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## Grassroots Strategic Planning: Involving Library Staff from the Beginning

Anne M. Casey

*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University*, [caseya3@erau.edu](mailto:caseya3@erau.edu)

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## Column Title: Strategic Planning and Assessment

Column Editor: Wanda V. Dole, Emeritus Dean of the Library, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, AR, USA.

FROM THE COLUMN EDITOR: Wanda V. Dole

This column focuses on the closely related topics of strategic planning and assessment in all types of libraries. The column examines all aspects of planning and assessment including (but not limited to) components, methods, approaches, trends, tools and training. Interested authors are invited to submit articles to the editor at [wvdole@ualr.edu](mailto:wvdole@ualr.edu). Articles on both theory and practice and examples of both successful and unsuccessful attempts in all types of libraries are invited.

In this issue, Anne Marie Casey, Dean of Retention and Student Success at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, reminds us that real life challenges such as staff resistance and reallocation of campus space have serious impacts on planning. She presents a case study of one library's attempt to deal with these challenges by using a variety of methods, including active employee input, appreciative inquiry, and scenario planning to encourage staff buy-in. For the most part, these attempts proved successful.

## Grassroots Strategic Planning: Involving Library Staff from the Beginning

Anne Marie Casey, PhD

Dean of Retention and Student Success  
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University  
600 S Clyde Morris Blvd  
Daytona Beach, FL 32114  
Caseya3@erau.edu

**Abstract:** Strategic planning is often considered a managerial tool. The management of an organization surveys the environment and develops a plan that they introduce to the organization as a whole. Most modern organizations seek employee involvement in the planning process and feedback to some degree with varied results. But for one academic library, employee involvement in the development and execution of the strategic plans has been a vital part of the processes. The Hunt Library at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University has been developing strategic plans for several years with active input from the librarians and staff. This case study chronicles the different approaches the library staff have used to create new plans. One method was to hold a set of retreats where all library staff provided ideas for new initiatives to explore and old processes to retire. Another involved the SOAR approach, which uses appreciative inquiry to determine strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. A third method employed scenarios to encourage staff input into the next strategic plan. Each of the different approaches yielded interesting results; some failures and many successes. Some processes were more positive than others but they all included mutually agreed-upon strategies that guided the library as it planned future innovations.

**Keywords:** strategic planning, employee involvement, appreciative inquiry, scenario planning

## Introduction

“Many [higher education] professionals consider strategic plans to be a massive waste of time and paper. And they can be, if there is no buy-in at the grassroots level of an organization, or if the resulting document is so lengthy that it sits on a shelf collecting dust” (Rickard & Harding, 2000, p. 3). It is not uncommon for strategic planning in an organization, such as a library, to rest at the administrative level, so librarians and staff may not realize the potential impact of the mission and goals on their everyday work life.

Dandira (2011) postulates that challenges to the implementation of a new strategic plan may have to do with situations in which the implementers were not part of the formulation of the plan – “they think that the strategic plan belongs to the architects of the document ... [the] management” (p. 31). This opinion is borne out in many institutions of higher education, such as Cleveland State University, where the committee, which was tasked with developing a new strategic plan, decided on a communication model designed to get broad faculty and staff input because previous strategic planning models were not well-received at the university (Hill, Thomas & Keller, 2009). In addition, Kent State University implemented a planning process in the late 1990s that had broad faculty and staff participation. This resulted in employees having a greater sense of the issues and concerns facing the organization and being better able to contribute and develop effective plans to address university needs (Rickard & Harding, 2000).

Libraries have also incorporated input and participation from employees into their strategic planning processes. Schlosser (2011) describes ongoing grassroots planning at the Ohio State University Libraries in which faculty and staff are encouraged to and do participate. Although uncertain of the ultimate success of the plan, the author states that the process may be one other libraries will find to be a useful model for change. Kendall, Nino and Staley (2008) explore the use of a wiki for communication and collaboration among committees and task forces working on a strategic plan for the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, which is jointly operated by San Jose State University and the San Jose Public Library. In addition, the Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame held a number of forums designed to gather the input of library employees into a recent strategic planning process (Simons & Havert, 2012). The Hunt Library at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) also has a history of successful grassroots strategic planning, dating to 2010.

## The Hunt Library Experience

ERAU is a specialized university focusing on aviation science and aerospace engineering. Granting degrees ranging from an associate's degree in Air Maintenance Science to a PhD in Aviation Science, ERAU has two residential campuses and a large distance learning program. The residential campus in Prescott, Arizona, has approximately 2,000 students. The other residential campus, in Daytona Beach, Florida, is home to approximately 5,500 students and the university administration. The largest Embry-Riddle campus is Worldwide, the distance learning division of the university, which enrolls approximately 25,000 students, who take classes in over 150 centers located all over the world or through the online programs.

The Hunt Library, located on the Daytona Beach Campus, is the library for both the Daytona Beach and Worldwide Campuses. Recognized at ERAU for excellent customer service and unique collections focused on the aerospace industries, the Hunt Library maintained operations for many years with few increases to the budget or to staff lines. After the retirement of the long-time director, who was well-respected at the university, the library management team (consisting of the four associate directors and the director) in consultation with campus administration, recruited a new director in 2009, who was charged with leading efforts to move the library from good to great. The management team was proud of the library's reputation for customer service but also wanted to develop initiatives in different areas.

## Formal Strategic Planning Begins at Hunt Library

Within the first month of her arrival, the director began discussing with the management team the idea of strategic planning as a tool to advance some new initiatives. Prior to her arrival, the library had some history of strategic planning but nothing recent or continuous. It had a strong mission statement, published on the website, and managers had engaged in strategic goal-

setting in the past as part of university strategic planning efforts. However, there was no memory of the Hunt Library engaging in formal strategic planning independently.

The first step the management team took was to familiarize themselves with current strategic planning ideas and processes. The director was passionate about involving staff in the process because she had seen strategic plans, developed solely by management, do little but gather dust after they were unveiled. She had been intrigued by a process at the George Washington University Libraries she heard about at a lecture. This particular process involved an annual library employee celebration in which all were invited to put post-it notes on to the poster-sized goals from the preceding year that specified what they had done to help meet the goals. The staff also put post-its up on the upcoming year's goal posters by which they pledged to take particular actions that would help the library meet them (Jack Siggins, personal communication, January 2008).

The management team liked the idea of the GWU process and discussed ways they could incorporate the same principles into their own process. They decided to ask everyone to bring ideas to the kick-off meeting for the strategic planning process. They also agreed to begin with a one-year plan and to solicit input primarily from within the library. With those issues decided, they planned an all-staff retreat to take place in early January 2010.

### Listening to Everyone

Since involving the entire staff in strategic planning was a new concept for the Hunt Library, the management team developed a very detailed agenda for the retreat. During the week before, the director visited each staff meeting to discuss the plans and answer questions. She explained that this strategic plan would be developed from ideas they all had for improving the library. She asked them to write down an idea for a new or improved service or activity on a

pink index card and to list an outdated function they thought could be eliminated on a white index card; and not to discuss their ideas with each other.

On the day of the retreat, staff members dropped the anonymous index cards into a basket as they entered the meeting area. After a brief introduction to the day's activities, they were assigned to one of five random groups. Throughout the day, the groups met three separate times, the first to discuss one of the strategies in an article they had been asked to read, the second to discuss the concepts that they put forward on the pink and white cards, compiled into lists by the management team, and the third to brainstorm a vision statement for the library, based on some samples provided. Members of the management team alternated leading large group discussions that occurred before and after the breakouts. This was in part to involve them more in the ownership of the planning and to signal to the staff that strategic planning was not centered in the role of the director. The retreat ended with an open discussion about the experience and the next steps.

### [The 2010-2011 Strategic Plan](#)

In the three to four months following this retreat, the management team drafted a vision statement, determined that the current mission statement was still viable, adopted values statements, and began drafting goals from the retreat feedback. Throughout this period, they shared the minutes of their meetings and updates with the staff via email. Staff were invited to comment on drafts of the strategic plan and the library conducted focus groups with students, faculty, and the academic deans to get their feedback on the plan drafts and other priorities for the library.

By May 2010, the vision, mission, values, and goals existed in draft format. Staff were asked to draft objectives for the goals that fit with their departments and roles. Each department

head led discussions in staff meetings about objectives and developed a list. The lists of objectives were then compiled by the management team and sent out to staff in draft form prior to a mini-retreat in late June. At that meeting, the language of the 2010-2011 strategic plan was agreed to by everyone. The director sent it to academic administration for approval, which she received immediately. The Hunt Library strategic plan was posted on the library website in a new area named, Strategic Planning (Hunt Library, 2015). This website has grown to include successive strategic plans and annual reports.

The first strategic plan contained five goals, each with three to five objectives. In order to ensure that the goals and objectives were reached, the Associate Director of Budget and Planning developed a spreadsheet listing the objectives, anticipated timeline for completion, responsible parties, and measures of success. As individuals or departments completed activities associated with the objectives, they informed her and she began populating the spreadsheet so that everyone was aware of the ongoing achievements as well as delays, primarily due to external factors.

Much of what was expressed in the goals reflected issues the library staff had long perceived as necessary to better serve the ERAU community, but were difficult to accomplish because they did not “belong” to a department’s charge or an employee’s position description. By assigning them priority in the strategic plan, the staff as a whole agreed to accomplish them and the management team reallocated resources to make achieving the initiatives a reality.

The first goal, *Begin the migration from print to electronic collections*, required several actions. Despite the fact that the large majority of the population served by the Hunt Library consists of distance learners, the book, media, and periodical collections were predominantly in physical formats. There were a variety of reasons, among them a sense that the Hunt Library



was a repository of sorts for the literature of the aerospace industries and needed to preserve the record in a tangible format; a budgeting model that favored the purchase of physical materials; and the fact that the collections of most of the e-book vendors did not sync well with the niche needs of ERAU.

Very closely connected to this goal, was number two, *Explore the collection development process*. Acquisitions and processing were handled in a traditional way with everything being tracked on slips of paper and items being handled numerous times by different staff members from the time the collection development committee requested material until it was catalogued and shelved. Orders could be held up for weeks lost somewhere in the process. Part of the reason for this situation lay in the fact that responsibility for the integrated library system (ILS) resided in the Information Technology (IT) department. The priority of the IT technicians and the library departments responsible for the ILS had been on circulation and cataloguing modules and it was difficult to convince IT to take on more work to enable the acquisitions module. In addition, some of the library staff members were long-time employees who were reluctant to change processes that worked for them.

To begin to accomplish the first two goals, the management team explored some reorganization among staff in technical services to align workflow more closely with current rather than traditional needs. As a result, some long-time employees retired and a new position, Collection Management Librarian, was created. Among the priorities of this position was to pursue electronic collection development and ordering. Simultaneously, members of the management team pursued a different funding agreement with the university administration that enabled the library to purchase books and media in electronic format and to subscribe to electronic versions of journals.

Goal three, *Investigate new avenues for marketing and outreach*, and Goal four, *Investigate ways to preserve special and unique print collections digitally*, were approached in a similar way. The management team asked for volunteers to serve on cross-departmental teams that would explore the marketing and preservation issues. The response was strong and from all areas of the library. The director chaired both the Marketing and Preservation Committees initially, helping them to establish charges and priorities. As natural leaders emerged on the committees, she took a background role to be available as a resource.

The fifth goal, *Look into implementing a new integrated library system and other innovative technology*, did not appear, at first, to be achievable. The focus for this goal was on implementing a new ILS. A sitting library committee did a considerable amount of research, including visits to libraries that used systems under consideration, but the funding for the ILS resides in the IT department at ERAU and the CIO did not see this as a priority at the time.

However, there were other objectives of this goal that gained in prominence as the year went on. Two successful initiatives, spurred on by feedback from faculty and students, were creating direct links to electronic resources from the library website and the approval and funding for a discovery tool. Prior to this year, the most common negative input from the ERAU community was that users could not find the databases easily in the university intranet and that when they did, they were not sure which to use.

### The 2011-2013 Strategic Plan

In March 2011, the library staff came together to discuss progress on the first strategic plan. The general consensus was one of pride and satisfaction at the list of accomplishments, as well as an enthusiasm to keep going. Although the library had progressed toward the completion of many of the objectives, the goals were still not achieved in full. By the end of the meeting

everyone agreed to keep the same strategic goals for another year, to continue to work on some of the unfulfilled objectives, and to add others that had come up either in the initial process or through the year.

The director announced that they would begin a three-year strategic planning cycle early in the next academic year, which the management team began preparing for in late 2011. As the discussion of the process began to take shape, an external hurdle appeared. Campus administration required one floor of the Hunt Library to house the newly created Office of Undergraduate Research. As a result, the library priority for the rest of that academic year was to reduce the physical collections in order to move off that floor by the end of finals in early May of 2013. In addition, that spring the university president and board decided to build a new student center complex on the footprint of the Hunt Library. The new complex would house the library but for the three years of construction, the library collections and staff would be located in five separate temporary locations. Planning for that move became another priority so the management team, in consultation with the staff, extended the one-year plan to two years and encouraged them to work on accomplishing goals and objectives as they could.

Despite the obstacles, staff continued to be engaged in the positive forward momentum of the strategic plan. Much of the new work was incorporated into normal duties. Among the accomplishments in this two-year period were:

- 82% increase in the number of e-books;
- 24-hour opening during the five days of finals;
- Partnership with University Archives to digitalize and provide access to ERAU publications;
- Implementation of EAGLESearch, a discovery tool, chat reference, and LibGuides;

- Development of QR codes to promote library events and a glossy library report on the accomplishments of the 2011-2013 strategic plan;
- Collaboration with IT, the Office of Undergraduate Research and the Hazy Library on the Arizona campus that resulted in funding and contracting for an institutional repository, to be maintained by the Hunt Library.

### **The 2013-2016 Strategic Plan**

In the fall of 2012, the management team again began to discuss possible processes for a three-year planning cycle. After some research, they decided to begin with a SOAR exercise. SOAR is a method similar to SWOT in which appreciative inquiry is incorporated into the strategic planning process. SOAR stands for strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results.

By incorporating the principles of appreciative inquiry into strategic planning, an organization is consciously seeking the best possible future by focusing employees on possibilities rather than on ways to overcome problems. This, in turn, can foster organizational learning, generative thinking, collaboration, trust, and a focus on making the best use of existing resources (Sullivan, 2004). Incorporating appreciative inquiry into strategic planning processes has been successful in a number of institutions, among them, Tacoma Community College (Heelan & Transue, 2005) and the Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame (Simons & Havert, 2012).

In November 2012, the director visited each department to introduce the SOAR exercise the management team had decided on. She asked each department to discuss the four components exploring the following questions within their staff meetings:

- What are we most proud of?
- How does that reflect our greatest strength?

- What are our top three opportunities?
- How can we reframe challenges to see them as opportunities?
- What are we deeply passionate about for the library that we aspire to?
- What are the results or outcomes that will tell us we are on track for accomplishing what we want to?

The department heads compiled their staff discussions into one response to each of the questions per department. At an all-staff meeting in December, the group brainstormed ideas for each of the four categories. After the meeting the director shared the four lists from the discussions with the staff and allowed some time for additions. Her intention was to begin drafting a new three-year plan in January from the results of the SOAR discussions. However, the library received unanticipated funding for an institutional repository platform in December that diverted the attention of the director and several staff members for most of the spring semester.

By May 2013, the management team prioritized developing a three-year plan. They were concerned that the information from the SOAR exercise was a bit dated and that another round of discussion with the staff might result in some fresh ideas. At that point, the director was drawn to the concept of scenarios as a tool to assist with collaborative strategic planning. A colleague, who had just completed his dissertation on that topic (Cawthorne, 2013), offered to help the Hunt Library adapt some existent scenarios to help with the process. The management team agreed.

“Scenarios are plausible stories about alternative futures” (Hannabus, 2001, p. 168). Based on current trends, the stories can offer alternative futures with varying degrees of probability that may guide a strategic planning process (Staley, Seaman, & Theodore-Shusta, 2012). Scenarios for future visioning exercises can be developed internally using scenario

planning processes (Giesecke, 1998) or can be adapted from established scenarios that reflect the organization, such as those developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (Staley & Malenfant, 2010).

In the summer of 2013, the director and Dr. Cawthorne reworked three academic library scenarios he had adapted from established scenarios. In June at a staff meeting, he led the library through an exercise intended to have them choose the most plausible future for the Hunt Library. The exercise did not go well because the adapted scenarios did not reflect enough of the ERAU culture. Shortly afterward, the director, in consultation with Dr. Cawthorne, and incorporating feedback from the staff, constructed a new scenario that she presented at a staff meeting in July (Casey, Cawthorne, & Citro, 2014).

During this meeting, the management team led a discussion on the major themes in the new scenario. They pulled out concepts that were of the highest priority to the group. Interestingly, many of these concepts had emerged in the SOAR exercise the preceding fall, which added credibility to the second scenario process.

From the list of concepts, the management team developed five strategic imperatives for the three- year plan. In consultation with the staff, they also changed the language of the vision and mission statements to reflect the current activities and aspirations of the library. They shared the draft document with each department and requested a list of goals that were unique to the departments but were tied to the strategic directions. From the departmental lists, the management team developed eight library goals for the 2014-2015 year. They asked each department to develop internal objectives aimed at accomplishing the goals.

Many of the goals for 2014-2015 centered on preparing the collections and staff for the move to temporary locations in the summer of 2015 prior to the anticipated demolition of the

Hunt Library building. These goals were accomplished early in the planning year. For the most part, the major objectives of the other goals were met as well. The library implemented the institutional repository and supported faculty submissions as well as establishing ERAU as a publisher by launching three new journals and several conferences; a considerable amount of new online instruction was created, and the perennial goal of increasing the electronic collection saw an additional rise of nearly 20%.

In the fall of 2014, the management team assessed the outcomes of the first year goals and agreed to continue those that were not fully realized and to add others that reflected the strategic directions of the three-year plan. The director, who had begun the strategic planning cycles in 2010, was asked to take on a new role at the university in January 2014, and the lead associate director was promoted to director. The library lost the director's position and has been understaffed for most of 2014 due to that change as well as two resignations and a retirement. In spite of the staffing changes, the strategic plan continues to focus library resources on the areas of highest priority.

### Living the Plan

As the evidence of continuous improvement linked to strategic planning has mounted, personnel at the Hunt Library appear to have internalized the planning as a normal part of business. In the first couple of years of the new era, when a staff member would suggest an idea, the director would ask them to relate it to the current plan. If they could not, she would request that they shelve it until the next planning cycle. More recently, staff members who bring an idea forward, will begin by demonstrating its relevance to the current plan and agreed-upon priorities.

The culture of strategic planning has begun to move into other areas of the campus. Among the new responsibilities the original director accepted in 2014 was oversight of four

departments in addition to the library. She has led an employee-involved strategic planning process in one of those departments that has yielded some major improvements in less than one year. She was also asked to lead the recasting of the strategic plan for the Division of Student Affairs and has started initial strategic planning discussions with two other departments.

## Conclusion

Each of the Hunt Library strategic plans has precipitated innovation and appears to have motivated employees to *own* particular goals and objectives, thus they work hard to realize the vision articulated in the plan. Since the entire staff collaborated on the development of each plan, buy-in has been strong. In some cases goals and objectives were adopted by particular departments and incorporated into their regular workflows. In others, the management team reorganized departments, requested additional university funds, and created cross-departmental teams to begin work on activities that were library-centric rather than related to one department.

While continuing the tradition of excellent customer service, the Hunt Library staff enhanced marketing efforts, incorporated new technologies, developed more comprehensive evaluation and assessment, extended hours, began the process of assessing special collections for preservation purposes, and led the implementation and ongoing maintenance of an institutional repository, which showcases faculty research and has established ERAU as a publisher. Because everyone in the library has a voice in determining the future direction of the organization, they are motivated to advance new ideas and work hard to make that improved vision of their library a reality.



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