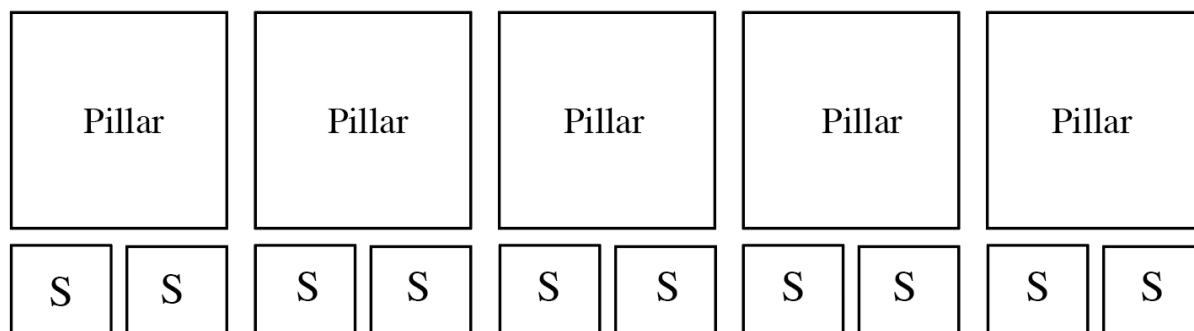


Figure 4.16 University of Oklahoma's "Pillars" and "Strategies." Note: "Tactics" are not listed in this figure.

rubber meets the road. They are actionable and, in most cases, measurable initiatives focused on advancing toward OU's long-term goals" (University of Oklahoma, 2025b).

Lead On, University: The Next Phase contains a large assortment of "Tactics." These measurable steps toward progress are too great to list in this report; each "Strategy," more often than not, contains upwards of five to ten. For this report, a selection of two for each "Pillar" is included.

4.12.3 "Pillars," and "Strategies," and a sample of "Tactics"

(All data in this section is sourced from the *Lead On, University: The Next Phase*, University of Oklahoma, 2022d, pp. 22-44).

1. Pillar One: Lead as a Top-Tier Public Research University
 - a. Strategy: Achieve the highest standards of academic and research excellence, measured by Association of American Universities (AAU) peer benchmarks.
 - i. Tactic: Hire 300 new top-tier faculty who are leading researchers in their fields, objectively reflected in external funding, awards, and recognitions such as prestigious fellowships.
 - b. Strategy: Be a leading value public research university, combining outstanding quality with distinctive affordability.

- i. Tactic: Offer a life-changing experience for OU students, both inside and outside the classroom.
 - c. Strategy: Open the doors of opportunity for all with the talent and drive to succeed.
 - d. Tactic: Increase OU Norman's (first-time, full-time) freshman enrollment by 3% annually.
 - e. Strategy: Transform Oklahoma's Future.
 - f. Strategy: Build OU's championship culture across the entire University.
2. Pillar Two: Empower Students for a Life of Success, Meaning, and Impact
- a. Strategy: Inspire learners with a world-class academic experience, inside and outside the classroom, that drives personal and professional growth.
 - i. Tactic: Harness the unique educational environment of a top-tier research university and academic health system to connect students with leading scholars at the forefront of discovery and creativity.
 - b. Strategy: Foster the social and emotional growth of students via signature experiences and a top-tier residential campus community.
 - c. Strategy: Foster a student-centered culture devoted to student academic success.
 - d. Strategy: Equip OU students for career success.
 - i. Tactic: Ensure that OU degrees lead to top-quartile jobs and long-term professional success by tracking placement rates, rapidly addressing gaps and deficiencies, and offering a full suite of career services that utilizes the full potential of OU's alumni and external networks.

- e. Strategy: Expand the reach of OU through online platforms and new, innovative educational pathways.
3. Pillar Three: Ascend as ONE-OU, Unified by our Purpose, Values, and Strategic Plan.
- a. Strategy: Across all campuses and all departments, live out our Values while pursuing our Strategic Plan together.
 - i. Tactic: Build a unified institutional culture that constantly affirms our Values of excellence, opportunity and success, boldness, freedom of expression and civility, and civic commitment.
 - b. Strategy: Promote and defend the ideals of bold inquiry and freedom of thought and expression.
 - c. Strategy: Be a place of belonging for all.
 - d. Strategy: Foster an engaged and satisfied workforce.
 - e. Strategy: Achieve operational and financial excellence.
 - i. Tactic: Develop and operationalize a multi-year financial pro forma that aligns with the Strategic Plan and is updated annually.
 - f. Strategy: Connect alumni to the University for life.
4. Pillar Four: Lift the Health of Oklahoma
- a. Strategy: Be a world-class academic health system through education, research, and patient-centered care.
 - i. Tactic: Attract and support world-class talent to advance biomedical discoveries, innovation, and health care practices for all Oklahomans, aligned with the performance benchmarks of the leading academic health systems in the nation.

- b. Strategy: Provide outstanding health care statewide, including providing care not available anywhere else in Oklahoma.
 - i. Tactic: Expand the presence of OU Health statewide, including a network of partners, to provide research-driven, highly specialized care that is only available through an academic health system.
 - c. Strategy: Meet Oklahoma's health care workforce needs with the urgency it demands.
 - d. Strategy: Focus investments in strategic research areas to improve Oklahoma's health and that of the world.
 - e. Strategy: Translate research into practice to improve the quality of care and health outcomes.
- 5. Pillar Five: Shape the Future Through Discovery Creativity, and Innovation
 - a. Strategy: Achieve AAU peer benchmarks in research and creative activity.
 - i. Tactic: Promote a University-wide commitment to faculty achievement and recognition to reach AAU peer benchmarks and advance on a path toward \$1 billion in research expenditures, awards, resources, and infrastructure
 - b. Strategy: Confront grand social and technological challenges.
 - i. Tactic: Invest in OU's strategic Research Verticals to achieve recognized global excellence in areas of institutional strength, such as: energy, environment, weather, health, aerospace and defense, and community and societal well-being.
 - c. Strategy: Think big.

- d. Strategy: Provide the world-class infrastructure necessary to compete at the level of top public universities.
- e. Strategy: Empower researchers.

4.12.4 Other Insights

Lead On, University: The Next Phase is more than just a guide; it's a declaration of OU's identity and aspirations (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, p. 7). It is a structured framework that serves as guidelines for the Institution and the State of Oklahoma, moving forward, designed to navigate complex challenges and the evolving landscape of education (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 10,11,12). The plan's organization, from overarching "Pillars" (p. 20, 21) to supporting "Strategies" and very specific "Tactics," is a clear, concise, and actionable hierarchy for decision-making and resource allocation. (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 20,21,22+). OU provides "Tactics" that are concrete steps, leaving less room for ambiguity in implementation. For example, the plan doesn't just call for "enhancing research"; it specifies "Hire 300 new top-tier faculty" and "Achieve \$30 million annually minimum in research funding from the National Cancer Institute" (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 22, 34).

Lead On, University: The Next Phase acknowledges OU's success in enrollment and research progress but also addresses the need to confront challenges like declining state funding and technological disruption (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 10-11).

However, both *Lead On, University: The Next Phase* and OU have very ambitious goals, particularly in research and infrastructure, both of which require substantial financial investment, which it acknowledges, with a need for increased philanthropy, industry engagement, and alternative revenue streams (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 12, 23, 24, 38, 39).

The sheer scope of the plan, numerous strategies, and tactics present a significant implementation challenge (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, p. 22). With this, effective coordination and communication between all stakeholders at OU will be necessary for success across all units of the Institution. *Lead On, University: The Next Phase* is designed to be a “living document,” meaning that it is regularly reviewed and updated (University of Oklahoma, 2024a, pp. 4-5).

Lead On, University: The Next Phase is a comprehensive and well-developed master plan, providing comprehensive roadmaps and steps for OU to take. Its strengths lie in its detailed actionability and data-informed perspective, while its focus and unit bring it together across all stakeholders. While financial sustainability and implementation challenges can exist with the plan, it’s just a framework that provides a strong foundation for the institution to achieve its goals and allow for progress in the State of Oklahoma.

4.13 University of South Carolina (USC)

4.13.1 Introduction and Timeline of Development

The University of South Carolina (USC) strategic plan, titled *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028*, is a small and straightforward document and website that seeks to shape USC’s future from 2023 to 2028. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, USC released a strategic plan, *For South Carolina: A Path to Excellence*, which was very expansive, with 25 goals, 71 objectives, 185 programs, and 260 metrics, serving as a comprehensive blueprint for the Institution (University of South Carolina, 2024b, pp. 3). However, due to the “myriad(s) of challenges related to funding and maintaining operations as usual,” coupled with new leadership, USC condensed and restructured *For South Carolina: A Path to Excellence* to the current plan titled *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* between 2020 and 2023 (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 3).

4.13.2 Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028 and Model Selection

This restructuring and refinement have led to today’s simple nine-page document, refreshed and confessed, focusing mainly on leveled growth for the university. This renewed vision represents a focused approach, building upon the original plan’s guiding principles

while prioritizing “near-term growth” (University of South Carolina, 2024b, pp. 3-4). With the institution focused on “near-term growth,” the strategic plan fits into and embodies the **Top-Down Model**, a model where a central theme drives specific goals (University of South Carolina,

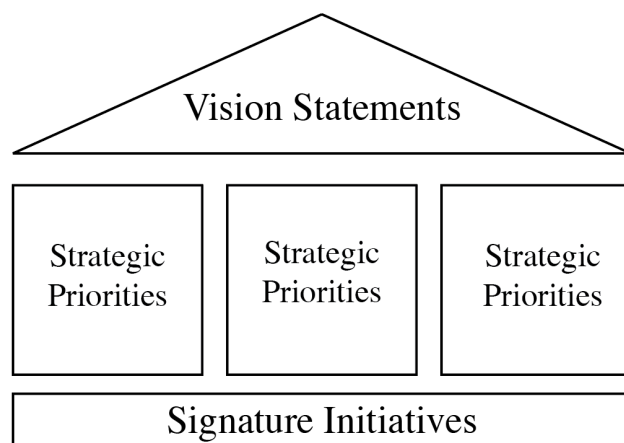


Figure 4.17 University of South Carolina’s structure of plan.

2024b, pp. 3-4). *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* has three primary “Vision Statements” that serve as the overarching theme. These three “Vision Statements” are as follows.

1. Our Students Change the World for the Better: This vision focuses on students' impact, emphasizing their application of knowledge to create positive change in the future (University of South Carolina, 2024b, pp. 3-4).
2. Our Faculty and Staff are Innovators: This highlights the role of faculty and staff in driving progress through innovative ideas and solutions that benefit the state, nation, and world.
3. Our Institution is Committed to Operational Excellence: This statement emphasizes the institution’s dedication to improving its internal processes and services to better serve its faculty, staff, students, and the broader community.

This overarching theme centers on cultivating students, fostering innovation, and achieving operation excellence (University of South Carolina, 2024b, pp. 3-4). With this guidance, the plan is then further developed into three “Strategic priorities.”

4.13.3 “Strategic Priorities,” “Signature Initiatives” and “Success Indicators”

The “Strategic Priorities” focus on elements that are similarly found in the overarching theme, “Vision Statement.” There are three “Strategic Priorities” for USC, “each (are) designed to have a positive and lasting impact on our community (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 5).” Following these main points are the subpoints, which are more

digestible initiatives that USC will take; these are called “Signature Initiatives.” These acts, steps, and goals all focus on how USC will perceive its broader “Vision Statement” and “Strategic Priorities.” Alongside these are what USC considers “Success Indicators” or metrics and KPIs that the Institution will use to track progress; for the sake of this report, they are not included. For each “Strategic Priorities,” “Signature Initiatives,” for *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* are as follows:

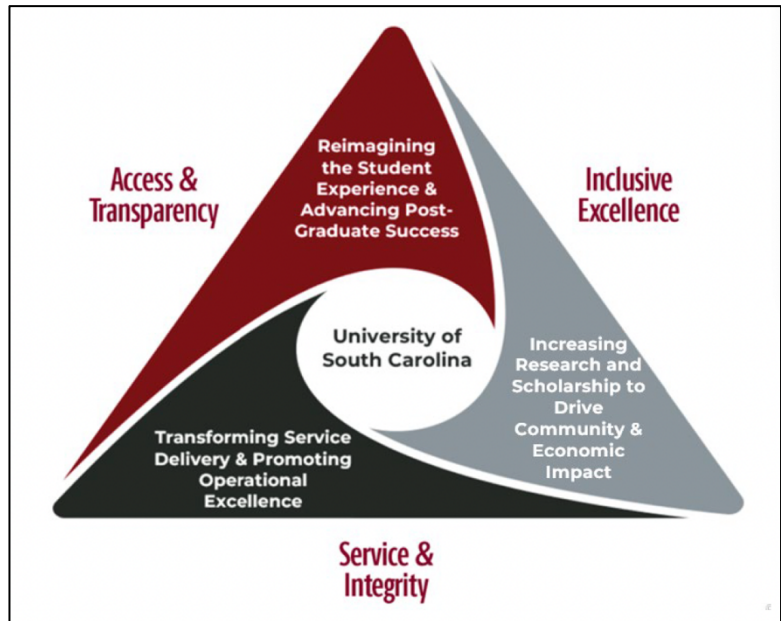


Figure 4.18 Foundational Values of USC. Note. From, University of South Carolina (2024a).

1. Reimagining the Student Experience and Advancing Post-Graduate Success (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 5)
 - a. Signature Initiatives

- i. Foster Access and Belonging: Enhance student access, affordability, and sense of belonging for all students including low-income, first-generation, international, and underrepresented students community.
 - ii. Empower Diverse Students: Recruit, retain, and graduate a diverse undergraduate and graduate student body and address opportunity gaps community.
 - iii. Support Student Excellence: Strengthen student support services and infrastructure including academic and career advising and student wellness to reduce barriers to retention and graduation community.
 - iv. Promote Teaching Excellence: Continue to foster excellence in teaching and curricular design and delivery by supporting faculty's application of best-practice pedagogy community.
 - v. Drive Post-Graduate Success: Enhance post-graduate outcomes by developing intentional experiences beyond the classroom that prepare students for all aspects of their future lives community.
- 2. Increasing Research and Scholarship to Drive Community and Economic Impact (p. 6).
 - a. Signature Initiatives
 - i. Elevate Research Focus Areas: Build from current institutional strengths and impact to identify a targeted set of research focus areas.
 - ii. Support Research Faculty and Scholars: Recruit and retain research-active faculty, that reflect the demographics of our student body, by supporting faculty to be successful in their scholarly endeavors.

- iii. Elevate Health in South Carolina: Invest in a state-of-the-art health sciences campus to work towards a healthier state through clinical education and research.
 - iv. Advance Team Science: Support faculty in pursuing team science through cross-campus research collaborations.
 - v. Expand Mentorship: Promote mentorship and support for graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and early-career faculty to pursue impactful scholarship.
 - vi. Impact Communities in South Carolina and Beyond: Pursue research opportunities that solve problems through effective engagement and collaborations with government agencies, private industry, and community organizations.
 - vii. Pursue Workforce Development Integration: Identify opportunities to integrate research and workforce development activity.
3. Transforming Service Delivery and Promoting Operational Excellence (p. 6-7).
- a. Signature Initiatives
 - i. Enhance Resource Effectiveness: Make on-campus and virtual resources more accessible, more useful, and better known to stakeholders by committing to high-quality infrastructure and redesigning the virtual gateways to reduce barriers to information access.
 - ii. Exemplify Organizational Excellence: Promote a culture of innovation, advance process enhancements, and facilitate key improvement projects.

- iii. Redesign Processes and Services: Improve the user experience for students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders through process improvement and service delivery redesign.

4.13.4 Other Insights

USC has developed *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* into a strategic plan that represents a dramatic shift from complex and beautiful to simple and strategic. The pandemic-era plan has a more streamlined and focused approach, allowing USC to be critical in its actions.

Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028 reduction into a nine-page document presents a shift to clarity and simplicity, making it easier to implement, monitor, and read and follow, allowing all stakeholders to be a part of the plan. Its simplicity and basicness allow the reader not to be lost in a lot of images or achievements but get straight down to the facts and figures of what the Institution is going through and planning on doing. In addition to this, the plan recognizes the importance of efficient and effective service delivery, which allows USC to operate with success in mind, in tandem with its “Success Indicators,” it sets up USC to know exactly how well it is doing in trying to achieve excellence (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 2-5).

However, while simplicity is its strength, it can come with drawbacks. Firstly, *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* make no mention of a CMP (University of South Carolina, 2024a). In 2024, USC released its updated CMP, *USC Next*, and it is notable that the document makes no explicit mention of how *USC Next* aligns with or is derived from the Institution’s overarching strategic plan. *USC Next* is the Institution’s attempt at a comprehensive CMP, which is designed to guide campus development through 2034 and accommodate future student body growth (University of South Carolina, 2024c).

There is a risk of serious oversimplification of complex issues, which can potentially overlook nuanced challenges, such as infrastructure, which the plan does not mention in great detail. *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* simplicity also allows for broad and ‘fluffy’ languages; for example, while the term “community” is often used, it is not always clear what “community” is being referenced to (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 3-8). Additionally, while “Signature Initiatives” provide some direction, USC and *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* could benefit from more detailed implementation strategies and timelines. Its focus on near-term growth may neglect issues that are only seen in the long term (University of South Carolina, 2024b, p. 3).

USC and *Strategic Priorities for 2023-2028* is a well-structured strategic plan for the institution over the next five years. Overall, this strategic plan provides a solid foundation for USC to navigate its future and achieve success while avoiding downfall.

4.14 University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK)

4.14.1 Introduction to *It Takes a Volunteer*

The University of Tennessee at Knoxville's (UTK) strategic "vision," titled *It Takes a Volunteer*, outlines the Institution's plan for the future to enhance UTK's impact and reputation (University of Tennessee, 2021b). Created before and during the 2020 COVID pandemic and then later approved and published in October 2021, the plan is centered around the core values of service and leadership, encapsulated in the "Volunteer spirit" (University of Tennessee, 2021a; University of Tennessee, 2021b). UTK defines its role as a "...flagship land-grant university of the state...dedicated to amplifying the Volunteer spirit of selfless leadership in every life (University of Tennessee, 2021b)." UTK looks to have this plan for the next five years (2021-2025)(University of Tennessee, 2021b).

It Takes a Volunteer was initially created by Donde Plowman, the Chancellor of UTK since 2019. In her 2019 investiture speech, she challenged the campus community to think about where UTK is headed and how to make the most of its recent growth, all while addressing the current and evolving landscape of post-secondary education (University of Tennessee, 2021a). Work on the strategic plan began in the following weeks and months (University of Tennessee, 2021a). First initiated in late 2019 with a committee's analysis of the strengths and opportunities of UTK, two dedicated committees were further created in early 2020: an executive commie engaging the campus and broader community, while a visioning committee oversaw input and feedback (University of Tennessee, 2021a). The plan was temporarily paused during the COVID-19 pandemic, but after, it resumed its work (University of Tennessee, 2021a). After receiving approval from leadership and the campus advisory board, *It Takes a Volunteer* was

unanimously approved by the UT Board of Trustees in October 2021 (University of Tennessee, 2021a).

4.14.2 Model Selection

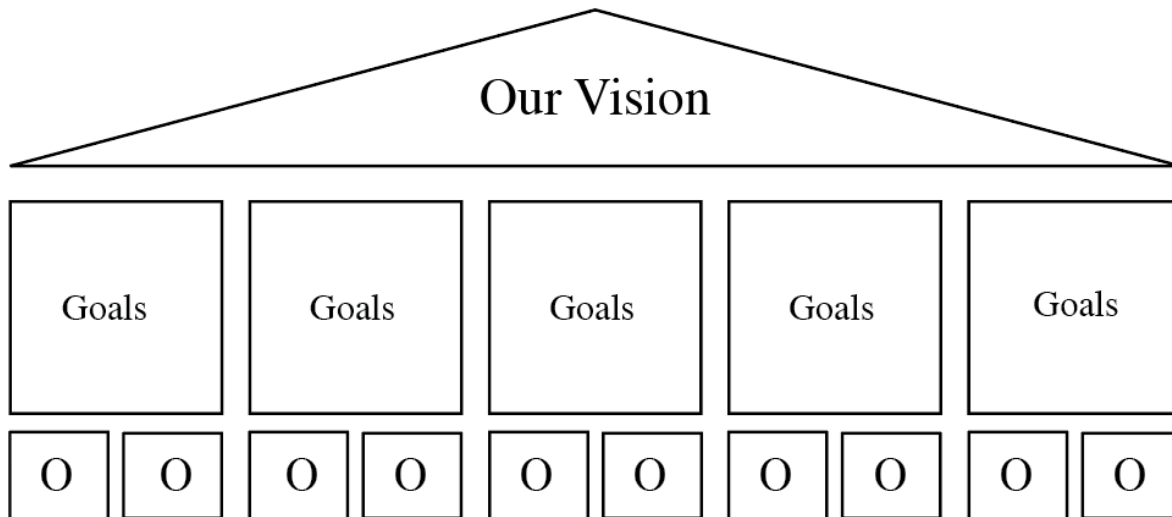


Figure 4.19 University of Tennessee's structure of strategic plan with its overarching theme, "Our Vision," then its "Goals", then its "Objectives." Note. "Priorities," are not listed here.

It Takes a Volunteer is both a physical document and a website, both published by UTK.

Within the physical strategic plan, it separates itself into the **Top-Down Model**, with an Overarching Theme, and then 'objectives' and 'goals.' The overarching theme, titled "Our Vision," looks to guide UTK fully; it states, "(Our Vision is) A world enriched by our ideas, improved through action, and inspired by the Volunteer spirit of service and leadership (University of Tennessee, 2021b)" Below this Overarching Theme are five "Goals" that UTK will focus on to achieve its broader "Our Vision." They are the following. (Note, all data in this section from University of Tennessee, 2021a; University of Tennessee, 2021b).

1. Cultivating The Volunteer Experience
 - a. Demonstrate leadership in providing high-quality educational opportunities for people at every stage of life, whenever and wherever they seek to learn
2. Conducting Research That Makes Life & Lives Better

- a. Advance the frontiers of knowledge to create a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future through world-class research, scholarship, and creative work
- 3. Ensuring A Culture Where Vol Is A Verb
 - a. Develop and sustain a nurturing university culture where diversity and community are enduring sources of strength
- 4. Making Ourselves Nimble & Adaptable
 - a. Empower and sustain a culture of collaboration, agility, and innovation throughout the university
- 5. Embodying The Modern R1, Land-Grant University
 - a. Connect with every Tennessean and with communities around the world, inspiring future Volunteers to join our diverse community

4.14.3 ‘Objectives’ and “Five-year Operational Metrics”

Below each of these “Goals” are two to three different ‘objectives,’ with each one having several ‘priorities’ within them. These do not have official names in *It Takes a Volunteer*, but the ‘objectives’ are in bold, versus the ‘priorities’ being beneath them. Due to the nature of the ‘priorities,’ they are too descriptive for this report; therefore, only the ‘objectives’ are included for the complete list of each ‘priority,’ they can be found in *It Takes a Volunteer* (University of Tennessee, 2021a; University of Tennessee, 2021b). The “Goals” and their following “objectives” are as follows. (Note, all data in this section from University of Tennessee, 2021a; University of Tennessee, 2021b).

- 1. Cultivating The Volunteer Experience

- a. Provide learners at all levels with opportunities to engage in rich learning and in scholarship that is collaborative, inquiry-based, experiential, affordable, and relevant
 - b. Deliver educational opportunities that are responsive to the needs of learners
 - c. Support curricular innovations that align with 21st-century workforce needs and our research strengths and priorities
 - d. Ensure that the programs we offer are accessible to communities across Tennessee and beyond
2. Conducting Research That Makes Life & Lives Better
- a. Strengthen the impact and reputation of our research, scholarship, and creative activities
 - b. Support transdisciplinary initiatives in areas strategically important to Tennessee and beyond
 - c. Ensure that the research outcomes we generate lead to the creation of a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future
 - d. Invest in state-of-the-art research infrastructure and frameworks to ensure that our researchers, scholars, and creatives continue to work at the knowledge frontier
3. Ensuring A Culture Where Vol Is A Verb
- a. Implement structures and practices that attract and retain a diverse community of faculty, staff, and students and that support a culture where everyone matters and belongs
 - b. Challenge students to examine their understandings of the world and their capacity to act as members of an inclusive community.

- c. Nurture change that supports inclusive behaviors and a culture of respectful dialogue to create greater understanding of difference, starting with our administration, faculty, and staff
- 4. Making Ourselves Nimble & Adaptable
 - a. Enhance a campus-wide culture of innovation and collaboration at all levels
 - b. Adapt current structures and systems to foster identity and collaboration while supporting innovation
 - c. Foster organizational agility and innovation by developing incentives for innovative and transformational work that also breaks or blurs the lines of organizational silos
- 5. Embodying The Modern R1, Land-Grant University
 - a. Deepen and extend the university's ability to connect with Tennesseans
 - b. Establish, build upon, and streamline processes to identify community needs and activate university resources to meet those needs

Within this, UTK uses a complex system of KPIs titled “Five-year Operational Metrics” (University of Tennessee, 2021b). These are specific and measurable indicators designed to track progress toward the overarching theme: “Our Vision” (University of Tennessee, 2021b). Within the appendix of the plan, a more detailed view of each of the “Five-year Operational Metrics” is provided. UTK includes a baseline for each KPI, which is the starting point or current value of the metric (e.g., current enrollment numbers) (University of Tennessee, 2021b). Then, it provides a “Five-Year Target,” or the target value that UTK aims to achieve (University of Tennessee, 2021b). In some cases, the appendix provides more specific details about how a metric will be measured or calculated (University of Tennessee, 2021b). For the sake of

simplicity, they are not included in this report, a full list can be found in the Appendix of *It Takes a Volunteer* (University of Tennessee, 2021b).

4.14.4 Other Insights

It Takes a Volunteer is a well-thought-out strategic plan for the future of UTK. The strategy perfectly fits within the context of the Top-down Model. Although it has some weaknesses, the strong organization and easy-to-read KPIs are overwhelmingly positive.

Its strength lies in a very clear articulation of “Goals” and their following ‘objectives.’ Although the plan ‘priorities’ were not covered in this report, the design of each of these priorities is easy to read and rather objective. The plans to focus on research and innovation, alongside a dedication to serving the needs of Tennessee and beyond, align with UTK’s land grant mission and position itself as a good driver of regional economic development. UTK additionally has a complex CMP titled *The University of Tennessee Knoxville Master Plan 2023*, which looks to guide both the campus and Knoxville over the next decade. At over 150 pages long, it is far too great to fully capture in a report of this nature.

However, the plan does have some weaknesses and limitations. Although UTK *It Takes a Volunteer* extensively covers academic, research, and community engagement, it lacks immense details of other parts of university life, such as athletics. This is a clear, measurable opportunity for UTK, particularly with the growth of Knoxville and the surrounding area. While the plan provides detailed metrics, the sheer number of them could make it harder to follow progress, if not dilute progress, making it challenging to prioritize the most critical indicators of success. Finally, the plan hinges on implementation and resource allocation; while it outlines this in the “Goals” and further within its objectives, it needs a more detailed strategy. *It Takes a Volunteer* is a robust framework for advancing UTK’s mission through clear “Goals” and measurable

outcomes. A clear plan and the correct use of the Top-Down Model showcase UTK's commitment to success.

4.15 University of Texas (UT)

4.15.1 Introduction to Change Starts Here

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) strategic plan for the future, *Change Starts Here*, is a comprehensive system of goals and steps for UT to become the world's single highest-impact public research university. Rolled out in May of 2022, it is a 10-year plan that looks to place UT in the front of not just the SEC in research but the world (Texas Connect Staff, 2024). The ambitious plan is grounded in a commitment to have a significant impact both in Texas and on a global scale with students, faculty, and research (University of Texas at Austin, 2022). *Change Starts Here* recognizes UT's existing strengths by acknowledging its position as Texas's flagship campus and research powerhouse, all located in a dynamic city, Austin, and in a thriving state (University of Texas at Austin, 2022). However, *Change Starts Here* recognizes the necessity for internal evolution by emphasizing the importance of adapting processes and

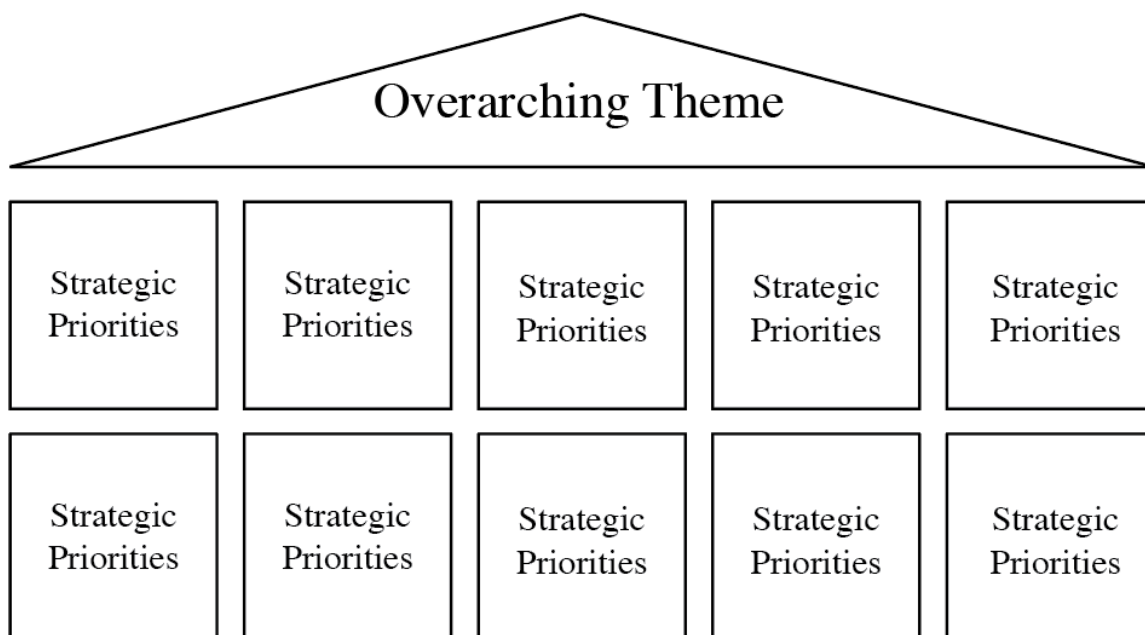


Figure 4.20 University of Texas, its overarching theme, and its following ten "Strategic Priorities."

programs to address complex ‘global’ challenges effectively (University of Texas at Austin, 2022). There is no timeline for development for the plan.

4.15.2 *Change Starts Here* and Model Selection

Change Starts Here is a **Top-Down Model**. With an Overarching Theme of “becoming the highest impact public research university in the world (University of Texas at Austin, 2022).” Beneath the Overarching Theme are “Ten Strategic Priorities,” which are divided into five different ‘categories.’ These “ten Strategic Priorities” and ‘categories’ are as follows:

4.15.3 “Ten Strategic Priorities,”

1. People:
 - a. Attract more Elite Talent
 - b. Equip Faculty and Staff with Support and Resources to Thrive
2. Place:
 - a. Elevate UT Through our Place in Austin and Texas
 - b. Build a Destination for Transformational Academic Medicine and Health Innovation
3. Experiences:
 - a. Ignite the Longhorn Spirit to Create Community, Connection, and Passion
 - b. Deliver Operational Excellence at Every Touchpoint
4. Education:
 - a. Inspire and Propel Students for a Lifetime of Well-Being, Success, Leadership and Impact
 - b. Harness the Breadth of UT to Prepare Students to Solve Society’s Most Challenging Problems

5. Research:

- a. Drive Discovery in Energy + Environment, Tech + Society, Health + Well-Being
- b. More High-Impact, Leading Academic Programs

4.15.4 Other Insights

UT's strategic plan, *Change Starts Here*, stands out among its peers. Compared to other plans, it simply does not have much going on. The plan is bare outside of its selected topics, showing that UT is already very successful and does not need to change or improve its operations. It is characterized by a clear-cut version of the Top-Down Model, with an emphatic focus on a single, clearly articulated Overarching Theme: becoming the highest-impact public research university in the world (University of Texas at Austin, 2022).” This unifying goal is not only bold in scope, particularly for a non-Ivy League institution, but reflects a competitive drive to distinguish UT as a national and global leader. The plan is methodically organized into ten strategic priorities across five core categories: People, place, experiences, education, and research, each contributing to the transformation of UT’s ecosystem (University of Texas at Austin, 2022). Notably, while the plan exhibits strong vertical alignment and cohesion, it lacks any details or a timeline for implementation. Still, the plan structure is a recognizable top-down strategic planning format, enabling clarity and focus.

4.16 Vanderbilt University (VU)

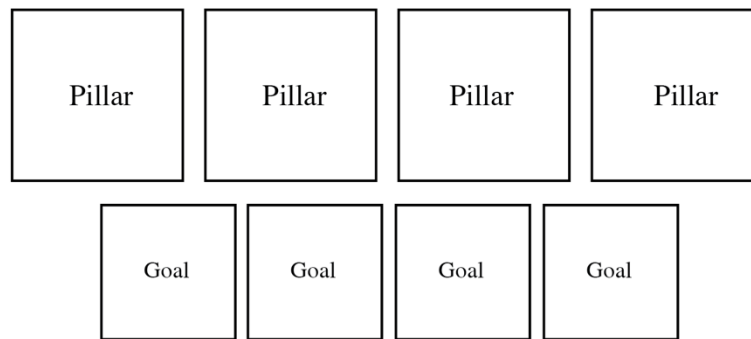


Figure 4.21 Vanderbilt's structure; four main "Pillars" and "Goals."

In 2014, Vanderbilt released its strategic plan, the *Academic Strategic Plan*, which is designed to chart VU's future (Vanderbilt University, 2014). Due to this, it is over 10 years old at this point and needs drastic refreshing (Vanderbilt University, 2014). The plan progress reports stopped reading in 2019, and it has been 5 years without a progress report or a new plan (Vanderbilt University, 2014). Because of this, not much time will be spent on the plan. The plan fits into the ***Decentralized Model***, with it being divided into four main “Pillars,” which are then divided into four main “Goals.”

1. Undergraduate Residential Experience
2. Trans-Institutional Programs
3. Education Technologies
4. Healthcare Solution

The following four “Goals” that support the “Pillars”

1. The pursuit of excellence in education by offering experiences that merge the advantages of a liberal arts college with those of a world-class research university
2. The pursuit of excellence in scholarship, creative expression and research that address important problems and questions facing our community, our country, and the world

3. The leveraging of the synergies between discovery, learning and service across our entire community of scholars and learners to seek accomplishment and seize opportunities
4. Transparency and accountability to all of the University's constituencies

4.16.1 Discussion

In addition to this static plan, VU has a world-class CMP; *FutureVU* is Vanderbilt's comprehensive campus planning initiative that supports the university's Academic Strategic Plan by guiding land use and capital projects (Vanderbilt University, 2014). It works in tandem with the strategic plan (Vanderbilt University, 2014). It was launched in 2015 and used as a land use strategy rather than a full plan; it has since grown into a full model and holistic plan, focused on enhancing campus spaces and investing in the people who use them (Vanderbilt University, 2014). *FutureVU* has core themes such as inclusion, sustainability, mobility, and community engagement (Vanderbilt University, 2014).

Despite the lack of recent progress reports, VU's plan reflects its success. It is quite simple: VU doesn't really need one due to its success and being a private institution within the SEC. The enduring success of VU, implies that while a refresh may be due, the strategic architecture has proven effective at institutional growth, innovation, and reinforcing global prestige.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This study analyzed the strategic plans of all 16 SEC institutions. In doing so, it sought to understand how each plan typology and organizational framework reflects institutional identity, governance, and plans for the future. This research identified three dominant models of strategic planning: the Top-Down Framework, the Decentralized Model, and the Hierarchical Structure. Within this, each model was used to explore how each institution organizes its goals, sub-goals, and action steps. This analysis also considered the broader implications of these typologies for institutional strategy and the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in adapting to changing educational and socio-economic landscapes.

Firstly, the Top-Down Model is common among SEC institutions. The Top-Down Model allows for strategic goals and/or direction to be under a central, overarching theme, mission statement, or governance, with an additional clear alignment to executive leadership. Mississippi State University (MSU) provides a clear example of this model in its *Transforming MSU* (2023-2028) strategic plan. The plan is structured around the institution's "North Star Vision." MSU's overarching theme attempts to articulate a unified direction for the university's mission and goals (Mississippi State University, 2023a). Following this, MSU then delineates five core pillars of the institution. Although the MSU plan is simplistic and short, it serves as a great example due to its successful use of typology. The hierarchical alignment of these pillars with MSU's vision ensures that all institutional efforts are synchronized. This alignment is a hallmark of the Top-Down Model (Bryson & Einsweiler, 1987). The literature in the strategic planning field, and its typology, remains thin at best. However, it suggests that this model promotes efficiency in decision-making and clarity in direction, making it particularly suited for large, complex institutions like those in the SEC (Cote, 2020). However, the Top-Down Model can also create

challenges for institutions, such as flexibility between goals and public responsiveness. While centralization may streamline strategic priorities, it can sometimes limit the autonomy of individual departments or academic units (Fumasoli et al., 2015).

In contrast, the second of the three, the Decentralized Model, allows for more autonomy among departments or units within the institution. Auburn University (AU), *2035 Strategic Plan, Grounded & Groundbreaking*, exemplifies this approach. The plan's five broad goals, such as "Exceptional Student Experience" and "Impactful Research," are outlined, each with specific sub-goals or "We Will" statements (Auburn University, 2024b). This allows flexibility between departments and/or colleges, allowing for academic units to pursue goals to tailor their specific needs while aligning with the institution's broader mission. It offers this as an advantage in terms of fostering innovation and creative development within colleges and institutions (Fumasoli et al., 2015). However, one of the limitations of this model is the lack of a clear, central theme that connects the 'goals' at every level of the institution. This can make it more difficult to assess overall institutional progress. For example, Auburn's Grounded & Groundbreaking plan presents its goals without an overarching theme in its policy, which could make it hard to synthesize the various initiatives or determine if Auburn has made any real progress in its identity. This contrasts with MSU's Top-Down Framework, which ensures that all efforts are consistently aligned with the university's core mission, land grant mission, for example. Furthermore, as Cohen and March (1974) argue, organizations that do not clearly communicate their strategic vision can struggle with aligning the efforts of different units, further leading to inefficiencies.

The last of the three models, the Hierarchical Structure, combines elements of both the Top-Down Framework and the Decentralized Model. This provides an insight that uses a multi-tiered approach to goal-setting and performance measurement. Louisiana State University

is the only institution in the SEC to use this model. It does this by organizing its goals into clear hierarchies, where each major goal is followed by specific objectives and strategies, with legal parameters (Louisiana State University, 2022).

This allows for very detailed tracking of progress, almost to the point of too much. For instance, LSU's goal of "Increasing Opportunities for Student Access and Success" is broken down into specific objectives such as increasing enrollment and improving retention rates, each with measurable indicators. This emphasis on clear, measurable outcomes aligns with Kaplan & Norton's (1996) Balanced Scorecard approach, which links strategic goals to specific performance metrics at multiple levels. By using indicators as well as its legal guidelines, LSU's strategic plan is able to track and measure progress in a way that is transparent for all stakeholders. However, while this model promotes clarity and accountability, it also risks becoming overly bureaucratic, as seen in the reliance on detailed legal metrics (Louisiana State University, 2022). The LaPAS metrics used by LSU may hinder its ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, such as another event like COVID-19.

The three models—Top-Down Model, Decentralized Model, and Hierarchical Structure—reveal differing priorities in strategic planning. The Top-Down Model emphasizes central control and alignment with overarching institutional priorities, making it ideal for universities that value consistency and coordination. In contrast, the Decentralized Model offers flexibility and autonomy, which may be better suited to institutions like Auburn that prioritize innovation and local ownership of goals. The Hierarchical Structure offers a balance between these two models, as seen in LSU's plan, but at the potential cost of flexibility due to its emphasis on performance metrics and legal compliance.

Each of these models reflects different philosophies, cultures, and priorities. The Top-Down Framework aligns with traditional, command-oriented institutions, while the Decentralized Model more closely reflects modern institutions that value academic freedom. The Hierarchical Structure, on the other hand, appears to be a hybrid approach that provides clarity and structure while at the same time allowing for freedom in creative works, for example, as long as it fits the guidelines and hierarchy.

These findings highlight the need for strategic planning as a tool for HEIs, and their use is important for HEIs in the rapidly changing educational, economic, and societal landscape of post-secondary education. As the literature suggests, the structure of strategic plans is not just a reflection of institutional priorities but also an indicator of how institutions look to be perceived (Zechlin, 2010). So, by analyzing these structural forms of strategic plans, this study adds to the literature of post-secondary education in how HEIs communicate their identity and strategy in an increasingly complex environment.

Conclusion

The Southeastern Conference's slogan is "It Just Means More," and when this era of our time hits higher education, the slogan could not be more true (Heim, 2024). In the current era of higher education, defined by declining enrollment, rising costs, and public skepticism, the idea, practice, and 'pursuit' of strategic planning is no longer an optional activity for Higher Education Institutions—it is an existential necessity and public requirement. This thesis looked to demonstrate that within the SEC, structure, rather than content, reflects profound insights into institutional behavior, values, and long-term viability. Whether a specific institution operates under a Top-Down Model, a Decentralized Model, or a Hierarchical Structure, reflects and reveals how each institution's decisions are made, but also how institutions understand themselves and communicate their purpose, which is particularly important in today's increasingly complex educational environment.

Ultimately, strategic plans are not simply created to make administrators look good (even though that's how they may look) but instead are cultural artifacts in a sense. This respective structure speaks to us, the public, the student, the faculty member, and the donor, as well as how the institution hopes to navigate an uncertain future, build legitimacy, and retain relevance in a context that is increasingly shifting. The practice of understanding how these plans are set up allows stakeholders in any field to go beyond a surface-level analysis of content and text and engage with the institution in logic and action. For it is the construction of form, not content, that allows one to "Just Mean More."

O Mary, most holy Virgin and Mother,
I come before thee, handmaiden of the Word,
to place this work—this writing, these thoughts, this labor—into the purest of hands.
It is *yours*, not mine.
Whatever good is in it, magnify it
Whatever is vain, remove it.
Whatever is unclear, enlighten it with your wisdom.
I ask thee, O Seat of Wisdom,
to guard this work as your own possession.
I bind this writing to thy Immaculate Heart,
trusting that under thy mantle,
it will be kept from error, from pride, and from forgetfulness of God.
Use it, Queen of the World,
according to your will,
and for the salvation of souls;
pull us from the fires of purgatory,
I am yours.
Amen.

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