

Strategic Directions, Goals, Objectives, Activities: What's the Difference?

The conceptual boundaries among strategic directions, goals, objectives, and activities are often vague: An objective in one context or organizational level might be a goal in another, for example. The following is intended as a rough guide to understanding, not a set of hard-and-fast rules.

Strategic Direction

Definition: An essential line of progress along which the institution seeks to move in the long run, and with which it seeks to align its resources and actions, to realize its mission more fully.

Characteristics of a Sound Strategic Direction

- Establishes the Big Picture, in concert with the mission and the other strategic directions
- Guides the planning and decision-making of the institution as a whole
- Focuses energy and resources on what's most important in the long term
- Well-defined subsidiary goals and objectives are required for effective pursuit of each strategic direction.
- Measurable, at minimum through progress on subsidiary goals
- Very long-range and stable over time (typically more than three years), unless and until it is superseded

Example: Student Access and Success

Goal

Definition: A major aspiration that the institution intends to realize under a given strategic direction.

Characteristics of a Sound Goal

- Reflects the Big Picture
- Clearly serves the interests of the institution as a whole
- Ambitious—even audacious!—yet attainable in principle
- Measurable, at minimum through progress on subsidiary objectives, but preferably also directly
- Achievement of the goal represents significant progress in the applicable strategic direction.
- Time period varies (typically one to three years), but stable unless and until it is achieved

Example: Significantly reduce the achievement gap across specified student subgroups.

Objective

Definition: A concrete, measurable milestone on the way to achieving a goal.

Characteristics of a Sound Objective

- Relevant and significant with respect to the applicable goal
- Brings the goal down to earth in clear language
- Measurable: Shows measures or sources of data for progress measurements, whether quantitative, qualitative, or both
- Achievement of the objective represents significant progress toward achievement of the applicable goal.
- Achievement of all the objectives related to a goal does not necessarily mean achievement of that goal; it often represents completion of one phase of work that will continue with the formulation of additional objectives and action plans.
- Achievable in typically six months to two years
- Shows the timeline or deadline for completion of the objective
- Shows the specific point person or group with overall responsibility for ensuring that progress on the objective occurs as planned
- May show estimated resources, if any, required for achievement, along with potential sources of support
- Specific
- Reasonable with respect to both scope and timeline
- Lends itself to formulation of a coherent set of activities or actions

Example: Provide mentors for at-risk students.

Activity or Action

Definition: One of a coherent set of specific steps that must be taken to reach the objective.

Characteristics of a Sound Activity or Action

- Specific
- Reasonable with respect to scope, timeline (typically one year or less), and workloads
- Shows the timeline or deadline for completion of the activity
- Shows the specific person with overall responsibility for ensuring that the activity occurs as planned
- May show estimated resources required for achievement, if any, along with potential sources of support
- Completion of all the activities under an objective means achievement of that objective.

Example: Identify students for the Mentoring Program through self- and staff referrals.