

# Inclusive Strategic Planning, Management, and Accountability

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## Bob Price and Rebecca Croxton

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In the 2020–2021 academic year, the University of North Carolina Charlotte's J. Murrey Atkins Library conducted a strategic planning and management process centered on stakeholder inclusivity. The university had completed a 10–year strategic plan, *Shaping What's Next* (<https://strategicplan.charlotte.edu/>), and campus leaders were charged to create their own plans that aligned with the campus plan.

The library adopted an inclusive planning process to create the 2021–2031 strategic plan that enabled all stakeholder groups to have a voice in shaping the plan and increased the number of planning participants from 14 in previous iterations to 91. We leveraged stakeholder groups to increase idea diversity and buy-in through a research-based, inclusive approach. This process enabled the library to create a dynamic growth plan that remains top-of-mind, helps to steer strategic progress and decision-making, and ensures ongoing accountability.

Admittedly, past iterations of the library's strategic plans were created and then largely remained untouched until end-of-year reporting. Rather than guiding the library's ongoing work, these plans were largely looked upon as annual reporting requirements. As the library's strategic planning co-chairs, we further recognized that prior plans had low buy-in and employee engagement. Thus, we set out to do things differently. The steps we employed to conduct an inclusive strategic planning and management process are outlined below.

## Reflect on Reasons for Low Buy-In and Engagement

As we reflected on reasons for low buy-in and employee engagement with prior strategic plans, we created a summary that outlines the numbers and types of individuals who helped develop previous plans, as illustrated below. Through this exercise, the lack of cognitive and stakeholder diversity in our past planning processes became readily apparent. Overall, 90% of the participants who helped develop the prior plan were librarians or library administrators who were predominantly white and female. While academic librarianship as a profession (American Library Association 2007), including Atkins Library, reflects a lack of diversity and is largely dominated by white and female employees, we knew we could do better.

## ***Strategic Planning Participants Summary***

### ***Previous 5 Years (N = 14)***

#### **Gender:**

- Female: 11 participants (79%).
- Male: 3 participants (21%).
- Undisclosed: 0 participants (0%).

#### **Race/Ethnicity:**

- White (not Hispanic or Latino): 13 participants (93%).
- White (Hispanic or Latino): 0 participants (0%).
- Black: 1 participant (7%).
- Two or More Races: 0 participants (0%).
- Undisclosed: 0 participants (0%).

#### **Participant Role:**

- Library Faculty/Staff: 14 participants (100%).
- Undergraduate Student: 0 participants (0%).
- Graduate Student: 0 participants (0%).
- University Faculty: 0 participants (0%).
- External Board Member: 0 participants (0%).

### ***2021–2022 (N = 91)***

#### **Gender:**

- Female: 52 participants (57%).
- Male: 27 participants (30%).
- Undisclosed: 12 participants (13%).

#### **Race/Ethnicity:**

- White (not Hispanic or Latino): 69 participants (76%).
- White (Hispanic or Latino): 3 participants (3%).
- Black: 15 participants (17%).
- Two or More Races: 2 participants (2%).
- Undisclosed: 2 participants (2%).

#### **Participant Role:**

- Library Faculty/Staff: 58 participants (64%).
- Undergraduate Student: 6 participants (7%).
- Graduate Student: 3 participants (3%).
- University Faculty: 11 participants (12%).
- External Board Member: 13 participants (14%).

## **Identify, Adapt, or Create a Process to Address Prior Challenges**

In seeking solutions that would be inclusive, engaging, and bring about greater stakeholder ownership and buy-in, we turned to the literature. We landed on a study by Amrollahi and Ghapnchi (2016) that introduced a crowdsourcing, open strategy model implemented at an Australian university that increased stakeholder participation and transparency. This model, along with the *integrative stakeholder participation theory* and the *value in diversity theory*, provided us with a framework that we adapted for our own context. Integrative stakeholder participation theory supposes beneficial outcomes can be gained by stakeholder involvement in decision-making (Hendrick 2003). The value in diversity theory proposes that heterogeneous groups made up of different work experiences and skills provide groups a broader level of knowledge to make decisions and address complexity (Mitchell et al. 2017).

### **Seven-Phase Inclusive Strategic Planning Model**

We adapted Amrollahi and Ghapnchi's (2016) model and aligned it with theoretical underpinnings to create the seven-phase inclusive strategic planning model outlined below. The model engages stakeholders, drives strategic thinking, creates buy-in, and ensures accountability. Phases four through seven are iterative.

#### ***Phase 1: Get Ready***

- Who: Strategic Plan (SP) Leads.
- What: Pre-planning meetings with leadership, analysis of peer institutions' strategic plans to identify key themes.

#### ***Phase 2: Identify Current Activities***

- Who: All Library Employees.
- What: Brainstorming sessions to identify current activities using key themes, with anonymous surveys for equal input.

#### ***Phase 3: Brainstorm Strategic Actions***

- Who: All Stakeholders.
- What: Meetings to review the process, discuss current activities, and brainstorm strategic ideas, with input via discussions and anonymous surveys.

#### ***Phase 4: Create & Align Strategic Actions***

- Who: SP Leads, Library Steering Committee, All Library Employees.
- What: Small group exercises to identify strategic actions, review and refine by teams, consolidation of actions, and alignment with campus plan.

#### ***Phase 5: Validate and Publish***

- Who: SP Leads, Library Dean, Associate Deans.

- What: Final review and revisions, establishment of performance metrics, approval, and publication of the plan.

**Phase 6: Implement**

- Who: Library Associate Deans, All Library Employees.
- What: Creation and implementation of annual action plans, integration into employee goals.

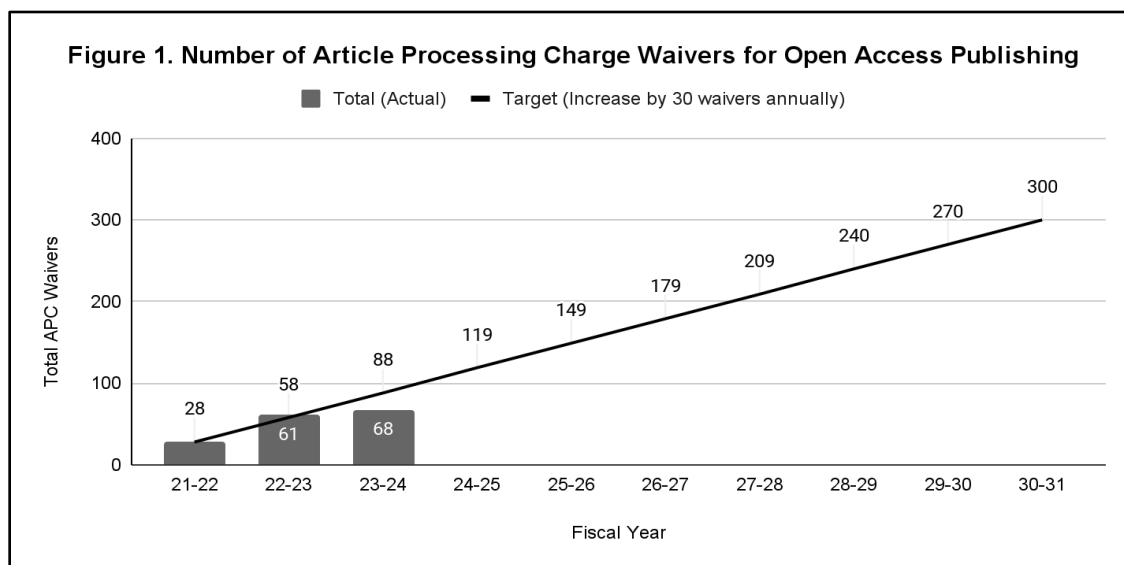
**Phase 7: Monitor, Report, Review, and Adjust**

- Who: SP Leads, Library Dean, Associate Deans.
- What: Mid-year and end-of-year reviews, analysis of metrics, progress discussions, and necessary adjustments.

**Strategic Management and Accountability**

Having a process to monitor, review, discuss, and adjust strategic processes, as outlined in Phase 7, is critical for advancing a plan and holding an organization accountable. In our organization, a major component of this work involves creating dashboards and charts for each objective's metrics. For example, Figure 1 depicts progress on a strategic objective to increase the number of article processing charge waivers by 30 each year. Upon reviewing annual progress in relation to the 10-year target, decision-makers were able to determine whether strategic changes were indicated. Organizing and sharing metrics in this way has proven useful for discussion and decision-making. Further, holding mid-year and end-of-year discussions with the Dean and Associate Deans to gauge progress and make strategic adjustments has been key to keeping the plan top-of-mind and holding ourselves accountable. With this new strategic management process in place, we have noticed more proactive engagement by unit and department heads to discuss metrics and strategize how to advance our work.

Figure 1



## Reflections about the Planning Process

Because the inclusive strategic planning process was new for the majority of stakeholder participants, SP lead, Bob Price, conducted a series of 15 semi-structured participant interviews to assess the process's inclusiveness and stakeholder buy-in of the plan. Participants also shared feedback that will be used to improve future processes.

Participants overwhelmingly felt optimistic about the plan and saw it impacting their work. They indicated that inclusion in the process brought greater understanding, clarified how their work contributes, and increased their commitment to the plan.

## Suggestions for Improvement

**Baseline Education.** Participant feedback highlighted the value of baseline education about strategic planning, though indicated that more participant-specific examples may increase the ability to distinguish operational from strategic ideas. Others suggested that reviewing baseline knowledge in each meeting would have been helpful. Interestingly, several previous strategic planning participants shared sentiments that suggest their sense of ownership was diminished compared to previous processes. Together, these findings indicate that more targeted baseline education and processes that are tailored to two distinct groups (new vs. past participants) may be beneficial.

**Strategic Planning Leadership.** Most participants believed that the characteristics of the individual(s) leading the strategic planning process matter. Suggestions include having a leader who is a minority to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment and having multiple individuals conduct and evaluate. A diverse team of individuals working on this process could bring more balance and help to ensure fairness and equity.

**Process.** If possible, limit or mitigate predetermined goals or metrics before beginning. Too many predetermined elements casts doubt on the validity of the process and can discourage stakeholder participation. Further, casting a broader net for stakeholder inclusion may yield participant demographics closer to the community served. Care should be paid to ensure the process is transparent, even if there are parts that a smaller group must oversee. During some sessions led by individuals other than the SP leads, a few individuals felt their supervisor or colleagues devalued or dismissed their input. Thus, it is recommended that everyone who leads strategic planning activities, including small group breakouts and informal meetings, is provided with baseline instruction to ensure an inclusive process. Finally, additional clarity was necessary in highlighting both strategic and operational work to remove the danger of demotivating or devaluing individuals whose primary responsibilities are operational.

## Final Thoughts

We have made progress and are seeing changes to the culture, but there is still some resistance to fully leveraging the data to make strategic decisions. In the two years since the plan was approved, we still find ourselves making small adjustments rather than planning more strategically. Our university is like many others across the country facing an enrollment cliff, a sometimes challenging political climate, and budgetary limitations that force us to constantly evaluate our use of finite resources. An inclusive and data driven strategic planning and

management process is a necessity so organizations can continue to make strategic, thoughtful, and sustained progress to advance their goals.

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