

CHAPTER 7

BEING STRATEGIC: EVALUATION AND PLANNING

A long-term strategic plan envisions the future of the community and library. It charts a course to reach that future. Long-term planning enables the library to be strategic in setting priorities for budget and determining staff activities and performance, library services, and resources.

To be relevant and responsive to the community, public libraries engage in a continuous cycle of planning, operating, evaluating, and reporting. Plans developed from these efforts are for use, not placed on a shelf gathering dust. There is a continuous cycle of planning, operating, evaluating, and reporting on operations and services is used for continuous improvement, long-range strategic planning, and public accountability.

A formal strategic planning process includes input from diverse community members, leaders, and organizations as well as staff, volunteers, and partners to center planning on community impact.

The Colorado State Library as well as Colorado Library Consortium are able to provide support in all areas of the strategic plan process. Please reach out for assistance.

The following sections are not comprehensive and not intended as legal advice. Libraries and trustees should consult their own legal counsel for advice.

RELATED COLORADO PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARD:
EVALUATION & PLANNING

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Step 1: Identify the Purpose

There are multiple areas of the public library that can be considered for long-range, strategic planning. It might be that they are all lumped together in one plan or done separately.

Some examples:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| ☐ Collection | ☐ Services | ☐ Facilities |
| ☐ Finances | ☐ Marketing | ☐ Technology |
| ☐ Staffing | ☐ Design | ☐ Infrastructure |

Is this plan to be for one, three, or five years? This timeframe balances ambitious goals with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Keep in mind, good strategic priorities provide a strong foundation and direction, but flexibility and adaptability are critical.

Having a clear purpose gives direction for the right stakeholders to be included and appropriate data collection to be used for identification of strategic priorities.

Step 2: Who is involved in long-term planning?

The board of trustees oversees the strategic plan development while the library director and staff implement the plan, track progress, and provide regular reporting to the board and other stakeholders.

Engaging the community is an important part of long-term planning. "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities," stated R. David Lankes, recipient of the American Library Association's 2016 Ken Haycock Award for Promoting Librarianship. Stakeholder engagement ensures the community has a voice in the process.

DO IT YOURSELF OR BRING IN A THIRD-PARTY ENTITY?

Organizations often bring in a third party to help with long-range planning, but it is not a necessity. Considerations whether to engage a third party include:

- Does someone on staff or on the board have data collection and analysis expertise?
- Is there time available?
- Will analysis be unbiased?
- Are you able to ask effective and probing questions?

It might be that a third party is needed for only part of the process. In Colorado, public libraries have access to no cost expertise through the Colorado State Library (CSL) and Colorado Library

Consortium (CLiC) to aid in planning as well as the shared expertise of other libraries that have undergone the process.

WHOLE BOARD OR STRATEGIC PLAN COMMITTEE?

Everyone gets excited about developing the future version of the library. When deciding who is engaged in the process, be mindful of Open Meeting Laws as well as time needed to efficiently complete the planning process. Like policy development, have the full board determine the purpose of the long-range plan and who will be engaged. At this point, it might then make more sense for the board to charge a Strategic Plan Committee with next steps.

Step 3: Data Collection

Once you have identified your purpose, complete a community needs assessment to determine the needs of the library patrons for current service as well as the needs of the community that the library can provide support. There is a wide variety of data sources including administrative data, people's sentiments, strategic plans of local community organizations (government, nonprofit), community data, library data, Friends, Foundations, employees. The list goes on. It is important to consider the purpose of the plan you are putting together when identifying what data sources you intend to use.

There are also a variety of methods you can use to collect data from those sources. Evaluation of current work, surveys, community and stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and community needs assessments completed by local groups in the last 18 months are typical. Consider using both qualitative and quantitative data to have a broad picture. This is a time-consuming process that allows for informed decision making.

EVALUATION OF CURRENT WORK

Value the work and success your library already has. It is important when planning to know where you are with what you currently have.

- What is your library's value?
- What is your vision?
- Who are the key stakeholders and their interests?
- Complete a SOAR analysis of your library data and the Colorado Public Library Standards. What are your strengths, aspirations, opportunities, and desired results?
- What progress, effectiveness, and successes does your library have?

SURVEYS

According to CSL's Library Research Services' "[Library User Surveys: A How-To Guide](#)", the first step is to consider what information you need and what are the characteristics of the people completing the survey.

Are you using a survey to measure how the library is currently doing or to seek ideas for what the library will be like in the future? Remember, most people aren't aware of the possibility of libraries. It is not their area of expertise. Additionally, keep in mind how long you expect people to take when answering questions. The guide emphasizes, "never collect more information than is absolutely necessary so as not to unduly burden survey respondents or create unnecessary privacy concern."

When writing your survey, it is important to write it with the user in mind. Surveys should be accessible and inclusive. Consider reading level, jargon, spoken language, comfort with technology, and age of intended respondents. Be sure to include the purpose of the survey on the survey so responders are aware. Lately, a note about using tax revenues has been used to demonstrate transparency and financial stewardship has appeared in surveys. This may cause some respondents to be conservative in their response rather than dream. A decision you should take into account when creating your survey.

Most public library surveys are anonymous. You will want to include some demographic information to help determine if your respondents are representative of your community. Some demographics to consider:

- Frequency of library use
- Library cardholder
- Distance to library
- Zip code
- Age range
- Household type
- Primary language

Distribution of surveys is as important as the survey itself. Be sure to use multiple methods as well as asking your community partners to share. Make it easy to access and be sure to have staff promote it wherever they are working during the open survey period. A 10-30% rate of return is generally recognized as a positive response. Monitor your responses. If you are lacking a demographic that you are hoping to obtain, push additional marketing into that population.

An excellent template of surveys can be found and personalized in the guide listed on the next page.

*Adapted from Johnson, B. & Christensen, L. (2012). Checklist for survey construction. In *Educational Research* pp.180 – 181). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

After drafting your library's survey, have colleagues proofread it for clarity and assess the validity of the questions included.

Avoid questions that ask respondents to rank items (e.g., "rank the importance of the following library services to you from most to least important"). Not only are rankings hard to analyze, but they are also misleading as it's possible that all the items asked about could be of equal importance to respondents. A better approach is to ask respondents to *rate* items (e.g. "rate the importance of each of the following library services to you on a scale where 5 = extremely important and 1= not at all important).

Use lead ins for new or lengthy sections to orient and guide the user. For example, if your survey includes a demographics section, title it as such.

Refrain from using "double barreled" questions that combine 2 or more topics, such that the researcher cannot know which "barrel" of the questions was answered. For example, "Do you think that the library is important and would you support a mill levy for increased funding?" If the words "and" or "or" are included in your question, it might be double barreled.

Use short questions when possible.

Carefully consider the placement of each question and set of related questions.

Number the items consecutively from the beginning to the end.

Use plenty of white space to ensure that the survey is readable.

Use an easy-to-read font size and type.

Do not "break" your questions or carry them from one page to another.

Include open-ended questions so survey takers can fully express themselves, particularly when covering complex topics.

Include a closing statement. In addition to thanking customers for participating in the survey, this statement might also include contact information should respondents have any questions or concerns about the survey.

Consider how the findings of the survey might relate back to your library's mission, vision, and values. This will make you data more valuable for stakeholders within your organization.

Provide clear instructions.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups provide an opportunity for probing into the results of your survey. Prior to hosting focus groups, begin your analysis of survey data to identify questions for inquiry. It gives you an opportunity to obtain in-depth insights into participants' opinions and experiences through guided discussion - to figure out the "why" behind the survey numbers.

Typically, a focus group is composed of 6-10 individuals with shared characteristics or experiences. They require careful planning and skilled moderation. It is necessary to craft questions prior to the meeting, establish ground rules, and manage group dynamics to foster dialogue.

It is useful to have two individuals not recognized as being from the library to lead the focus groups. Ideally, one asks the questions, and the second records a transcript of the discussion to use for analysis.

COMMUNITY AND STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Community and stakeholder interviews are an opportunity for you to find out what people in your community are thinking about. Interviews are also a quiet way to let the community know you are an organization supporting the community and good financial stewards.

Once you've completed your data analysis and identified key findings and trends, it is important to share this back out with those who participated in the interviews, so they are cognizant that you utilized their time for a purpose and are taking action.

When conducting these interviews, do not ask about the library. You are not using them as an opportunity to find out how they use the library. These interviews are the time for you to find out what the community needs.

During your analysis, you can determine how the library can be of support.

Keep these interviews short and with few questions. When selecting questions to ask, be consistent. Your intent is to find out their opinions on:

- community strengths
- opportunities for making the community better
- aspirations for the community.

Should you still do them if your community has recently made a massive plan? Area strategic plans including county, town, community partners can help provide information on community needs. They are worth reviewing. If there are common needs that frequently occur (mental health care, childcare, affordable housing), perhaps ask your interviewees to consider other issues.

Step 4: Data Analysis

When analyzing the data and looking for key findings & trends, it is critical to be non-biased in your review. Be open to surprises. Avoid confirmation bias. Look for trends and consider outliers. The goal of your analysis is to create an executive summary with areas of strength and recommended areas of opportunity.

The following is excerpted from CSL's Library Research Service "[Library User Surveys: A How-To Guide](#)" available online at lrs.org.

SURVEY DATA

How you analyze the data resulting from your survey is dependent upon how your survey was conducted, i.e., whether it was an electronic or paper survey, and upon the types of questions included therein. Some platforms used to distribute electronic surveys, such as [Alchemer](#) and [Survey Monkey](#), have built-in features for data analysis as well. Regardless of your data collection method and the tools available to you, [here are a few tips](#) to keep in mind as you move into your analysis.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative data obtained through survey comments, focus groups, and interviews can be used as anecdotal evidence to emphasize or paint the picture of the numbers. More importantly, it can be analyzed through coding. CSL's Library Research Service provides a resource for this process in "Mapping the Methods: Content Analysis Part 1".

The key question that content analysis helps answer is, how do you categorize this textual data to best identify important patterns, anomalies, and relationships that answer your research question?

Tips

Ensure questions are clearly defined for your understanding of analysis.

Clean the data you have collected. This involves removing unnecessary or inaccurate data and organizing it so you can focus on the pieces that will be most useful to you.

Start by looking at basic descriptive statistics, meaning statistics that summarize your data. As well as being revealing in and of themselves, descriptive statistics can provide important context as you move into more complex analysis.

MEANINGFUL UNITS

Before you create codes for your data, it may help to condense text into sections that hold meaning, called meaning units. Don't let this step intimidate you. You still want these meaning units to be close to, if not literally, the text of the data. For example, perhaps someone's response to our example question includes the sentence, "I've always enjoyed the library, but it was a particularly great resource for me while raising my children." A condensed meaning unit you may take from this is "a great resource while raising my children."

It is important that your meaning units relate as directly to the text as possible, and you are careful not to over-interpret or otherwise misrepresent the responses in the data set.

CODES

You begin to interpret the data and take it to a slightly more abstract form with the next step, which is applying codes. An example of coding is taking the meaning unit "a great resource while raising my children" and assigning the label "family support." If these are not the specific words you would use to describe this meaning unit that is OK. Codes will vary person to person and also change depending on the focus of your driving question.

As long as you work diligently to keep the coding faithful to the text, while acknowledging and limiting your bias from previous experiences on the subject, codes will not be right or wrong. Many codes will be used repetitively throughout your data analysis. You may assign the code "family support" to other meaning units from other survey participants if appropriate. There will likely be certain codes that are used often and other outlying codes that are not. There is also no right or wrong answer for the number of codes that you use. It depends on the size of your data set and the variations within it.

It can be helpful to use your intuition while creating codes as long as you are still basing these labels in the text and staying aware of how your biases will affect their selection. Similarly, there may be aspects of a map you intuitively understand, but it wouldn't be very smart to throw the map away entirely and assume you know the way yourself.

While coding you may need to change meaning units that suddenly don't make sense moving forward. Remember this backtracking is a normal part of the process to make sure the codes you are using reflect the whole of the data the best that they can.

Step 5: Trends & Key Findings

Now is the time for fun! It is time to look at the results of your data and look for the key findings and trends.

When doing this, be sure to break down your data into your identified demographic groups so you can determine whether your results are consistent across all demographics or if you have specific demographics that require particular attention. should be results to see if consistent across all demographics or specific certain groups.

Look for trends. Trends analysis involves looking at the data results you have and looking for patterns. When you integrate your data results, are there themes that appear? What recurs or stands out? Mind mapping is a useful tool to connect themes that build into trends. The use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze results and consider trends is a time saver.

Once you've identified your trends, write up an executive summary to be shared with the full board and community. This executive summary should include:

- Purpose and scope: purpose of
- Key findings and trend analysis
- Recommendations and implications

Reviewing the results of the community needs assessment in board meetings, staff meetings, and marketing provides opportunities for the board, staff, and the community to review and provide feedback. Once completed, the results can be used to identify strategic priorities for your future planning.

Step 6: Values, Vision, Mission

Libraries have changed from repositories of information to hubs of education, information, and recreation. Why does a review of values, vision, and mission come into place when determining long-range planning? Values, vision, and mission should be at the forefront when any decisions are made. Use this time to review the library's current values, vision, and mission so when determining strategic priorities, it is clear what the role of the library is in how it serves the community.

VALUES IDENTIFICATION

As you consider your organization's values, be sure to review Core Values of Librarianship, Library Bill of Rights, and Freedom to Read/View as these are the guiding principles and ethics for librarianship in America.

Consider what 3-5 core values inform how decisions are made, how business is conducted, and how success is measured.

VISION

Based on the library's values and analysis of the data completed in earlier steps, take time to describe what the library looks like in the future at the fruition of the long-range plan. Remember this isn't what you want, it is driven by what the community has identified as its need and service.

MISSION

What does our organization uniquely do (could do) better than any other? What is your reason for being? Identify concepts and words that most resonate about the library and develop a statement that describes the primary purpose of the work of the library.

Step 7: Strategic Priorities, Goals, and Objectives

Finally, you've made it! After all the preliminary work, this section takes your data analysis, your values, vision, & mission, and puts them all together to determine the library's goals and strategic priorities.

Consider your goals as the destinations (what) and your strategic priorities as the compass or steps you will take to get there (how). Typically, you will have three (3) and no more than five (5) goals.

One way to determine your goals, strategic priorities, and objectives is to complete a SOAR Analysis of key findings and trends. Use these to look at patterns. Based upon these patterns, what would your library look like if these patterns were in place.

It is useful to look at other libraries around the country to gain ideas. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) is also a useful tool as a brainstorming partner.

Once you've obtained these goals and then considered what the priority is, consider objectives. Objectives break down strategic priorities into actionable steps or need to accomplish the priorities. Think of objectives as, "How do we know we're making progress towards our goals?"

Step 8: Action Plan, Measurements

MEASUREMENTS

Before staff dive into the action plan, it is important that the board communicates how often they want updates towards goal completion. Is it monthly, semi-annually, or annually? What evidence will demonstrate to them that actions the library staff are taking are indeed causing a shift or change?

Measurements might include data that you are already collecting for the Public Library Annual Report, satisfaction surveys, or bumps in collections. Library Research Services (LRS) can help identify data to collect as well as building board reports to demonstrate the change. Remember to record initial starting point data to demonstrate growth.

ACTION PLAN

Now that the board has determined the vision for the library, it is time to pass the strategic plan items to the staff for action plan development. The staff also needs to report back to the board measurements to demonstrate they are on track to fulfilling the strategic plan.

As staff develop the action plan, they should consider the bite size steps, manageable actions, it will take to meet the goal. Elements to be considered are time, staffing, community partners, lead, and funding. Some actions may take multiple years to accomplish. Consider breaking down into quarters what the actions will be to get to the whole. Update the action plan regularly to demonstrate that actions are taking place, potential changes or modifications, and the impact actions have.

Step 9: Reporting

Under Colorado Library Law, all libraries must present an annual report to their legislative body showing the condition of the library including “sums of money expended, purpose of the expenditures, and such other statistics and information the board of trustees deems to be of public interest.” ([C.R.S. 24-90-109\(2\)](#)).

Keeping with the idea that ‘great libraries build great communities’ introduced at the start of this chapter, sharing the strategic plan as well as reporting on the progress should not be done solely between the library board of trustees and the library director. It should be shared with the staff, community, stakeholders, legislative body, and elected officials to celebrate the work of the library, and its commitment to library service.

Additional Plans in the Library: capital and disaster

Other plans in the library such as a capital replacement plan and disaster plan should also be developed and reviewed by staff on a regular basis. These are more operational pieces but as stewards of the library, trustees should be aware of their existence. Additionally, trustees should be aware of their role, especially around communication and decision making, if an emergency occurs.

Summary

Long-term planning puts into place a vision created by the board that directs staff action and budgeting. Identifying a clear purpose for the plan coupled with identification of who is responsible for the development of the plan and what data will be used for determining goals and priorities ensure an efficient process.

It is typical that a review of the library's mission, vision, and values occurs as part of the process to ensure the stewardship entrusted to the board of trustees demonstrates responsiveness to the community the library serves as well as an asset-focused approach to strengthening operations while supporting staff in implementing change.

Rigor in evaluation, along with communication with various community stakeholders, instills public trust, maintains transparency, addresses all community groups, and can be a vehicle to justify funding and support.

Try This: Strategic Plan

Develop an inventory of your organizations long range plans and tools that communicate board vision to staff action steps.

VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

What are the vision, mission, and values of your library?

Vision

Mission Vision

Values Vision

LONG-RANGE PLANS

Do you have long-range plans for the follow areas and when were they created?

- ☐ Finances ☐ Staffing ☐ Facilities & Infrastructure
- ☐ Capital Projects ☐ Programs, Services & Collections

REVIEW

Review the goals, objectives, and priorities of the above plans.

ANALYSIS

Based on the reports from your library director, what can you communicate to your stakeholders about the library's future?

Is there information in reports from your library director that you need to communicate to your stakeholders about the library's future?

What long-range plans do you believe are needed?

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| ☐ Finances | ☐ Staffing | ☐ Facilities & Infrastructure |
| ☐ Technology Collections | ☐ Capital Projects | ☒ Programs, Services & Collections |

How will you bring this to your board's attention?