As part of this ECAR study, we reviewed a random sample of IT plans that were developed and posted to the Web by U.S. and Canadian EDUCAUSE member institutions. The plans reviewed for this research represent a wide variety of institutions and reflect the even wider variety of notions about why to plan, how to plan, what to plan, and what to say publicly. This chapter presents the results of our review. By and large, our findings based on our reading of these plans, with some exceptions noted below, corroborate those found elsewhere in this study.

The planning literature—both academic and management—includes consistent patterns of recommendations. These patterns extend across higher education and beyond, even though the plans reviewed do not reveal whether or not higher education practitioners use standard models for either IT or institutional strategic planning. The abundant literature on planning is dominated in the academic context by the work of George Keller and in the general organizational context by that of Henry Mintzberg. Yet despite explicit reference to standard theory and practice, the ECAR review of plans suggests that

**Key Findings**

- Higher education’s IT plans are not widespread on the public Web.
- Higher education’s IT plans do not refer to standard planning methods and frameworks and do not conform closely to prescriptions in the literature. These plans are strongly situated in their institutional contexts.
- Higher education’s IT plans are derived, in general, from public, broad-based, consensus-seeking processes that serve to communicate the capacities and constraints of the IT organization and function.
- Higher education’s IT plans tend to be inward-looking and do not benefit tremendously from a systematic scanning of the external environment.
- IT plans are more often tactical than strategic in nature.
- Most institutions studied view vision and mission as the cornerstones of their IT plan.
- Achieving public congruence between the institution and the IT priorities seems critical for the eventual implementation of strategic IT plans.

- colleges and universities explicitly share the same concerns in planning, and
- the individual cultures of those institutions shape the manner in which they plan.
This study of IT and institutional plans reviews the elements from those recommendations and describes how those elements have been included in various IT plans. Always, we have kept in mind the wisdom of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's John R. Curry. After summarizing two decades of changes within higher education IT, he suggests three lessons. Paraphrased, these are the reminders that:
- within higher education, change occurs incrementally;
- universities are “deeply decentralized, loosely coupled by nature”; and
- people, organizations, and their cultures are conditioners of change.

The evaluated plans’ great diversity most especially reflects the third lesson. While certain elements and concerns may appear in a significant number of plans, the plans themselves reflect institutional environments. Our study and the literature suggest that planning frequently occurs in response to events that occur within institutions and is often specifically designed to meet institutional challenges. Further, we found significant effort to align the IT planning efforts with institutional goals and objectives at a tactical level rather than at the more abstract, long-range strategic level.

While this can identify frequent concerns and practices, we acknowledge the limits of any attempt to impute so-called effective practices from this analysis alone. Applying external standards to planning is often fruitless because to be effective, planning must reflect the institution. We observed that plans vary in length from a few pages to more than 100 pages but understand that examples at those extreme edges might be appropriate to the institutions’ needs. In this chapter we analyze what commonly appears in strategic plans and the alignment of those plans with the institution.

ECAR compared the number of plans found in the random sample with the number of positive institutional responses to the quantitative survey question, “Is your IT strategic plan published on the Web?” (See Figures 7-1a and 7-1b.) Apparently, many colleges and universities are ambivalent about making public their planning efforts. In the quantitative survey, of the 273 institutions that have an IT plan, 112 (41.0 percent) indicated their plans were publicly available on the Web, and another 70 (25.6 percent) indicated their plans were available on their intranet only, with limited access. The ECAR review of 250 random campus Web sites found 57 plans, representing 22.8 percent of sites reviewed.
Clearly, those who intend to make their plans public have done so effectively!

Although this sample of plans might not cover all varieties of IT strategic plans used in higher education, we believe it offers considerable insight into the variety of issues that concern planners.

**Content of IT Plans**

To provide a basis for our quantitative analysis, we recorded our findings for each of the 57 plans in a matrix created for this purpose. This matrix included issues discussed in the literature, items derived from our survey questions, and items that would allow us to test several hypotheses. We organized these issues within six broad categories of concern:

- vision and mission,
- the purpose of planning,
- organization and procedures,
- inventory of concerns,
- funding issues, and
- strategic thinking.

Table 7-1 reports how frequently we identified significant planning foundations, purposes, and processes in the plans reviewed. All but three plans have IT objective statements, although these tend to be rather general. For example, a common statement in response to the purpose of planning is, “Provide necessary technology infrastructure.” Similarly, many plans include a desire to “communicate IT opportunities to the institution” as a key motive for planning.

Most (from nearly 60 percent to over 70 percent) of these plans include vision and mission statements, stress the importance of aligning IT with other institutional priorities among the reasons for planning, identify the leadership and committee structure for the planning effort, and express an interest in connecting IT plans more specifically with both business and academic plans. As indicated in the table, 45.6 percent include implementation plans, and just over a quarter (26.3 percent) have a concern for the future.

The list in Table 7-1 reflects the concerns presented in a recent IT planning study. In their award-winning 1998 essay “Is Strategic Planning for Technology an Oxymoron?” Martin Ringle and Daniel Updegrove ask the question, “What are we trying to accomplish?” Their response:

“To many people both inside and outside of information technology, the reason for technology planning seems apparent. It is to look ahead and determine which forms of hardware, software, and technical support will be required to meet the future needs of...
the institution. In conversations with more than 150 technology officers, however, this obvious goal barely surfaced. Indeed, most technology officers express skepticism about anyone’s ability to accurately predict which kinds of technology will be needed beyond the next two or three years. The motivations for strategic technology planning that were most frequently mentioned were the socio-economic ones of:

- aligning technology with other institutional priorities;
- disseminating knowledge about technology needs and constraints;
- building alliances with key decision makers;
- lobbying for (and obtaining) financial and other resources;
- addressing existing technology needs; and
- keeping an eye on the leading edge."

We’ve already seen that “aligning technology with other institutional priorities” and “communication” in a broad sense are important concerns in the plans reviewed. “Addressing existing needs” also ranks high. “Keeping an eye on the leading edge” falls between a “concern for long-range planning” and “planning for an unknowable future” (see Figure 7-2). “Keeping an eye on the leading edge” is positioned next to last in the list, likely due to both plan authors’ healthy focus on current needs and a bit of skepticism about their ability to address the future. These observations also reinforce a survey data finding suggesting that higher education IT planning cycles now occur more frequently and cover shorter horizons.

We hypothesized that IT strategic plans concerned with planning for the future would also express an interest in human services, technical expertise, hardware and software, and, of course, funding. In fact, two-fifths (40 percent) of the plans reviewed indicated a concern with such future priorities. We examined those 35 plans that did show some concern with future priorities more closely to
test the hypothesis that the implementation of activities to address these concerns might involve

- developing and maintaining staff;
- addressing life-cycle funding for hardware;
- and
- standardization of protocols, middleware, data interchange, and/or software across an institution.

Tables 7-2, 7-3, and 7-4 show the results. As Table 7-2 makes clear, most plans do indeed recognize the need for support, the importance of addressing human resources, and the need for technical expertise. Coupling these concerns with incentive plans and clear statements about compensation is quite another question.

Table 7-3 shows that while managing hardware and software are important concerns, somewhat fewer plans address such implementation issues as life-cycle funding and standardization.

The plans we reviewed treat IT funding in a wide variety of ways (see Table 7-4). These plans most frequently addressed aligning IT funding with institutional funding and concerns about new resource allocation in the IT organization.

Perhaps the single most interesting finding is that relatively few of these plans actually focus on strategic versus what we’d call operational or tactical issues. For our purposes we use “strategic” in the military sense of describing activities for which one plans procedures or rules for the commitment of resources on a scale that is highly material to the organization. In this vein, strategic applies to a concern for aligning technology with institutional priorities, communicating technology needs and constraints, building alliances with key decision makers, lobbying for (and obtaining) financial and other resources, addressing existing technology needs, and keeping an eye on the leading edge. “Tactical” denotes a concern for daily operations, for getting things done that need to be done now, rather than a concern for the future. In its original context, tactical refers to the lowest level of military operations, the view from the trenches and foxholes. Tactical planning relates to the development of plans and actions designed to drive the strategy to success. An overlap between strategic and tactical exists, for example, in the area of “addressing technology needs.” Where is the dividing line between immediate needs and eventual needs? In many institutions, what needs to be done now may spread over several years; hence, time is an essential element of both strategic and tactical plans.

The plans from 10 doctoral/research universities emphasize strategic thinking or a balanced mix of strategic and tactical thinking (Figure 7-3). We also noted a bal-
Table 7-2. Human Resource Concerns in IT Plans (N = 35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Resources</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for students, faculty, and staff</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources (personnel)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for technical expertise</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive plan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-3. Hardware and Software Concerns in IT Plans (N = 35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hardware and Software</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hardware</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Life-cycle funding”</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardization</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-4. Funding Concerns in IT Plans (N = 35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining effective IT staff</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of IT funding with institutional funding</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of new resources into the IT department</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of funding schedules and procedures</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reallocation of existing resources within the IT department</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives and support for the creative use and application of IT</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
anced mix of such thinking in half of the associate’s colleges’ plans. The emphasis on tactical thinking across the board, however, suggests to us that many U.S. and Canadian institutions focus chiefly on daily operations or “putting out fires.” These actions often support institutional and IT strategies but so dominate current activity that they leave little time for more-strategic concerns. This emphasis can also create risks of winning battles but losing wars.

The data we gleaned from our analysis of plans on the Web corroborates the findings of Ringle and Updegrove. While our observation of what plans included differs somewhat from the Ringle and Updegrove list, the tactical emphases remain. Most of the plans on the Web are concerned with alignment issues and focus on addressing immediate needs. Regarding long-term planning, the plans express in various ways institutions’ awareness of staff needs, required technology updates, and the inevitable funding issues.

**Key Elements of IT Plans**

In reviewing plans on the Web, we found it difficult to ascertain which underlying planning frameworks or models the plans’ authors followed. While consensus exists in both the higher education and business management literature on the elements to be included in strategic plans, few institutions acknowledge a source or model. This is likely typical of most plans and planning processes. We recognize too that institutions follow directions from a unique board or system office or act to meet unique institutional expectations. As we discuss later, the institution’s needs—although not always stated precisely—dictate the steps to meet those expectations.

The elements appearing consistently across the IT plans include vision and mission, alignment between IT and the institution, the purpose(s) of planning, the process, linking IT with budgeting, and (less frequently) assessment and communication. We illustrate our discussion of these topics with the range of practice to convey, as few models in the literature set out, the variety of ways in which colleges and universities actually carry out the process of strategic planning. Many institutions likely choose to plan and publish the results of their processes in ways that suit their needs and aspirations rather than follow the literature planning model.

We cannot always find the explicit alignment with institutional goals and objectives in the published plans, but we found interesting examples in the integrated plans as well as in separate IT plans. Among the integrated plans, that from Nova Southeastern University includes mission, vision, values, assump-
tions, and "critical success factors." The IT "factor" is explicitly linked to seven "institutional goals" and focuses on "the learning environment, the delivery of instruction, and the preparedness of students in the use of technology." This plan does not include all the parts that some frameworks do, but the tight alignment with university objectives offers a strong example of integration. The Nova Southeastern University IT strategy is linked to five institutional goals and identifies projects such as cost-benefit analyses, administrative systems, and technology training. More traditional institutions not included in this sample, such as Indiana University and the University of Nebraska, similarly draw explicit linkages between their IT plans and the explicit priorities of the institution. Athabasca University has chosen to align plans in a very different way, creating an IT plan that includes a "business plan," and the institution’s strategic plan is published as an appendix.

Planning efforts sometimes begin with a "plan to plan." Brown University’s IT plan recommends the development of a strategic plan, as do most of these "plan to plan" documents. In the Brown plan’s conclusion, the author(s) carefully spell out expectations that the eventual product will have "a coherent vision and plan," "a financial plan" for specific projects, a "reliable feedback loop," and a communication effort to make the community aware of the IT plan and its usefulness. If the institution followed the planning group’s prescription, the resulting plan might integrate IT and institutional goals and objectives with the mission and vision.

Finally, among the alignment examples, we must note another "plan to plan" document from a state university which, in its second paragraph, insists that the plan “is guided by two overarching strategic planning initiatives”—a system-wide IT plan and an institutional strategic planning process. Such an integration of system and institution planning process and document increases the likelihood that the IT plan is aligned with other processes and documents. Without such alignment, a strategic IT plan is unlikely to be implemented.

Vision and Mission

Vision and mission statements commonly appear in strategic IT plans, in part because there is strong evidence that the alignment of IT priorities with institutional priorities can be fostered through those statements. In fact, 53.6 percent of our survey respondents indicated that they had an IT vision statement, and of those, 74.9 percent said that the vision statement was explicitly linked to the institutional vision. Still, IT vision and mission statements do often occur without reference to the parallel institution statements. Some plans lack explicit vision and mission statements. While vision and mission statements can promote alignment, the quality and usefulness of plans does not rest on labels. For example, Hamilton College names three strategies as the foundation of their plan:

♦ providing excellent support of teaching and learning,
♦ extending the [Hamilton] experience, and
♦ improving access and services.

Within each of these umbrella topics are lists of actions that reflect conscious thought of what is labeled vision and mission. The intentions of the IT unit to meet the expectations of the college and support the vision and mission of the college with a similar long view could not be clearer. In other words, the college’s IT unit apparently understands the value and intent of strategic planning for both the institution and the unit. Rather than use the labels or a model structure, the IT planner(s) expresses the strategic planning concepts that will support the organizational effort and serve to guide decision making. The value of aligning IT intention with institutional purposes cannot be underestimated. The es-
ence of alignment is supporting and furthering the institution’s goals and objectives.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln takes a similar tack. The opening lines announce that the “document” is not intended to be a full-fledged strategic plan but rather will highlight “the key directions that will position Information Services to effectively support the institutional mission.” The strategies listed reveal an understanding of planning and, more particularly, an understanding of how IT can support the vision and mission of the university. Arguably, this flexibility suits at least some higher education institutions, revealing the ability to view the situation strategically and to plan for at least the near future without relying on an external model or process to accomplish the task.

A traditional approach is further represented in our sample by the plan from Mt. Hood Community College, whose plan begins with an executive summary followed by a description of the strategic planning process. After this description of development, the document moves to vision statements and “Information Technology Guiding Principles.” These explain the reasons behind the IT principles and how they impact the constituencies of the college. Next are the planning and resource assumptions, followed by a list of alignment factors that tie the IT plan to the college’s mission and vision. A table of IT goals matched to college goals precedes the implementation plan. These are most of the traditional elements of an IT plan, and many institutions incorporate them into plans that superficially look as though they were following a higher education template. While the arrangement of sections varies somewhat, and the level of specificity varies greatly, the typical plan at least touches on these elements.

Most institutions regard vision and mission as the cornerstone of planning. The strategic plan from Nova Southeastern labels an early section “Foundations of Planning” and includes vision, mission, and values as those foundations. At the very least, such a structure provides a common ground for those within and without the institution and may be suggestive of the nature of the academic environment. The labels may not be critical, but achieving public congruence between the institution and the IT priorities seems critical for the eventual implementation of strategic IT plans.

### Purpose of IT Planning

The ways of approaching the typical elements of strategic planning vary not by Carnegie class or control (public/private) but by institution. This variation may reflect the lack of a professional planning cadre at many institutions and hence the absence of any reference to standard planning frameworks in virtually every plan we reviewed. It may simply be that local cultures determine the why, what, and how of IT planning. The purposes of planning are as varied as the other elements. Some institutions recognize the need for clarity of purpose and incorporate explicit statements in their plans. However, very few of the plans we reviewed accept aligning budget as well as mission and vision as part of the purpose of planning.

A particularly succinct rationale is presented in the plan of Mt. Hood Community College. Its authors note that IT’s increased significance in the past decade led to the need for a place within the institution’s strategic plan. This college brought in consultants to help shape an IT plan that would mesh with “the college’s vision, mission and goals and … serve as a roadmap for how information technology … can provide faculty, students and staff and the community with rich and meaningful access to technology.” The resulting plan includes separate vision, goals, and processes for IT.

Not every institution sees planning as an opportunity to reflect larger goals. The plan
of Illinois State University simply states, “The purpose of the Planning Committee was to provide Telecommunication and Network Support Services (TNSS) with guidance in terms of its 3 year planning efforts....” The effort resulted in a plan to “help [the organization] prioritize their resources and work efforts over the next 3 years.” Just how this relates to institutional vision, goals, and plans is not apparent in the document.

Some of the most elaborate plans, including that of Virginia Tech, appear to assume that the purpose of planning is self-evident. An especially brief statement appears in a short plan from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln: “This document is not intended to be a full-fledged strategic plan, but rather will highlight the key directions that will position Information Services to effectively support the institutional mission.” Surely neither of these large institutions provides models for others; they simply manifest the purpose of planning within particular contexts. The significance, we suggest, lies in those diverse needs the plans are designed to meet.

While the most frequent motive for IT strategic plans is the perceived necessity to forecast the IT strategies, tactics, costs, and personnel requirements, other reasons do occasionally occur. As we noted above, some of the Web plans are “plans to plan.” The origins of such documents are not always clear, but their purpose is typically to urge action to meet an observed need. For example, Brown University produced an IT plan that begins with a statement on the “Urgency of Planning,” advancing three reasons for taking action: an institutional strategic planning process that has “significant implications for IT,” “lagging position [of the institution] in innovative use of IT,” and “growing frustration among the … community.” This statement of urgency is followed by the further argument that “tactical” planning has been done well but the “big picture” of integrated IT services and support is missing. Doubtless other institutions that remain silent on the purposes of planning have similar reasons for planning.

**IT Planning Process**

Advantages to CIOs and their institutions of describing the planning process leading to a strategic IT plan include alignment with institutional plans, linking budget to other planning, and communicating the involvement of faculty and others. The process can facilitate communication and information exchange between the IT organization and the rest of the institution. However, many plans appear to be the result of planning within the IT organization. Such efforts potentially miss the opportunity for engaging those who are constituents and end users of IT support.

A typical plan, such as that of New Mexico State University, summarizes the campus involvement. “This plan is the result of extensive consultation and planning across the … campus.” While this suggests a representative process, it contrasts with statements such as this one from California State University, Monterey Bay: “The IT Leadership Team … spoke to more than 100 … community members from the executive leadership to students, from faculty to IT staff.” The statement specifies reviews of the work, including “analyzing stakeholder interviews, a faculty/staff survey, a student survey, and input from other strategic planning efforts on campus.” A third institution, Brooklyn College, lists an advisory committee on academic computing; a faculty council committee; a student advisory roundtable; a teaching, learning, and technology roundtable; a technology advisement committee, “Tech Reps”; the provost’s technology committee; and the Center for Teaching.

Broad participation is the common practice. For example, one private institution, Nova Southeastern University, describes participation from “the Board of Trustees … three planning subcommittees, the Deans Council, the
Vice Presidents, administrative unit directors, and about 200 full-time faculty members.” A much smaller college, West Liberty State College, describes a planning retreat including 50 participants with representatives from the trustees, deans, students, administrative directors, department chairs, faculty senate, classified staff, and program chairs. Given the relationship between IT and virtually every constituency in an institution, these techniques and practices may be most useful.

The process differences reflect the nature of communication across our institutions. Perhaps they also reflect the complexities of governance in institutions large and small. Effective practice cannot easily be identified. As with so many factors in the world of planning, the effective practice is often that which best matches the institution. The checklist of factors to consider must include constituents’ expectations, current practice on other planning processes, recent history of such processes, the state of such communication within the institution, and, of course, the purpose of the planning process. Is it, narrowly, to produce a plan for the IT organization or, widely, to publicize a plan to inform the community?

**Linking IT Funding and Budget Planning**

Higher education institutions’ stove-pipe organizational structure puzzles outsiders as it has frustrated insiders. Therefore, few will be surprised that plans that do not include budget planning significantly outnumber those that do. Why then look for evidence of such a link? The answer relates back to our operating definition of strategic: activities that define the rules for committing resources on a large scale. The question this analysis leaves unanswered is whether the absence of an explicit and public resource component to most plans reflects the absence of such components altogether or merely a bifurcation of public planning and private budgeting. The latter is likely, since 77.6 percent of our survey respondents say they do link their IT plan to the institutional budget.

Some institutions simply omit budget linkages from the plans they publish on the Web. It is possible, of course, that the budget linkages are included in the “official” IT plans circulated within the institution. Bowie State lists seven key issues in their IT plan, including student access, campus backbone, end-user services, teaching and learning, and IT policies. The funding issues are identified later in the plan by listing the cost of some of the proposed projects. However, no indication of the mechanisms by which these are linked to budget planning can be found. More commonly, many plans simply omit any mention of funding issues.

Montana State University publishes a very short plan on the Web that includes a section on funding entitled “Keep … resources stable, secure, current, and of high quality.” This plan is not unlike many that include funding resolutions. While such a plan announces IT’s intentions to the institution, it postpones the difficult tasks of integrating IT budget plans and processes with those of the institution.

Some institutions make a visible effort to pull budget planning into the IT planning. An example of the difficulties and perhaps of the structures that may exacerbate them can be seen in a plan from California Lutheran University. This plan devotes several pages to the cost of various technology projects and staffing recommendations. At the end of the plan are listed goals, objectives, and outcomes along with the “assessment methodology” and “person responsible.” The boxes for outcomes and objectives involving budget are empty—presumably these are negotiated privately.

On the other hand, Estrella Mountain Community College has an extensive IT plan that announces the goal to “ensure continuous funding for technology.” Under this sec-
tion heading, the author(s) lists a “long-term strategy” and two “midrange” strategies. The first calls for aligning technology plans with the institutional strategic plan, including identifying costs and internal funding opportunities. The others again require IT cost analysis and the identification of external funding possibilities. In another part of the plan, a list of cost analysis projects concludes with the task of linking the outcomes of these analyses with the institution’s “Financial Resources and Academic Plans.”

Although some institutions may successfully link IT funding and budget planning, apparently most do not do so publicly. They typically do not identify the steps to connect planning and budgeting. Costs are sometimes given but seldom linked to the funding sources and opportunities. While this may be the key step in linking IT funding to institutional budgets, the budgetary process in most institutions simply does not foster this linking. One IT budgetary purpose the plans reviewed serve is to establish the IT business case—that is, the use of plans and planning processes to communicate the severity of IT needs and the advantages to the institution of funding those needs.

A few institutions choose to deal with the linking of funding to IT planning in a different way. Duke University published on the Web a “Vision for Information Technology” that is a high-level IT plan for the institution. The statement includes “Principles for Decision-Making” and areas of focus. Funding is thoroughly integrated into both. Appropriate to a vision statement, there are no details of procedure or cost; there is, however, the recognition that no strategy is complete without aligning “priorities and funding” “with institutional goals and objectives.” Similarly, Brown University simply called for a “financial plan for the development, operation, and renewal of any particular project.”

In no other area of IT planning is higher education practice, as evidenced by these plans on the Web, so differentiated from business practice models. In A Practical Guide to Information Systems Strategic Planning, a highly regarded handbook for such planning, Anita Cassidy calls for inextricably linking IT with the organization’s business plan. The gap analysis between where the organization must be to be effective and where it stands at the beginning of planning includes cost estimates on closing that gap. While almost every IT plan in higher education performs such a gap analysis, albeit without that label, few reveal mechanisms to secure funding allocations to meet the needs.

**Communication**

Communication and assessment are not always found within the strategic IT plans on the Web. Strategic IT plans in higher education only rarely incorporate assessment, whereas in the corporate sector planning models generally include evaluation or assessment. Institutions often separate planning from reporting, with a minority of them issuing separate annual reports. For many, budget planning itself does not include reports. Overlapping calendars and other factors have led to planning processes that only vaguely refer to a previous year’s outcome.

Some institutions, as some of the plans reviewed attest, view communication as a critical aspect of strategic planning. The institutions that do see communication as critical publish plans that, in various ways, provide their internal constituencies with information about IT as well as incorporating them into the processes that produce the plans. The strategic plan, after all, can so align IT with budget, academic affairs, business affairs, student services, and institutional priorities that IT can then be seen as an integral, if not a leading, element. But unless the plan is shaped by many and known by all, the view of IT may be incomplete, incorrect, or incoherent.

One of the many engaging strategic plans comes from MIT, an institution that recognizes
the potential of the strategic plan as a communications tool. This document carefully defines the major topics in an appendix: vision, mission, strategic themes, strategies, initiatives, and projects/activities. (The source of the definitions is footnoted, and the definitions are identified as part of the working glossary for other publications from the IT unit.) The plan itself begins with the statements of vision and mission and is matched to the university’s general mission statement.

The advantages in such careful framing of the plan’s content are not hard to discern: the unit communicates to internal and external constituencies its plan and how this plan, as well as its operations, “fits” the whole institution. It specifies initiatives to assure the community of the IT unit’s awareness of what needs to be done, what can be done, by whom, and how. Of course the plan speaks to the IT staff across the university as well as to the leadership who eventually must fund new projects. Statements of vision and mission within a plan provide assurance that the IT leadership is synchronized with the efforts of the others in the university. This spirit of integration, particularly in time of budget difficulties, can lead to understanding and support when change, funding issues, and uncertainty might suggest otherwise.

**Conclusion**

Nearly one-quarter of colleges and universities post an IT plan or an institutional plan with an IT component on the Web. Budget information, even among those plans that are posted publicly, is scarce. In our sample, a typical planning process seemed to take four to six months, but some extended well over a year.

Is there an ideal length of process, length of document, number of participants? Doubtless, there isn’t. The best strategic IT plans surely are those that meet institutional purposes, including links to the institutional strategic plan and budget process. Many IT plans in higher education are tactical rather than strategic, focusing on incremental change rather than long-term strategies. Not every institution sees planning as an opportunity to reflect larger goals. The choice of planning style is highly influenced by local conditions, such as institutional culture. Higher education plans generally do not explicitly reference or conform to planning models described in the literature. This may be a warning indicator, but more research needs to be done. Most institutions regard vision and mission as the cornerstone of their plans, and the most important purpose of IT planning is creating alignment of IT priorities with those of the institution.

Broad participation in the planning process is common practice. The function of IT plans as communication varies widely from mere reporting to building alliances. Finally, surprisingly few of the plans reviewed specifically relate IT planning to teaching and learning.

It is abundantly clear in the plans we reviewed on the Web that institutions are making efforts to link IT practice with institutional purposes. That occurs at several levels: mission, goals, objectives, hardware and software, and support. Read carefully, the plans tell us that IT units struggle to support the academic and research enterprises. These plans are often intended in part to explain how they can do that. Often the proposals and initiatives may seem to be requests for funding to benefit the IT infrastructure. They are, in fact, proposals to further the institutions’ purposes.

**Endnotes**

1. For our reading of the plans reported on in this chapter, we created a randomized list of EDUCAUSE member institutions from Canada and the United States. We then arbitrarily chose to look at the first 250 institutions on this list, which represent more than 15 percent of all EDUCAUSE U.S. and Canadian members. We conducted an initial search of all 250 institutions to determine which actually had something like an IT strategic plan publicly available on their Web site. Among these institutions, we found
64 plans, 16 institutional plans with IT sections, and 15 IT mission statements. On further inspection, we concluded that only 57 of these institutions actually had IT strategic plans available publicly on the Web. In some instances, we found links to strategic plans, but access required authentication.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.