

Guide for Operationalizing Strategic Thinking and Planning¹

Macalester's strategic plan provides a shared framework for strategic thinking and planning at the College level. It can help orient, but not entirely direct, the actions at the division or department levels. To this end, the general recommendations below provide a working guide that can be tailored to operationalize strategic thinking and planning within each individual department. This guide places positive value on: integrated **planning practices** that are aligned around a shared vision and identify a clear process for implementation; and **planning cultures** which foster broad participation in the planning process and prioritize communication within and across departments. Together, these recommendations encourage departments to ask *what, who, how, and why*: *What* is to be done? *Who* will do it? *How* will it be done? and, most importantly, *Why* will it be done?

A. Planning practices

Institute a planning cycle

The immediacy of our day-to-day activities often interrupts more sustained strategic thinking and planning. Instituting a planning cycle is critical to balancing *urgent* items that need immediate attention with *important* items that have more long-term significance. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Create a tiered planning cycle:
 - Multi-year plans orient planning around long-term goals; while
 - Annual plans can be more flexible, iterative, and responsive to emerging issues.
- Link the timing of your department's planning cycle to institutional planning cycles (e.g.: academic calendar, budget cycle, assessment cycles).
- Dedicate time and space to strategic thinking and reflection throughout the planning cycle, using:
 - annual retreats or workshops committed to broad visioning;
 - monthly meetings that facilitate iteration and assessment; and
 - as relevant, monthly sub-group meetings that provide space for refinement.

¹ This guide was designed by the Strategic Planning & Analysis (SPA) committee in Fall 2019 as part of a study on the *Thrive* strategic plan's priority around strategic thinking and careful, timely decision-making.

- Utilize your precious time together by focusing meetings on substantive topics over day-to-day details that can otherwise be communicated over email.

Identify a shared, aspirational vision

Effective planning processes are aligned with and motivated by a vision that is shared within and across departments. It is this vision that identifies not *what* we want to do, but **why**—*why we are here and who we seek to become*. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Develop and validate a vision with all department members by:
 - workshopping as a group;
 - recognizing that good ideas can come from anywhere; and
 - facilitating and inviting broad participation.
- Avoid a fragmented and siloed vision by building collaborative relationships outside your office/department/division/reporting line.
- Link your department's vision and planning to:
 - the college's mission and current strategic plan;
 - the college's culture and history;
 - environmental factors outside your department and outside the college;
 - the quality and distinctiveness of the student experience; and
 - other department specific guiding documents (e.g., for academic departments, the curricular development plan).

Identify concrete objectives

Whereas a shared vision articulates *why* we want the future we've identified, a set of concrete objectives identifies **what** we plan to do to get there. Thus, objectives provide necessary focus to the planning process. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Engage in reflection. With respect to the shared vision, objectives should be informed by asking:
 - What is working? What is not working?
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of what we do?
 - What are the current opportunities? What are the current threats/obstacles?
 - What needs to change over time? What needs to change right now?
- Ground your objectives in evidence and data.
- Critically evaluate the tradeoffs, and the new or restructured resources, that will be required to pursue any new objective, including people, funding, time, space, and technology.
- Consider the inherent risk and uncertainty associated with any potential objective.

Create and follow an implementation plan with phased goals

Moving objectives from goals to actions requires a directive and documented implementation plan. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Set specific timelines for addressing each objective.
- Sequence and phase objectives throughout the planning cycle in order to:
 - balance resources (people, time, budget) across the planning cycle;
 - build in the opportunity to learn, iterate, and perhaps pivot.
- Split each objective into a set of smaller, supporting actions.
- Foster ownership for implementing each objective: Who might lead the initiative?
- Develop an evaluation plan for monitoring progress: How will we know when we've met an objective and how do we prove it? Who is responsible for monitoring progress and stating when a goal is met?

B. Planning culture

Successful implementation of the **planning practices** above requires a broader **planning culture** which prioritizes participation, communication, and individual responsibility.

Foster and value broad participation in the planning process

An informed and effective planning process requires a strong model of shared governance, healthy channels of communication, and a shared, aspirational vision. Simply put, the quality and successful implementation of any planning process will be diminished without broad insights, collaboration, and buy-in. Our recommendations for fostering participation throughout the planning process are as follows:

- Identify who, both within and outside the department, you should engage in the strategic thinking and planning process. To this end, those leading the planning process should ask:
 - Who, including those closest to the work and expanding outward, will be “impacted” by your work and decisions?
 - Who has expertise, experience, insights, and history to share?
 - With whom should you collaborate and cooperate in order to make your vision a reality?
- Equip participants with the tools needed to meaningfully contribute to the planning process. Leaders should:
 - Provide orientation and mentoring to new colleagues.
 - Share information relevant to the planning process (context, history, motivation, guiding documents, and timeline).
 - Advocate for more professional-development opportunities for participants.
- Prioritize transparency and communication. Leaders should:
 - Clarify the participants’ role in the planning process and be transparent about how their input will be utilized.
 - Communicate relevant timelines for the planning process.

- Update participants on relevant decisions and actions.
- Be mindful of people's time. Don't seek participation if you don't plan to use it.
- Identify and communicate clear timelines for participation. Leaders should:
 - Avoid back-loading participation, i.e., inviting people into the planning process when it's too late to meaningfully contribute.
 - Avoid endless feedback loops. Participants can become disillusioned and ultimately surprised by outcomes resulting from a vague and drawn-out participation process.

Engage in the planning process on an individual level

Any individuals participating in the planning process should:

- Reflect upon the degree to which you can participate in the planning process. Given your schedule and competing commitments, how can you make the space and time for participation in Macalester's planning process?
- Trust those that do choose to participate and assume the best of them.
- Planning processes introduce iteration and change. Reflect upon how you respond to, and can embrace, necessary change.
- Commit the time and preparation that are necessary for *meaningful* participation. If you feel that you do not have the necessary background or context for meaningful participation, be emboldened to request this information from others.