

# Strategic plans and their contents: What are the important issues in higher education?

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## **Abstract**

*Strategic planning has become a virtual requirement in higher education management. Huge amounts of time, energy, and money are committed to the process by individuals representing every level in a university's hierarchy. Despite widespread adoption and commitment, researchers have frequently questioned whether the content of these plans varies significantly among institutions, or if they are essentially interchangeable compendiums of buzzwords and cliches. Our study quantified the presence of various ideas, or themes, in strategic plans from 150 public higher education institutions in the United States. Our analyses provide evidence of what is important to strategic planners in higher education, where in the plans these themes tend to be discussed, and how patterns of usage vary across Carnegie classifications and geographic settings. Such information can be useful to planners in identifying concepts that should be present in their strategic plans, as well as those that can distinguish an institution from its peers.*

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## **Introduction**

Strategic planning as a process and product was first developed by the military, and subsequently adopted by the corporate world in the 1960s. Strategic planning entered academia in the 1970s and it became widely used by higher education management in the 1980s. Strategic planning was ultimately embraced by higher education accreditation agencies in the 1990s. Their mandates essentially required some form of strategic planning (Dooris et al., 2002; Zimmerman, 2024). Currently, strategic planning is virtually universal among institutions of higher education (Gardner, 2021; Graves & Erickson, under review; Zinkan et al., 2021).

Although there are instances of superficial attempts at strategic planning (Graves & Erickson, under review), anyone who has engaged in the process can attest that it is almost invariably quite costly with

regard to time, energy, money, and even political capital. But its return on investment is largely a matter of faith; the value of strategic planning has been questioned often and for many years (Buller, 2014; Dooris et al., 2002; Eckel, 2023; Eckel & Trower, 2019; Gardner, 2021; Gordon & Fisher, 2015; Graves & Erickson, 2024; Mallon, 2019; Moran, 1985; Mintzberg, 1994; Rowley et al., 1997; Zinkan et al., 2021). Several researchers have suggested that the contents of strategic plans are very similar, if not interchangeable, across institutions (Buller, 2014; Eckel & Trower, 2019; Gardner, 2021; Presley & Leslie, 1999). It has been suggested that these statements “use language that is superficially impressive but does not really say very much” (Buller, 2014), were “idealized platitudes with little institution-specific text” (Conway et al., 1994), or are a “restatement of the obvious, combined with a generous sprinkling of buzzwords that masquerade as expertise” (Rumelt, 2011). However, such comparisons and evaluations tend to be subjective and anecdotal. There has been little analysis of the content of strategic plans.

### Literature Review

A few studies have examined the contents of higher education strategic plans with regard to their structure (Gordon & Fischer, 2015; Graves and Erickson, under review; Ozdem, 2011; Zinkan et al., 2021). Perhaps because a number of guides to strategic planning are available (Chance & Williams, 2009; Hinton, 2012; Lerner, 1999; Rowley et al., 1997; Yeager et al., 2013; Zechlin, 2010), certain structural components and conceptual ideals appear repeatedly in higher education strategic plans, although there is also significant variation (Graves & Erickson, under review).

Even fewer studies have looked for the conceptual ideas that are addressed in strategic plans (Barringer et al., 2020; Hall & Lulich, 2021; Harris, 2010) and these looked only for single issues (e.g., innovation or interdisciplinarity). When undertaking a strategic planning project, it is useful to know what other institutions have put into their strategic plans. Such information could be useful as planners may wonder whether there are important issues that they have overlooked. Some institutions may find it prudent to follow common practice. Others may seek to distinguish themselves from peers by emphasizing unique characteristics and ideals. Planners may emulate aspirational institutions, or try to avoid filling their plan with verbiage that is essentially the same as what everyone else says. Currently, planners at colleges and universities are left to make such decisions based on opinions and anecdotes, or by perusing a few peer institutions.

Clearly, it would be useful to know what others are doing before embarking on a process that hundreds, if not thousands, of institutions have completed before. “Reinventing the wheel” may not be an efficient approach to strategic planning. The goal of this study is to better understand the content, similarities, and differences among strategic plans produced by a broad array of public higher education institutions in the United States. We attempted to quantitatively analyze the ideas and concepts presented by colleges and universities in their strategic plans.

### Research Methodology

A list of all public institutions of higher education in the United States and their Carnegie classifications was obtained from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the American Council on Education (<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/>) based on 2021 data. The institutions were sorted into eight Carnegie categories that included Baccalaureate Diverse, Baccalaureate Mixed, Baccalaureate Arts and Sciences, Master’s Small, Master’s Medium, Master’s Large, Doctoral High Research, and Doctoral Very High Research. Twenty institutions from each of the eight categories were randomly selected. Our goal was to obtain a broad array of institutions within the three Carnegie degree levels (i.e., Baccalaureate, Master’s, and Doctoral) from 160 institutions. In addition to the institution’s name and Carnegie classification, a mapping function from the National Center for Education Statistics

(<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/maped/LocaleLookup/>) was used to categorize each institution's geographic setting as rural, town, suburban, or urban. Strategic plans were collected during summer and fall of 2022, mostly from institutional websites. We attempted to obtain strategic plans that were not posted on websites by contacting the institution's president's office by telephone to ask for a copy. One category included only nineteen institutions. Five institutions did not have strategic plans; all were branch campuses of larger institutions. Interestingly, four institutions seemed to have a strategic plan, but refused to provide it. As a result, 150 strategic plans (52 baccalaureate, 59 master's, 39 doctoral) were reviewed.

### Theme Definition and Quantification Software

The contents of the 150 strategic plans that were acquired for this study were analyzed using NVivo (release 1.7.1 by QSR International), which is designed for qualitative and mixed methods analysis of text, audio, and video sources. Recurrent concepts (which we have called themes) were identified in the strategic plans. Themes were chosen on the basis of our personal experiences with strategic planning, as well as our assessment of the prominence of terms, phrases, and ideas that recurred while reading thousands of pages of strategic plans. Themes could not be identified on the basis of a single term or phrase, because there are several ways to state various concepts. For example, a common theme in higher education strategic plans is "diversity." Other terms that may be considered functionally equivalent include "equity," "inclusion," "multicultural," and "global." Furthermore, a single word can indicate different concepts, depending on context. For example, entrepreneurship sometimes refers to innovation, but sometimes refers to career. The problem of lumping versus splitting themes was also apparent. For example, "Infrastructure" could be separated into subcategories of "People" and "Things." While these were clearly delineated in some cases, it was common for them to be closely linked in a single phrase (e.g., promote technology, improve customer service). Similarly, "Community" could be separated into "On-campus" and "Off-campus" subcategories, but these also could frequently not be delineated (e.g., promote service, connection to place). Splitting of categories was also sometimes necessary. For example, "Communication" was originally included within "Innovation" because communication often seemed intended to promote cross-disciplinary work and new ideas. However, much communication is not innovative and, hence, these were separated. Obviously, there is subjectivity involved in creating the themes and assigning terminology to them. Table 1 lists the themes that seemed most apparent, along with words and phrases that alluded to similar concepts.

- **Alumni**
- **Broad Education** - extracurricular, co-curricular, liberal, comprehensive, athletics, general education, study abroad, international
- **Career** - applied, employment, entrepreneurship, internships, real world, competitive, workforce
- **Character** - leadership, ethics, civility, compassion, good, integrity, social responsibility, justice, citizenship
- **Communication** - transparency, trust, collaboration, shared governance
- **Community** - service, place, connections, civic engagement, relationships, partnerships, economic development, region, local, campus community, learning community
- **Distinctive** - unique, signature, identity
- **Diversity** - inclusion, equity, multicultural, global
- **Engagement**
- **Enrollment** - recruitment, retention, student success, access, affordability, opportunity, empower, supportive, graduation

- **Excellence** - premier, outstanding, pride, quality, choice, destination, top tier, exemplary, rigor, distinguished, selective, significance, leader, exemplary, prominence, first class
- **Financial** - advancement, budget, funding, resources, grants, contracts, development
- **Institutional Characteristics** - Carnegie classification, demography, geography, selectivity
- **Infrastructure** - administration, staff, efficiency, faculty, professional development, customer service, facilities, technology, buildings, spaces, processes
- **Innovation** - transformation, resilience, proactive, interdisciplinary, integrative, collaboration, continuous improvement, entrepreneurship
- **Marketing** - image, advocacy, lobbying, promote, brand, pride
- **Programs**, curriculum
- **Scholarship** - creativity, research, creative works, knowledge,
- **Student**
- **Sustainable** - environment
- **Teaching** - learning, academic success, active learning, engagement, student-faculty relationships, pedagogy

Table 1. Themes (bold font) in Strategic Plans and Similar Terminology

The NVivo software was used to code text throughout the documents according to these themes. It also provided the ability to analyze their frequencies (the number of times mentioned) within the various components of strategic plans. These included Mission Statements, Vision Statements, Values Statements, Level 1 Items (i.e., broad goals), Level 2 Items (i.e., more specific action items embedded within Level 1 items), or anywhere in the document (see Graves and Erickson, under review).

Descriptive data were obtained concerning how often themes appeared from two perspectives. First, themes were ranked by how often they were mentioned in various components of strategic plans across all institutions. Next, the proportion of institutions that mention a theme in various sections of strategic plans was compared across degree levels of institutions (Baccalaureate, Masters, Doctoral). Data were then statistically analyzed to examine the effects of Carnegie classification (degree level) of the institution and Geographic Location of the institution (Rural, Town, Suburban, Urban) on the frequency of appearance of each theme in strategic plans. R statistics (R Core Team, 2022) was used to analyze these data as a two-factor (Carnegie Classification x Geographic Setting) analysis of variance. The response variable was count (number of occurrences per institutional strategic plan), typically with many low counts. Therefore, a generalized linear model with the Poisson family was used. If the ratio of residual deviance to degrees of freedom was  $> 1.5$ , a quasi-Poisson distribution, which corrects for overdispersion, was used. Significance in a Poisson model is tested with a chi-square statistic, whereas the quasi-Poisson uses an F statistic. All models were initially tested for a Carnegie classification x Geographic Setting interaction. If the interaction was not significant, the analysis for that theme was rerun excluding the interaction term from the analysis (i.e., main effects only). For post-hoc multiple comparison tests, the Emmeans package (Lenth, 2023) was used to compute estimated marginal means along with Tukey-adjusted pairwise comparisons. This resulted in some significant main effects having no significant differences in pairwise comparisons. Alpha was  $p < .05$  for all analyses.

## Results and Discussion

### Ranking of How Frequently Themes Are Mentioned in Various Parts of Strategic Plans

Table 2 reports the rank of each theme (most frequently mentioned at the top and least frequently mentioned at the bottom) within strategic plan sections, summed across all institutions. If the frequency

that a theme is mentioned indicates the importance that an institution puts in it, then we can see which themes are most valued in various sections of the strategic plans. Zinkan et al. (2021) found that “diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging” was by far the most common theme in the 108 higher education strategic plans that they surveyed. Following DEI in their study were “financial sustainability,” “community outreach,” “research, scholarship and creative work,” and “student experience and success.” In our study, Community, Student, and Diversity rank highly throughout strategic plans. Community (which includes service) is most frequently mentioned in Mission Statements, Excellence is most frequently mentioned in Vision Statements, and Diversity is ranked highest in Values statements. Level 1 and Level 2 Items once again mention Community and Student frequently, but refer to Enrollment and Infrastructure more than Mission, Vision, and Values Statements. The former probably relates to the “Financial Stability” mentioned by Zinkan et al. (2021), while the latter is probably a function of the tendency of strategic plans to emphasize operational planning (how we will do something) over strategic planning (identification of institutional strengths and distinctiveness that can be used to become more competitive) (Buller, 2014; Eckel & Trower, 2019; Gardner, 2021). On the other end of the spectrum, Alumni and Sustainability are mentioned infrequently. In contrast, Bieler & McKenzie (2017) found that 41 of 50 (82%) strategic plans from Canadian higher education institutions mentioned sustainability. It is surprising that Distinctive is the least mentioned theme across all institutions’ strategic plans, because several authors emphasize that determining how an institution will differentiate itself from its competition is a primary function of the strategic plan (Buller, 2014; Eckel & Trower, 2019; Mallon, 2019). Morphew et al. (2018) note that terms related to our themes of Excellence, Community, Diversity, Innovation, and Student are commonly mentioned in university strategic plans. These are also frequent in the strategic plans studied here, although Innovation falls more toward the middle of the rankings.

<u>Mission</u>	<u>Vision</u>	<u>Values</u>	<u>Level 1</u>	<u>Level 2</u>	<u>Anywhere</u>
Community	Excellence	Diversity	Student	Student	Community
Student	Community	Character	Community	Community	Student
Teaching	Student	Community	Enrollment	Infrastructure	Diversity
Diversity	Innovation	Excellence	Excellence	Enrollment	Infrastructure
Excellence	Institution	Teaching	Engagement	Teaching	Engagement
Scholarship	Diversity	Innovation	Infrastructure	Engagement	Enrollment
Character	Teaching	Student	Diversity	Diversity	Teaching
Institution	Scholarship	Communication	Innovation	Programs	Excellence
Engagement	Character	Scholarship	Scholarship	Financial	Innovation
Innovation	Engagement	Engagement	Financial	Scholarship	Programs
Career	Programs	Enrollment	Teaching	Innovation	Career
Programs	Career	Sustainability	Career	Career	Financial
Broad	Infrastructure	Infrastructure	Programs	Communication	Scholarship
Enrollment	Broad	Career	Communication	Excellence	Character
Sustainability	Enrollment	Programs	Character	Marketing	Communication
Financial	Distinctive	Broad	Sustainability	Broad	Broad
Distinctive	Communication	Institution	Marketing	Alumni	Institution
Communicat	Financial	Financial	Broad	Sustainability	Marketing
Infrastructure	Sustainability	Distinctive	Distinctive	Character	Sustainability
Marketing	Alumni	Marketing	Institution	Distinctive	Alumni
Alumni	Marketing	Alumni	Alumni	Institution	Distinctive

Table 2. Rank of themes (most frequent at the top) in various components of strategic plans (Communication is abbreviated as Communicat; Institutional Characteristics is abbreviated as Institution).

### Use of Themes by Carnegie classification and Component of Strategic Plan

Patterns in the appearance of themes can also be analyzed with regard to the proportion of institutions in each Carnegie classification that refer to each theme (rather than how frequently they mention a theme, as above). Such data are presented in Table 3, broken down by degree category and section of the plan. Most themes appear in a higher proportion of Level 2 Items than other sections, probably simply because there are often a lot of Level 2 Items and so many opportunities to mention themes. Across all institutions, the most commonly mentioned themes (at least 90% of institutions) were Community, Student, Diversity, Infrastructure, Enrollment, and Engagement. The least commonly mentioned themes (less than 50% of institutions) were Sustainability, Alumni, and Distinctive. Master's institutions tend to talk about Broad Education, Career, Character, and Communication more than others, reflecting their comprehensive nature (at least 10 percentage points higher than either baccalaureate or doctoral institutions anywhere in the strategic plan). Not surprisingly, doctoral institutions talk more (using the same criterion) about Scholarship.

#### Alumni

	Mission	Vision	Values	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	0	0	2	2	31	31
Masters	0	2	3	10	36	41
Doctoral	0	0	0	10	31	36
All	0	1	2	7	33	36

#### Broad Education

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	10	4	6	17	40	48
Masters	22	8	14	12	56	66
Doctoral	3	0	0	13	46	51
All	13	5	7	14	48	56

#### Career

	Mission	Vision	Values	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	27	13	8	23	50	71
Masters	27	14	15	44	61	85
Doctoral	3	5	5	33	62	74
All	21	11	10	34	57	77

#### Character

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	37	21	37	21	31	69
Masters	46	17	49	27	37	83
Doctoral	21	8	49	13	23	69
All	36	16	45	21	31	75

#### Communication

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	6	10	23	29	42	60
Masters	5	0	25	25	68	80
Doctoral	3	8	33	13	46	67
All	5	5	27	23	53	69

**Community**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	48	33	29	77	85	100
Masters	66	46	51	80	80	97
Doctoral	56	28	38	85	85	100
All	57	37	40	80	83	99

**Distinctive**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	8	6	4	17	12	29
Masters	2	8	3	8	22	32
Doctoral	10	0	0	5	21	31
All	6	5	3	11	18	31

**Diversity**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	40	27	38	40	65	88
Masters	51	32	54	56	76	97
Doctoral	31	21	56	51	64	87
All	42	27	49	49	69	91

**Engagement**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	31	19	23	48	60	88
Masters	34	17	29	61	85	93
Doctoral	21	8	18	67	74	87
All	29	15	24	58	73	90

**Enrollment**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	19	10	17	69	69	85
Masters	7	2	20	69	85	97
Doctoral	10	3	18	49	69	87
All	12	5	19	64	75	90

**Excellence**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	46	48	23	54	42	81
Masters	46	47	47	59	54	93
Doctoral	23	46	33	62	62	90
All	40	47	35	58	52	88

**Financial**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	2	4	2	37	58	73
Masters	8	5	7	54	69	81
Doctoral	8	3	8	23	69	77
All	6	4	5	40	65	77

**Infrastructure**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	4	13	10	60	77	90
Masters	3	7	15	56	88	93
Doctoral	0	3	10	56	77	87
All	3	8	12	57	81	91

**Innovation**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	17	31	27	35	50	81
Masters	24	41	41	44	59	85
Doctoral	26	26	31	59	67	92
All	22	33	28	45	58	85

**Institutional Characteristics**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	35	21	4	10	6	48
Masters	41	29	7	12	7	63
Doctoral	26	38	8	8	8	54
All	35	29	6	10	7	55

**Marketing**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	0	0	0	29	52	58
Masters	0	0	7	7	49	56
Doctoral	0	0	3	18	44	51
All	0	0	3	17	49	55

**Programs**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	27	13	8	33	58	81
Masters	22	19	10	31	75	81
Doctoral	5	0	5	23	62	72
All	19	12	8	29	65	79

**Scholarship**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	29	10	15	15	40	56
Masters	42	22	27	42	66	78
Doctoral	44	26	31	79	79	97
All	38	19	24	43	61	75

**Student**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	50	35	27	73	81	92
Masters	54	39	25	93	92	98
Doctoral	41	26	31	90	79	97
All	49	34	27	85	85	96

**Sustainability**

	Mission	Vision	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	4	4	13	23	31	44
Masters	8	3	12	22	32	44
Doctoral	5	0	13	18	33	49
All	6	3	13	21	32	45

**Teaching**

	Mission	Vision	Values	Level 1	Level 2	Anywhere
Baccalaureate	42	29	21	33	69	79
Masters	58	24	37	47	83	95
Doctoral	36	13	26	28	67	92
All	47	23	29	37	74	89

Table 3. Percent of Institutions that Include Various Themes

**Effects of Carnegie classification and Geographic Location on Theme Frequency**

Table 4 shows the themes for which frequency was significantly affected by Carnegie classification, geographic location, or the interaction between these two factors. The only significant interaction effect was for the theme Alumni. Alumni was mentioned more by rural institutions than the other geographic settings, but only in baccalaureate settings. This may reflect the reliance of small baccalaureate institutions on fundraising and endowments from alumni who are more connected to their alma maters than at larger institutions.

<u>Carnegie classification</u>	<u>Geographic Location</u>	<u>Interaction</u>
Distinctive $X^2_{2,147}=411.76; p < .012$	Scholarship $F_{3,144}=6.63; p < .001$	Alumni $X^2_{5,139}=195.33; p < .023$
Character $F_{2,147}=4.10; p < .019$	Excellence $F_{3,144}=3.38; p < .020$	
Community $F_{2,147}=3.39; p < .036$		
Engagement $F_{2,147}=3.23; p < .042$		
Enrollment $F_{2,147}=4.29; p < .016$		
Excellence $F_{2,147}=3.91; p < .022$		
Innovation $F_{2,147}=4.66; p < .011$		
Scholarship $F_{2,147}=27.41; p < .001$		
Teaching and Learning $F_{2,147}=4.40; p < .014$		

Table 4. Theme frequencies that were significantly affected by Carnegie classification and geographic location in strategic plans.

Multiple comparison tests show that Development of Character is referred to by master’s institutions significantly more than by doctoral institutions. This may reflect a greater emphasis on liberal arts education at the former, but one would expect this to also be found in baccalaureate institutions.

Similarly, a Broad Education was mentioned more by master's institutions than by doctoral institutions, which may reflect the tendency of some master's institutions to emulate smaller liberal arts institutions. Although there were significant main effects of Carnegie classification on Enrollment, Innovation, Excellence, and Community, multiple comparison tests did not produce significant contrasts.

Baccalaureate institutions mentioned being Distinctive significantly more than doctoral institutions. This is likely related to the need for small institutions to distinguish themselves from the competition (and hence engage in strategic planning), while public doctoral institutions are generally quite large, include most academic disciplines, and are uniformly focused on scholarship.

Master's institutions discussed Engagement significantly more than baccalaureate institutions. This theme could refer to engagement with a variety of entities. Sometimes it promoted on-campus engagement with classes, student-faculty scholarship, or extracurricular activities. Sometimes it referred to off-campus engagement with community service, internships, or social issues. The relatively high frequency of this theme in the strategic plans of master's institutions may reflect aspirations and marketing aimed at enrollment, rather than its current level of importance at these institutions.

While the frequency of reference to Enrollment did not differ between groups in multiple comparison tests, Carnegie classification had a significant effect in the general linear models analysis. The difference between mean frequency is greatest for masters compared to doctoral institutions. Doctoral institutions are generally more selective in admissions than master's institutions, and may be able to compensate for falling numbers of high school graduates by simply admitting a higher proportion of applicants. Master's institutions may not have this option and so must emphasize strategies to enhance enrollment.

In the general linear models analysis of Excellence, there were significant effects of both Carnegie classification and geographic setting. However, multiple comparison tests showed significant differences only between town and urban geographic settings. This difference is hard to speculate upon. The difference between Carnegie classifications may reflect "organizational mobility," which is described by Morphew et al. (2018) as efforts to move up in national rankings. This would create a tendency for universities to promote perceptions of excellence. It could also reflect concerns about external perceptions of an institution's quality and a need to enhance this in order to attract students, which may be especially prevalent among master's institutions.

Innovation is another theme whose frequency differed significantly between Carnegie classification in the general linear models analysis, but did not produce significant paired contrasts in the multiple comparison tests. Still, any effect of Carnegie classification would come from a difference between baccalaureate and higher-level institutions. This could be related to the importance of scholarship at masters and doctoral institutions, or to their generally larger size that may provide opportunities for innovative changes in curriculum or administrative efficiencies. The theme Innovation included the term "interdisciplinary" in this study. Several studies have found that both of these concepts are common in strategic plans of universities (Hall & Lulich, 2021; Harris, 2010; Morphew et al., 2018).

There were significant effects of both Carnegie classification and geographic setting on the frequency of reference to Scholarship. Multiple comparison tests show that baccalaureate institutions referred to Scholarship significantly less than both master's and doctoral institutions, but master's institutions did not differ from doctoral institutions in this regard. This aligns well with the importance of scholarship and graduate training at the various institutions. Master's institutions may not differ from doctoral institutions because of the former's aspirations to emulate doctoral institutions, resulting in the "mission creep" that is often a result of strategic planning (Buller, 2014; Hinton, 2022). Additionally, Scholarship was mentioned less by institutions in town settings than in rural or urban settings. Once again, this effect of geographic setting is hard to interpret.

Teaching was mentioned significantly more at master's institutions than doctoral institutions. The focus on teaching and learning is often used as a marketing tool by comprehensive universities. In contrast, teaching in the classroom is a primary focus at baccalaureate institutions. Consequently, such institutions may not feel a need to emphasize plans for improvement in this area. At doctoral, research-intensive universities, classroom teaching is sometimes caricatured as an afterthought. This data lends some credence to such lore.

## Conclusions

Strategic planning is ubiquitous in higher education today. Furthermore, it is a repetitive process occurring most commonly on a five-year cycle or when a new president arrives (Graves and Erickson, under review). Planners and institutions beginning the next iteration of their strategic planning process would be wise to consider what others have produced. Unfortunately, information in this regard is usually limited to a brief survey of what a few hand-picked peer institutions have posted on their websites. A planner might want to know what are common features, what is variable, and to what extent? Many who study this field have caricatured academic strategic plans as essentially interchangeable compendiums of buzzwords, jargon, and platitudes (Buller, 2014; Eckel & Trower, 2019; Gardner, 2021; Presley & Leslie, 1999). Based on strategic plans collected in late-2022, our analysis suggests that certain themes appear frequently in college and university descriptions of what their institutions are, what they should become, and how they will get there. On the other side of the coin, even the most central themes in higher education, such as Students, Teaching, and Community are in most plans, but are not universal. Furthermore, there are a few statistically significant differences between institutions that function at various degree levels or in different geographic settings.

One might wonder whether similarities and differences in the concepts discussed in strategic plans exist because of similarities and differences in the characteristics, student bodies, academic programs, current missions, and plans for the future of various higher education institutions? Or do the similarities exist because most colleges and universities are trying to do essentially the same things in similar ways, while differences exist because planners working in relative isolation simply fail to think of everything. How can a college or university write a strategic plan that never mentions students (4% of plans), teaching (11% of plans), or scholarship (25% of plans)? Is it because the institutions are different or the planners are different and, with little actual training in strategic planning, continually reinvent the wheel in a somewhat haphazard way? One could come to the conclusion that maybe it doesn't really matter that much what ends up in most of the strategic plan? We propose that one value of our study is as a set of ideas that planners can use to consider what issues and ideas might be included in their own strategic plans. When standard themes are included, planners should think about why they are there and how they might be molded to reflect the distinctive character that an institution has or hopes for. Similar questions should be asked when standard themes are omitted.

Furthermore, this study can serve as a baseline for comparison with future analyses of strategic planning in higher education. Much has changed in higher education and the United States in the three years since the strategic plans analyzed here were collected. The Carnegie classification system was recently revised to incorporate academic program mix and student population size into the traditional emphasis on degree levels. The United States government has embarked on a campaign to essentially eradicate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs, which have comprised one of the more pervasive themes in academic strategic plans. The number of high school graduates is plummeting and the proportion that attend college is declining significantly. Many potential college students and their families do not accept the virtually dogmatic assumption that the higher education experience is valuable for everyone, both economically and personally. Our personal experiences tell us that most students see

college as a job training program first, with liberal education being a tangential concern. How will this changing set of parameters in which higher education operates affect strategic planning? Our hope is that this survey and analysis can start to fill the gap in our knowledge about what is actually in strategic plans from a broad array of higher education institutions.

### Limitations and Direction for Future Research

Some degree of subjectivity is necessarily a part of theme definition and identification. Because of recent advances in natural language processing (e.g., Khurana et al., 2023) replication of this work using such artificial intelligence tools could be quite informative. Computer processing and analysis of strategic plans could make inclusion of much larger sample sizes feasible. Of paramount importance is empirical examination of the actual effects of strategic planning on university function, which has yet to be addressed.

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