Chapter 5: Planning

This chapter covers:

✓ Reasons for planning

✓ The planning team

✓ The planning process

✓ Plan follow-up

Why Plan

One of the most important and often overlooked responsibilities of a library board is strategic planning. Having a plan is like having good insurance – it is always there to fall back on. It is also a road map to tell where the library is going. Size does not matter. Every library needs a plan, no matter how small or how large the library and community may be.

Planning for libraries is a process of envisioning the future of both the community and the library and setting a direction to move the library toward a chosen future vision. Planning helps the staff and board understand the situation of their community, set priorities and establish methods for achieving those priorities. The planning document provides a record of the decisions made during that process. The document also becomes a guide for decision-making and action by staff and the board.

The importance of planning cannot be overemphasized. The library board or director that does not plan is like a shopper going to the store without a shopping list. The library may be offering services that are not really needed by the community while failing to offer the one or two services that might provide a great benefit.

Planning essentials—getting started

The process followed to create a plan will depend on the size of the library and community involved with the project. Large and even many medium-sized libraries or those accustomed to planning may have the resources and experience to undertake a full-blown process such as that described in *Strategic Planning for Results—(*Nelson, Sanda, ALA, 2008), the Aspen Institute plan or Best Practices in Connecticut Public Libraries (https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/dld/bestpractices). *Strategic Planning for Results* provides a blueprint for creating a vision of the future for a library and its community along with a blueprint for creating the services that will enable a library to achieve its vision. Because it is so thorough, *Planning for Results* describes a fairly time-intensive process involving a large cast of players. Any library, including smaller ones or those new to planning, will benefit from undertaking the process outlined in *Planning for Results* if the board and staff have the commitment, time and resources to follow through.

Libraries should start with a mission statement, reviewing the current one or crafting a new one. The mission statement defines the library's purpose, describes the functions it performs and for whom, and states why it is valuable to the community. The mission statement should be kept short. One sentence is best.

Sample mission statements may be found at: https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/dld/help/samples

A link to mission statements is found here in the list of Connecticut sample policies.

Who Plans?

The strategic plan for the library benefits from input from multiple individuals.

The minimum number needed to draft a strategic plan is one. On the other hand, large committees can be a real problem. Ideally, the group should number between seven and nine including two or three trustees, the library director, two or three staff, a government representative and one or two good library customers.

The library director can be relied on to gather statistics about a community. Important statistics include:

- The size of the community broken down by age, gender, racial heritage, etc.

- The existence of large or growing groups of newcomers to the community such as urban or rural transplants, new ethnic groups, etc.

- Economic factors such as household incomes and sources of payrolls

- An educational profile of the community

At the same time the director and staff can gather facts about the library. Questions to ask include:

- What services are currently being offered?

- How have usage patterns been changing in the past few years?

- What is the composition of the collection? How many resources does the library own, including books, recorded books, videos, children's books , etc.?

- How old is the collection? What is the average publication date for each section of the nonfiction collection?

By discussing these and similar facts about the library and the community, the staff and board can reach some basic conclusions with which to plan future services. For example, a library with a small large-print collection in a community with a stable aging population may want to buy more large-print books. A science collection with relatively few titles less than one or two years old probably needs updating.

By talking to other stakeholders, library planners can add to the strength and reliability of their plan as well as obtain buy-in from the public. There is a substantial list of individuals and groups that might be consulted as part of a basic planning process. Which ones a library chooses will depend on its particular situation.

Suggested players include:

- The mayor and city council (or equivalent)

- Municipal employees such as an economic development officer, senior center director or recreation department director

- Representatives from the PTA, teachers and board of education

- Representatives of active service groups such as the Elks, Rotary or Lions

- Representatives of other social service organizations such as those representing growing minority populations

- Representatives of the religious community

- Current library users

- Those not currently using the library

The more people consulted about the community, the more information that will be available to use in creating the strategic plan.

Gathering Information

Probably the most common mistake library planners make when consulting the community in preparation for a strategic plan is to ask people about the library. Neophyte planners ask what library services people are looking for. The real purpose of consulting all of these community representatives is to find out about *them*—what they are doing and what is important in their lives and work. The library staff and board are the experts in the broad array of possible library services. It is up to the experts to be creative in proposing new services or changes in services to meet emerging needs. For example, the mayor and city council may be interested in developing tourism in a community but they may not think of the library as a vehicle for collecting and disseminating local

information of interest to tourists. If people are asked what the library should be like, they will probably answer based on their preconceptions about what a library is. Instead, they should be asked about community needs. Library resources can be used to develop services to help fill them. There are various ways to ask this large array of players about community needs. One of the simplest but most effective is simply to invite them to the library or a neutral site

and talk to them. Someone experienced in conducting focus group interviews should be brought in. Groups can be built around particular interests or important segments of the community such as children or immigrants. The board can assist the interviewer in eliciting the opinions of interested parties regarding what is important to them.

Library planners often gather information by means of surveys. The following ideas should be considered:

- What are the specific questions to be answered? What hypotheses are being tested?

- How will having the information affect the investigation? Questions should not be posed simply for the sake of asking. For example, if a respondent is asked where he or she went to college, how will this knowledge be helpful?

- How will the information be used?

- Will the survey reach the target audience? Surveys done inside the library are useless for learning the needs and opinions of non-users. Current library users do not necessarily represent a cross section of the community.

- How will the survey be distributed?

- How will the survey be tabulated?

A pretest should be conducted to make sure the respondents have the same understanding of the questions as the library does.

Enlisting the help of someone experienced in writing and conducting surveys before they begin does not have to cost anything. A volunteer may be found at a local Chamber of Commerce or a nearby university. A local resident who has conducted surveys as part of his or her business may be willing to help. If the library composes its own survey, someone outside the organization should critique it. A poorly executed survey can have less value than none at all. It may even lead to opposite conclusions from those that might have been reached otherwise.

Outline of the Strategic Plan

After all information is gathered, it needs to be organized using a simple plan like this:

Introduction: In discussing the planning process, questions such as these should be considered. Who are the people in the community? What are the library and community like? How was this people in the community? What are the library and the community like? How was this determined? Who was consulted? How were they consulted? What was learned?

Mission Statement: What vision of the community is the library trying to support? What is the library's role in supporting that vision? What is the reason the library exists?

Service Responses: What are the specific services the library will offer and why?

Activities: What activities should be carried out for each of these services? These activities should be listed along with what the library intends to accomplish and the way they relate to the library's mission.

Evaluation: How it will the library measure the impact these services are having on the target population? Means should be determined by which the library can determine if it is doing the right things and the alternatives available if it is not.

The specific time frame the plan should cover will depend on how ambitious it is or how many activities the library hopes to carry out. There is no formula dictating that the plan should last five years, three years or even one year. The plan should be based on what makes sense for the library and the community. The most important thing is to be adaptive.

Plan Follow-up

The plan should be followed and revisited along the way to make sure it is taking the library where it wants to go and to revise it as necessary. At the end of the planning cycle when all evaluations are in, it is time to start over, create a new plan and perhaps go a little further in the information-gathering process.

The strategic plan should be used every year to set goals for the library board.

Other Specialized Plans
- Technology plans
- Facilities plans
- Emergency preparedness plans
- Americans with Disabilities Act

In addition to general strategic planning for the entire library, the board should also consider planning projects focusing on special issues such as technology or disaster preparedness.

Because new technologies can greatly expand the services and resources offered by a library, it is important that all libraries be involved in some type of technology planning.

Most libraries will rarely experience a severe emergency or natural disaster, but it is best to be prepared just in case. Fires, floods, tornadoes and hazardous material accidents can endanger lives and it is important for libraries to have plans and/or policies in place for dealing with these types of emergencies. It is also important for staff to be trained to handle emergencies properly, including medical emergencies.

Plans and/or policies can also be established to prepare for recovery of library materials after an accident or disaster.

Sources of Additional Information

Nelson, Sandra. *Strategic Planning for Results*. Chicago, IL: ALA, 2008.

Disaster Preparedness Clearinghouse web site http://www.ala.org/alcts/resources/preserv/disasterclear developed by the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, a division of the American Library Association

Emergency Preparedness for CT Libraries: Emergency Preparedness https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/dld/emergency

Emergency Preparedness for CT Libraries: Resources for Disaster Preparedness https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/dld/emergency/disaster

Conservation OnLine (CoOL), *Disaster Preparedness and Response* (at http://cool.conservation-us.org/bytopic/disasters/

Reed, Sally Gardner; Kalonick, Jillian *The Complete Library Trustee Handbook*. New York: Neal Schuman 2010