

No Free Lunch: A Condensed Strategic Planning Process

We offered lunch, fed our strategic planning participants, and then put them to work developing a five-year strategic plan for IT Services

By **C. Patrick Kohrman II**

Mention “strategic planning” and watch people’s eyes glaze. Most picture endless meetings spent doing SWOT analyses, crafting vision and mission statements, and developing goals and action plans. Few look forward to the experience or reflect back on it with pleasure.

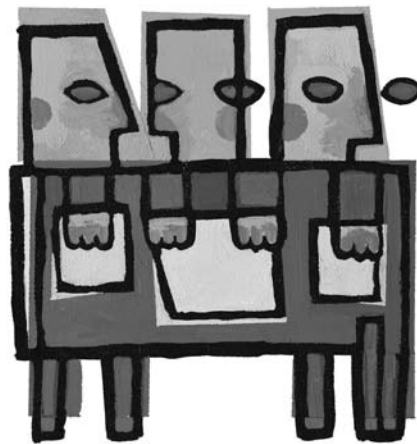
So, what’s the solution? Higher education IT organizations need strategic plans to function efficiently. Can the process be condensed into a few hours? Can that condensed process produce an effective, flexible document? Can the participants actually enjoy the process? Yes, yes, and yes!

At Penn State University–Berks during the spring 2008 semester we developed a new five-year Information Technology Services (ITS@Berks) strategic plan, and we did it in less than five hours of meetings with stakeholders. Participants even said they enjoyed the experience. Here’s what we did.

Planning for Success

The process itself required careful planning to make it highly interactive and engaging for all participants. I held five lunch meetings over a three-month period. The strategic planning activities took no more than 30–40 minutes of each meeting. Doing the math, we spent about three hours of meeting time to develop the strategic plan.

Two groups were involved throughout. The ITS staff, consisting of about 20 people, all had an opportunity to participate in the effort. The Berks IT Advisory Committee, also about 20



people, was the other key group. The committee included representatives from all of the administrative and academic departments on campus, as well as students.

Advance planning was critical to the brainstorming activities for the strategic planning process. It was important to schedule an appropriate meeting space for the activities and—of course!—arrange for lunch. Even more critical was the careful choice of people to work together. Because we are a relatively small institution of just under 3,000 students, I knew all the participants well, which made creating four working teams easier. I did not assign people to specific teams to predispose them to any hoped-for outcomes, and I changed the first-round team groupings for the second-round brainstorming activities. The advance planning for the four teams’ assigned activities and creating the team groupings took

approximately 30 minutes each for a total of two hours.

Each brainstorming session produced numerous flipchart pages that needed to be transcribed into electronic format. Normally, this is something I would ask my staff assistant to do. However, I had a son who needed to earn money for a prom and was quite willing to transcribe flipchart sheets and note cards. Transcription took about 30 minutes per brainstorming session for a total of two hours. A trained administrative assistant would probably take less time.

Each brainstorming session was carefully planned to ensure all participants had the opportunity to actively contribute to the planning process. The meetings were designed to be short and have a clear focus, so participants didn’t have time to get tired of the experience.

Stages of Strategic Planning

The complete strategic planning process was broken down into three stages: Fix Your Sights on the Future (brainstorming); Chart the Course (how we are going to get there); and Check Your Bearings (monitor progress). Stages one and two had three steps each, while the monitoring of stage three will be an ongoing process. Table 1 shows the stages, activities, and deliverables of the strategic planning activities.

Stage One: Fix Your Sights on the Future

The first step in brainstorming involved members of the Berks IT

Advisory Committee and the IT managers. About 20 people attended the first meeting. Of those participants, five were IT managers; the remaining 15 were students, faculty, and non-IT staff. Participation on the IT Advisory Committee is by invitation, so I knew who to expect at the meeting. As participants arrived for the meeting, they were assigned to teams without being told their team assignments. I explained the purpose of the meeting and described the process for the planning session. The purpose was to develop a vision statement, conduct a SWOT analysis, develop strategic objectives, and establish criteria for evaluating projects. Creating a new mission statement was not part of this strategic planning process, although our mission statement did become part of the final plan. Our department mission statement had been developed several years earlier and more recently reaffirmed by the ITS staff and the IT Advisory Committee.

Throughout the planning process, all participants were challenged to be creative and to “think from inside the box.” This concept was borrowed from “Breakthrough Thinking from Inside the Box,” a *Harvard Business Review* article by Coyne, Clifford, and Dye.¹ Thinking from inside the box requires a framework for approaching the creative process, which I provided.

The first step of stage one consisted of several activities. First, each participant received a blank 3 × 5 card. I then provided the framework and gave people five minutes to write their responses to two questions:

- What do we want ITS@Berks to look like in five years?
- What will that mean for our customers?

After five minutes, people were asked to stop writing. The group then divided into the four preassigned teams and moved to assigned corners of the room, where easels with flipchart paper and markers awaited them. At this point, one team was assigned as the vision statement team. Everyone was then asked to pass their completed note cards to the vision statement team. That team randomly selected a half dozen or so cards and read them aloud. This allowed people to get a feel for the views of the other participants.

After listening to the shared vision statements, each group was given its assignment and asked to record its work on the flipcharts provided. Again, assignment of the participants to the respective groups was not random. I gave careful consideration to personalities, experience, job responsibilities, and background in determining who should be in each group.

The vision statement team used the material on the cards to prepare a vision statement describing what ITS@Berks would look like in five years and what that would mean for our customers. The strategic objectives team set out to develop three or four strategic objectives or goals that reflected the comments they had just heard read aloud, guided by the following questions: What strategies do we use to achieve our vision? and, What long-term approaches do we take to achieve the vision? The SWOT analysis team conducted a standard SWOT analysis for ITS@Berks. Finally, the project criteria team focused on creating criteria that could be used to evaluate and prioritize projects.

Teams had 20–25 minutes to complete their assignments. Each team was given two minutes to make a brief report back to the entire group. All flipchart notes and note cards were collected. The flipchart material was later transcribed into a Word document to show the vision statement, mission statement (previously developed and reaffirmed by the department), strategic objectives, SWOT analyses, and project criteria.

The second step in brainstorming involved the ITS staff—a relatively small, albeit diverse, group with a mix of technical and educational backgrounds, job responsibilities, and campus clients. All full-time and part-time staff participated. The same activities used with the IT advisory committee, including lunch, were used with the ITS staff and took approximately 40 minutes. All written material was then collected and transcribed.

For the third step in brainstorming, I combined the transcribed material from the two groups into a single document. The two groups’ results had many similarities, making consolidation simple. The initial editing and combining took less than an hour of my time. The edited vision, mission, objectives, SWOT analyses, and project criteria were distributed to the members of the IT Advisory Committee and ITS department staff for comment. After a review and comment period via e-mail over a two-week period, I finalized the vision statement, and strategic objectives.

Table 1

ITS Strategic Planning Process

Stage	Activities	Deliverables
Fix Your Sights	Visioning and brainstorming; SWOT analysis	Draft vision statement; SWOT analysis; strategic objectives; project evaluation criteria
Chart the Course	Brainstorming; prioritizing	Final strategic plan with vision and mission statements, strategic objectives; action items, and project evaluation criteria
Check Your Bearings	Compare actions and options against strategic plan; course corrections	Implemented projects that support the plan

Stage Two: Chart the Course

Steps one and two of the second stage invited participants to develop strategic action items tied to the strategic objectives but with flexibility in accomplishing them. A brainstorming process similar to that used in stage one was employed with the IT Advisory Committee and the ITS department staff.

For step one, the advisory committee was reconvened, divided into four teams, and charged to develop strategic action items. Each team was assigned to work with strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats from the SWOT analysis. Everyone was given a copy of the vision and mission statements, objectives, and SWOT analyses. Each team was again asked to think from inside the box in

developing action items related to their separate assignments. Specifically, they were asked:

Given the vision and mission statements and strategic objectives of the ITS department, what three or four strategic actions can you identify that would allow ITS@Berks to leverage the strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats identified in the SWOT analysis? Be as specific as possible and identify the actions, resources required, timeframe, and expected outcomes.

The teams had about 20 minutes to develop their action items. Then, each team was allowed two minutes to high-

light their action items for the entire group. Next, each person received six yellow dots to vote on which action items the plan should include. The voting took about 10 minutes. As a group we then looked for similarities among action items.

In step two, the same brainstorming process was used a couple of weeks later with the ITS department staff. The ITS staff developed action items related to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and identified required resources, timeframes, and expected outcomes. Then they used the yellow dots to vote. A similar voting process was used with the ITS department managers to rank the project evaluation and selection criteria.

The third step was editing and synthesizing. After the advisory committee and ITS staff completed the exercise of creating and voting on the strategic action items, and after the flipchart pages were transcribed to electronic format, I combined and edited the two lists to produce a single list of action items. Editing addressed wording and repetition only. An interesting difference distinguished the action items created by the IT Advisory Committee from those supplied by the ITS staff: The majority of action items from the IT Advisory Committee were externally or customer focused, while those from the ITS staff were internally or department focused.

A draft strategic plan with vision and mission statements, strategic objectives, action items, and project evaluation criteria was distributed to the advisory committee and ITS department for review and comment. Following a two-week period for comments and revisions, I made some final edits for clarity and associated each action item with one or more strategic objectives. This final editing required about an hour of my time. The final document was then distributed to the IT Advisory Committee, the ITS department staff, and the chancellor's administrative council.

Stage Three: Check Your Bearings

We now have a flexible strategic plan that provides direction for ITS@Berks

It Worked at Berks— Can It Work for You?

Penn State Berks, a campus college of The Pennsylvania State University, has almost 3,000 students and is, in many respects, much like a small, independent college. The process described in this article takes advantage of our size. Same size or smaller institutions should be able to implement this process with little modification, while larger and more complex institutions might need to modify it. Regardless of your institution's size or complexity, specific steps contribute to a successful experience.

First, the process must be inclusive and representative of all constituencies: faculty, staff, and students. "Representative" also means including a variety of perspectives. At the same time, the number of people participating must be manageable. I did the team selection at Berks, but a larger institution might assign a small group to plan the teams.

Second, the process must stay focused and collaborative. Provide a clear focus for each small-group brainstorming session. Provide a framework so that the participants can "think from inside the box." Facilitate the process so that everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

Third, pay attention to people. In the ITS@Berks planning process, the mix in each small group and the group assignments were not random. I paid careful attention to personalities, which is easier if you know the players. This planning is not meant to influence the outcomes but to ensure effective interaction within each group. Make sure that all voices are heard.

Fourth, keep the sessions short and focused. The brainstorming sessions never lasted more than 30–40 minutes.

Fifth, feed participants and thank them sincerely—they have, after all, created a stakeholder-supported strategic plan for IT.

Further Reading

Collins, James C., and Jerry I. Porras, "Building Your Company's Vision," *Harvard Business Review* (September/October 1996), pp. 65–77

Collins, Jim, "Turning Goals into Results: The Power of Catalytic Mechanisms," *Harvard Business Review* (July/August 1999), pp. 71–82

Chester, Timothy M., "A Roadmap for IT Leadership and the Next Ten Years," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2006), pp. 56–60, <http://connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/ARoadmapforITLeadership/39975>

Regenstein, Carrie E., and Barbara I. Dewey, *Leadership, Higher Education, and the Information Age: A New Era for Information Technology and Libraries* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2003)

Kotter, John P., *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996)

over the next five years. The plan will be reviewed regularly with the IT Advisory Committee, which meets twice each semester, and used to evaluate projects and set directions for each academic year. A review of the strategic plan will also be a regular agenda item of the biweekly ITS managers meetings and the periodic ITS department meetings.


Conclusion

This planning process took about three months. The process involved two meet-

ings of the IT Advisory Committee, two meetings of the ITS department staff, and a meeting with my managers.

I like to think of this condensed effort as an eight-hour strategic planning process that included the various formal planning steps, plus my management of the process, administrative support (transcription and distribution of materials), and editing of the document drafts. I cannot stress enough the importance of the prior planning and preparation for each meeting, including team selection.

If the success of the process is measured by having a new plan, the process was successful. If success is measured by engagement of the participants, the process was successful. If success is measured by how well the plan is working, that will be measured over the next five years.

This condensed strategic planning process produced more than one payoff: The process included representative stakeholders, everyone involved was actively engaged, and participants produced an effective strategic plan to guide ITS@Berks for the next five years. We fed them lunch, and they worked hard! 

Endnote

1. Kevin P. Coyne, Patricia G. Clifford, and Renée Dye, "Breakthrough Thinking from Inside the Box," *Harvard Business Review* (December 2007), pp. 71–78.

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