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# Prioritizing Strategic Imperatives

Distilling Broad Strategic Goals into Concrete Guidelines

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PART

4



- 1 To pivot from strategy formation to strategy execution, it's incumbent upon central strategy teams to prioritize a set of strategic imperatives, providing concrete guidance about the nature of action steps to be taken to pursue strategic goals, and why the steps matter. Well-crafted imperatives are essential for focusing the efforts of working groups tasked with downstream project scoping, and providing context to help academic and administrative leaders aligning unit annual improvement plans with institutional priorities
  
- 2 When strategic imperatives and their corresponding objectives and actions prove ineffective, it's often out of an excess of consensus-seeking: the institution designates too many projects as "strategic," thus diluting prioritization signals, or uses aspirational and abstract language that's hard to interpret
  
- 3 When crafting strategic imperatives, strategy teams should keep these recommendations in mind:

Key Considerations for Crafting Strategic Imperatives:

- Keep the number manageable, ideally seven or fewer
- Explain imperatives using concise, precise sentences (not in generic or slogan terms)
- Balance imperatives among goals relating to market position, resources/capabilities, and stakeholder value
- Balance a forward-looking focus on innovation and new markets with support of the current business model

# Prioritizing Strategic Imperatives

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## How Strategy Teams Provide Guardrails for Downstream Execution Work

Prioritizing a short list of **strategic imperatives** is the last step in strategy formation, before the work of strategy implementation begins. By this point, the central strategy team has already put in place several key foundations of effective strategy:

- **External market scenarios** that make explicit assumptions about the importance and rate of approach of outside financial, social and competitive forces, and the opportunities and risks they bring
- A **differentiated value proposition** that defines the institution's genuinely distinctive attributes, that meet the needs of student, research funders, and staff better than competitors can
- A **vision and SMART targets** that describe the institution's desired *to-be* state—how it might grow in impact and prestige if differentiated strengths are applied over time at scale, with time-bound metrics of progress and goal achievement

Strategic imperatives are the set of large-scale actions that the institution can pursue that bridge near-term current state performance and long-term vision targets. They're not just the campaign slogans of unrelated projects. Collectively, imperative descriptions tell a story about what big steps are needed to execute the overarching strategy, and why each step is important, in ways that are understandable and galvanizing for the entire campus. They provide important guidelines about what's most important among the hundreds of worthy projects going on across campus, and how ambitious and innovative the initiatives must be to pursue dial-moving change.

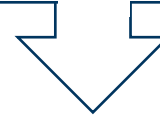
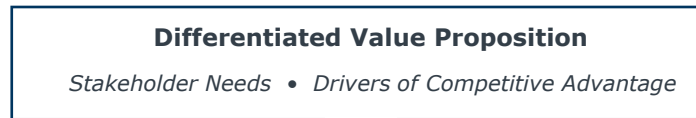
# Bridging Current and Desired Future States

Well-Crafted Imperatives are the Keys to Attaining Strategic Goals

**1** If assumptions about the external market hold...



**2** ...and the value proposition is clearly differentiated...

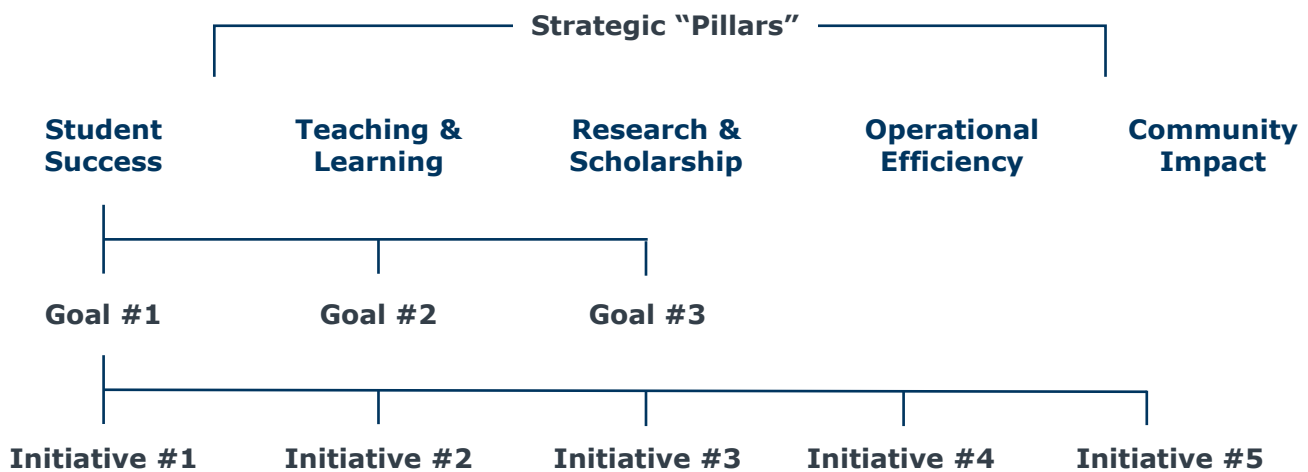


# Key Considerations for Crafting Strategic Imperatives

## Defining Our Terms and Aims

### From Pillars and Themes to Strategic Imperatives

Many strategic plans in higher education are organized by *topic, pillar, or theme* at the highest level, often with categorical labels common to most institutions like “student success,” “teaching and learning,” “research,” and “community impact.” Below these categories often lie 3-5 *goals*, and/or a series of *action steps* or *initiatives* mapped to each goal intended to assign ownership and explicit operational expectations within the institution. See below for a common performance scorecard framework cascading from the categorical “pillar” altitude.



Organizing institutional strategy around categorical “pillars” encourages *institutional description* rather than *transformation*, and *comprehensiveness* over *prioritization*. Strategy teams end up with lengthy lists of initiatives and action items (sometimes in the hundreds) across all categories, with no clear animating principle for determining the relative importance of any one item.

While common “pillar” topics and language play an important role in organizing in one document the fundamental work of the institution for all stakeholders to see (and see themselves in), the resulting language typically serves primarily as a public “**Declaration of Values**,” rather than a true strategic plan. In this format, the institution has catalogued and described its foundational commitments, and mapped those commitments to the units, investments, and core operating metrics associated with each topic.

Institutions embracing *Dynamic Strategy* may publish a comprehensive public plan broadly matching the value-based structure described above, but the majority of board, cabinet, and strategy team time and effort is spent on the prioritization of **strategic imperatives**—a short list of no more than seven critical actions that will allow the institution to move from current state to its defined destination as envisioned in the previous stages of strategy formation.

These imperatives can and should include the concrete goals, key performance indicators, initiatives / action steps, and owners that traditional strategic plans (or their appendices) often detail; however, by organizing those execution-focused considerations under carefully crafted imperatives or priorities rather than generic categories, leaders will find the implementation stages of strategy far easier and to design and explain to the campus community.

# Key Considerations for Crafting Strategic Imperatives

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## Defining Our Terms and Aims

Whatever label you use to identify the small number of high-altitude ideas in your strategic plan, strategy teams can maximize their cultural and executional impact by attending to a few essential *Dos* and *Don'ts* in their design.

### Keep the Number of Strategic Imperatives Manageable

**Do: Limit the number of imperatives to no more than 5-7**

**Don't: Designate too many projects as "strategic"**

The private industry strategic planning adage "too many priorities means you have no priorities" is empirically reflected in a study conducted by MIT Sloan that analyzed the S&P 500's strategic plans, which revealed that 81% of organizations maintained five or fewer priorities, with the majority maintaining between three and five.

The reason for keeping imperatives few in number is clarity. Long laundry lists are difficult for stakeholders to remember and communicate, and suggest that the central strategy team hasn't made hard strategy choices and resource trade-offs.

Some higher education institutions are tempted to designate many priorities (in some cases 30+) as "strategic," with the best intentions of motivating and recognizing good work across diverse stakeholder groups. There are always hundreds of valuable projects underway across campus: financial, academic, operational, HR. Ultimately, we caution against conferring "strategic" status to too many of them, as an unwieldy list tends to dilute the signal of what actions are truly important to enact strategy. Finding other currencies to recognize valuable projects that don't quite meet the bar of an institution-wide strategic priority is the better approach.

### Explain Strategic Imperatives in Concise, Precise Sentences

**Do: Explain what the imperative is, and why it's important**

**Don't: Use language so abstract that goals and action steps remain unclear**

The temptation to describe strategic imperatives using high-level language is understandable: it's easier to gain consensus for abstractly aspirational language (who could object to becoming more "student-centered"?) and doesn't commit leadership to any particular course of action. But vaguely worded imperatives on "perennial" aspirations won't accomplish the goal of signaling critical guidance about what's important for the institution's competitive future, and what kinds of action steps will be favored going forward.

As a self-check, consider using the "Mad Lib" template below to ensure your strategic imperatives are concrete enough that stakeholders understand what they mean and why they matter.

# Key Considerations for Prioritizing Strategic Initiatives

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## Precision and Conceptual Balance

### “Mad Lib” for Drafting Concise, Precise Strategic Imperatives

“We will [concise description of aspiration] by [relatively concrete action steps] in order to [why the initiative is important to mission or institutional competitiveness].”

#### Vague Strategic Imperative Language

*Connect to the Community*



#### Concise and Precise Imperatives

We will deeply engage with our home city by expanding distinctive community-based learning and research programs, to build students’ service ethic and invigorate the local economy

*Enhance Educational Excellence*



We will enhance educational excellence by innovative interdisciplinarity in the curriculum, teaching, and scholarship, in order to ensure that students combine deep mastery in their chosen fields and top-notch analytical and communication skills

*Pursue Financial Sustainability*



We will enhance financial sustainability by diversifying revenue sources through lifelong learner academic programs and administrative cost savings to reinvest in high-growth academic and research fields

### Balance Imperatives Devoted to Market Position, Resources/Capabilities, and Stakeholder Values

**Do: Focus a third of your imperatives on market position**

**Don’t: Devote too many imperatives to stakeholder values in pursuit of consensus**

Strategic imperatives can be divided into three complementary categories:

1. Market Position: Competitive issues like new markets, products and services, pricing strategy
2. Resources/Capabilities: Foundations for delivering value, like sustainable finances, operational effectiveness, and world-class talent
3. Stakeholder Values: Non-commercial, ethical goals like equity, community engagement, and environmental sustainability

The reason we suggest that institutions prioritize 5-7 strategic imperatives (more than the 3-5 seen in private industry) is that higher education has more aspiration and responsibility in the stakeholder values category of priorities. Higher education rightly plays a vital social role in advancing and modeling issues like equity, community engagement, and sustainability. Such issues merit inclusion in the short list of strategic priorities.

# Key Considerations for Prioritizing Strategic Initiatives

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## Balancing Continuous Improvement with Innovation

But, in many strategic plans EAB has reviewed, there can be too much of a good thing: enough stakeholder values are elevated that they either expand the list of strategic imperatives to unwieldy length, or require conflating or shortchanging imperatives in the other categories, losing the opportunity to signal how the institution plans to compete. Some presidents tell EAB privately that strategy formation tilts towards stakeholder values priorities because they're easier to build consensus for than market positioning and resource/capability priorities. Everyone can support a commitment to community engagement; it can be harder to get support for trade-offs about changing the business model or focusing on a particular student segment.

Our recommendation is to reserve approximately a third of your list of strategic imperatives to matters of market position—these are the issues most likely to build understanding and rigor about how the institution plans to outperform competitors, and what it takes to support a competitive advantage.

When possible, try to link strategic imperatives about stakeholder values to sources of differentiation or competitive advantage. How will being an equity exemplar attract students, faculty or grants, or improve outcomes? Will being a sustainability leader help generate funding or cost savings to reinvest in the academic core?

### **Balance Innovation with Support of the Traditional Business Model**

**Do: Explicitly reference some unfamiliar market, process, or capability that will be developed to create and capture value going forward**

**Don't: Overfocus what the institution has done well in the past**

Strategic imperatives shouldn't just exhort the institution to "keep doing what we're doing well." They should indicate where the institution is evolving to create new value and meet emerging stakeholder needs. It's OK to write imperatives focused on strengthening core activities, but highlight novel approaches, and make connections about how improving an existing activity helps fund or enable innovation other areas. A good self-check is to ask, if the strategic imperatives are successfully executed, how closely will you resemble your vision for the institution in 5-10 years? Will the institution be different in any important way? If the imperatives are weighted too much in favor of business-as-usual, chances are ambitious goals for greater impact and prestige won't bear out.