



The Macarthur Maze in Oakland, California, shown here, is a complex convergence of highways. Chances are, if you're unfamiliar with the area, as you navigate through this "spaghetti junction," you just might wind up somewhere other than where you intended to go. This serves as a metaphor for organizations and communities as they seek to respond to rapid changes in today's environment.

# Strategic Planning as Action Research: Envisioning the Future of a University Library



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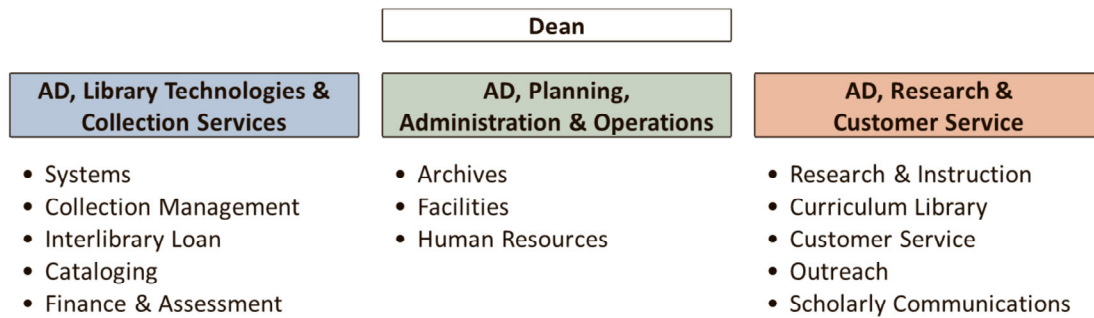
In this presentation I'll be talking about a strategic planning process that we undertook in 2020 at Liberty University's Jerry Falwell Library (hereafter referred to as JFL). Our experience will, I think, prove valuable in settings other than university libraries. More specifically, we'll be looking at our planning process to see how it aligns with action research.





First, let's set the context. The JFL building opened in 2014. Our floor space consists of 170,000 square feet—a little less than an average Walmart Supercenter. In 2019-20, our budget was \$9.5 million.

## JFL Organization Chart



When we're fully staffed, our organization consists of nearly 170 full- and part-time employees. We report to a dean who is parallel to the deans of colleges and schools on our campus. We have three associate deans—myself included—who oversee a range of operations that is more diverse than you might expect. I think we have something of the complexity of a mid-sized nonprofit organization.

## Aims of the Strategic Planning Process

### **The Plan**

- Core values
- Mission statement
- Vision statement
- Strategic directions
- Goals

### **Planning**

- Broad participation
- Enhanced capacity for ongoing strategic thinking

When we mapped out our four-month planning process beginning last July, we had two complementary aims: (a) to produce the best possible outputs under the constraints of our timeline and (b) to make a better organization through participation and capacity-building.

## Questions

### **What is the relationship between strategic planning and action research?**

- Is strategic planning a form of action research?
- How might approaching strategic planning as action research shape the process and outcomes?

As I co-chaired the planning process with another associate dean, I was also taking courses in my doctoral program in leadership studies, including one with a focus on action research. As I completed that course and the strategic planning project wound down, it struck me that the strategic planning process resembled an action research study in many ways. In this presentation and in the accompanying paper, I reflect on whether it's viable to construe strategic planning as a form of action research, and if we do this by design, how it will affect the planning process and outcomes.

## 4 Phases of Action Research



This model is a simplified version of the six-step process espoused by Efron and Ravid (2020), omitting steps pertaining to problem identification and study design.

Action research has a lot in common with other kinds of research. It can incorporate quantitative or qualitative elements. Action research also has some distinctive features. An action research study begins with a base of literature—what is known about the subject matter of interest. On that basis, data are collected or compiled and subjected to analysis. The final step, action, really separates action research from other empirical research: Action research is designed to effect change in a community or organizational setting rather than yielding findings that can be generalized across a range of similar settings. In the next three slides, we'll look at three features that distinguish action research.

### 3 Distinctive Features of Action Research

#### Focus on Change

- “uniquely suited to researching and supporting change” (“Action Research,” 2008, p. 4)
- “practitioners ... seek to uncover answers to complex problems” (Adams, 2010, p. 4)
- “The research outcome is a program or policy” (Gibson, 2004, p. 4)

#### Participants as Researchers

- “action researchers are most often full participants” (Adams, 2010, p. 6)
- “unique access to insider knowledge” (“Action Research,” 2008, p. 6)
- “a commitment ... to include the voices of those most affected” (Gibson, 2004, p. 5)

#### Learning/ Capacity-Building

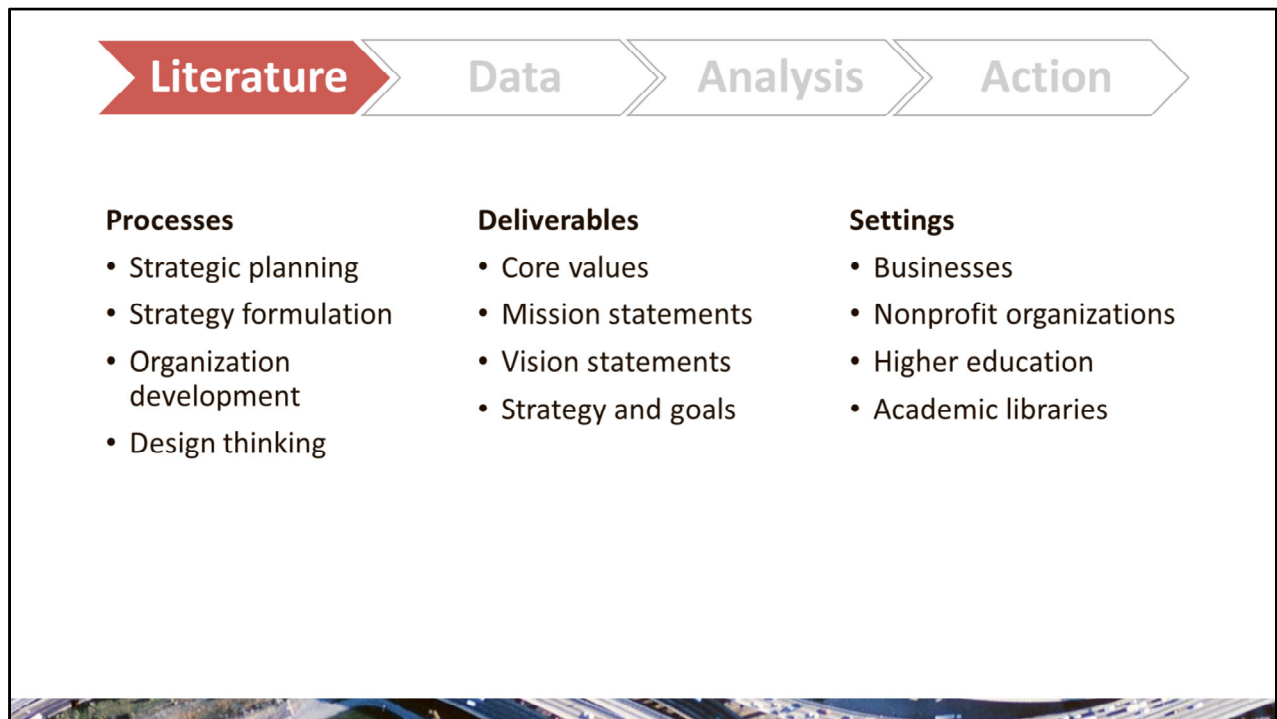
- “Learning is an explicit objective” (Martin, 2006, p. 168)
- “The process ... is as valuable as the more tangible research results” (Gibson, 2004, p. 5)
- “researcher and participant learning at its center” (Adams, 2010, p. 9)

First, action research has a focus on change. It doesn't aim to produce generalizable knowledge; it aims to enable change in an organization or community—“to uncover answers to complex problems” (Adams, 2010, p. 4). The end result is “a program or policy” (Gibson, 2004, p. 4) that can be carried out in hopes of achieving a better state of affairs.

Second, in action research, researchers may be “full participants” (Adams, 2010, p. 6). This is different from most research, wherein researchers study subjects, and the two groups are completely distinct from one another. In action research, the blurring of these roles isn't seen as a weakness, but as an asset—a source of “insider knowledge” (“Action Research,” 2008, p. 6) that gives voice to “those most affected by the research” (Gibson, 2004, p. 5).

Finally, learning and capacity-building have a central role in action research. As Gibson (2004) stated, “The process ..., including mutual learning and capacity building through training, is as valuable as the more tangible research results” (p. 5). In our strategic planning process, we didn't just aim to produce a set of deliverables; we wanted to enhance our organization's ability to function strategically in the future.





Now we'll walk through the JFL's strategic planning process following the four phases of action research. We'll also see how well our process aligned with the three distinctive features of action research.

First, our planning made use of a lot of literature—about how the process should be conducted and the outputs we sought to produce. The literature wasn't just set in the context of academic libraries, but also in higher education, nonprofits, and businesses in general.



Literature

Data

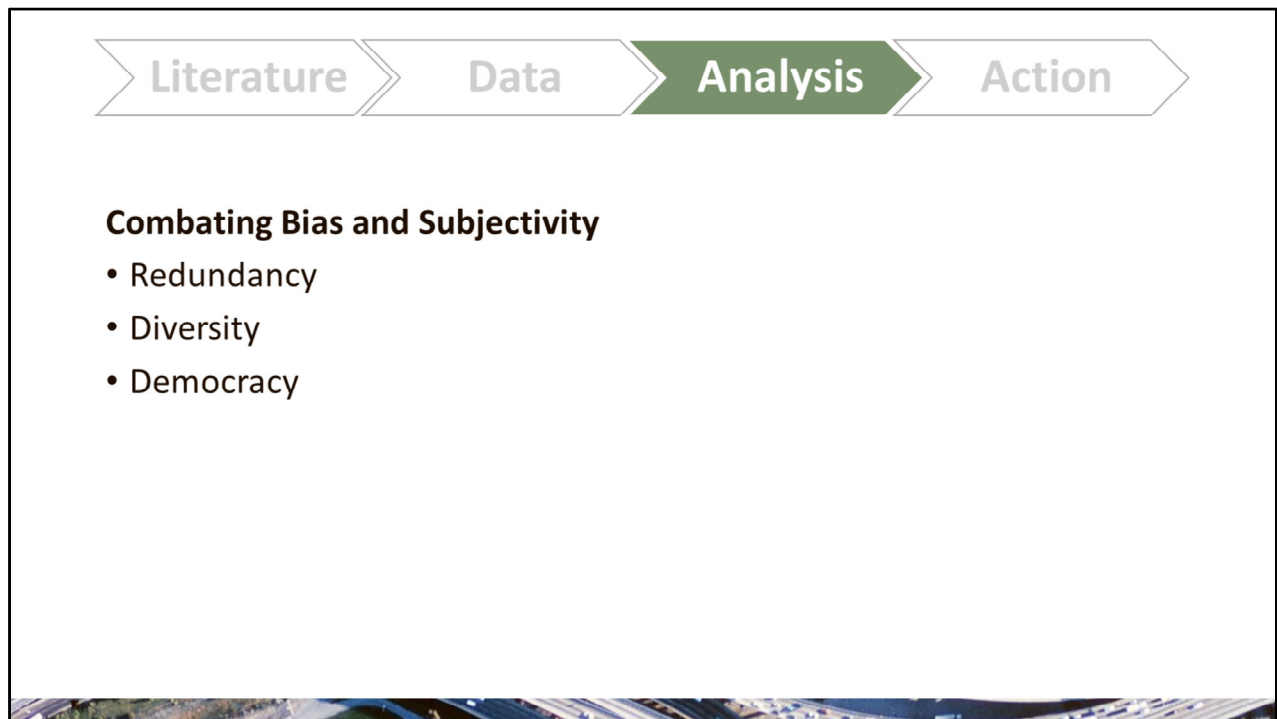
Analysis

Action

### **Types of Data Collected**

- Anonymous survey (65 participants)
- Focus groups (8 groups; about 50 participants)
- Individual interviews (24 participants)
- Critiques of legacy mission and vision statements (5 participants)
- Examination of similar organizations' statements (5 participants)

We gathered new data in a variety of ways. A survey yielded quantitative data. The rest of our data collection efforts generated qualitative data. We had a high degree of participation, with most of our full-time employees completing the survey and taking part in one of eight focus groups. We also conducted 24 individual interviews.

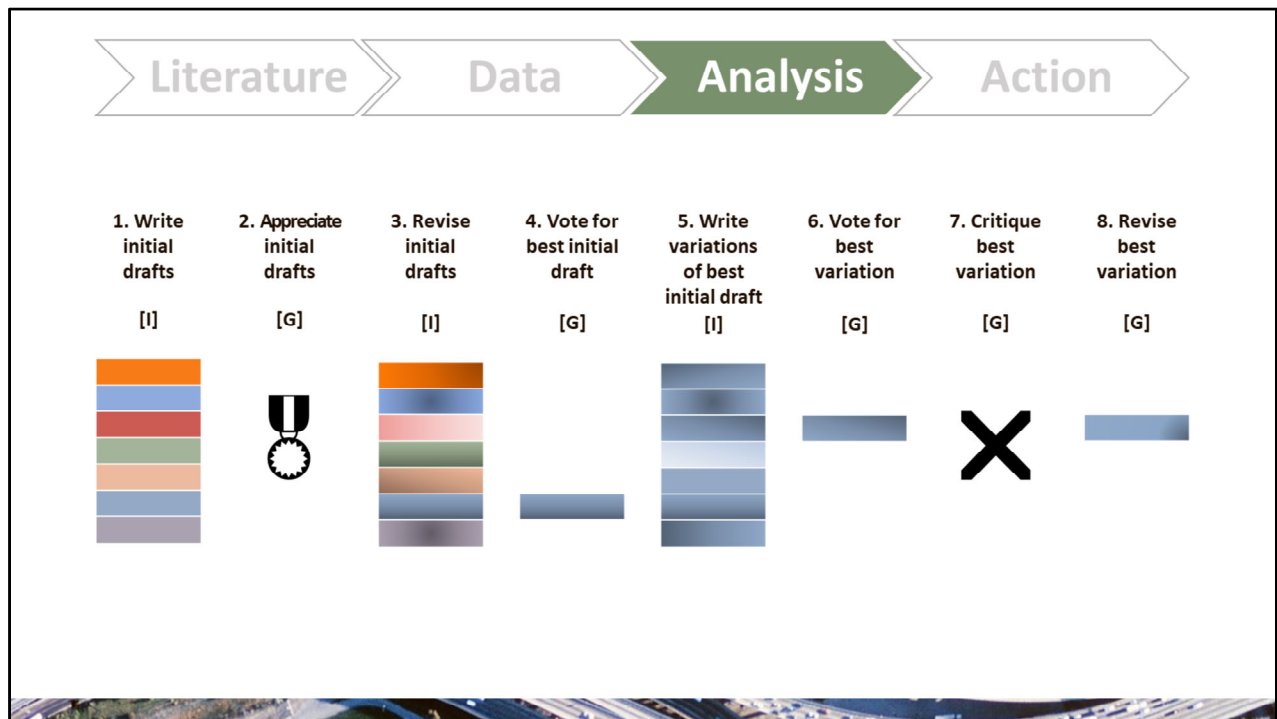


When we talk about data analysis, the analogy between our planning process and an action research study becomes weaker. Research with qualitative data typically involves the use of a coding process as a means of demonstrating rigor and minimizing subjectivity in the analysis. Instead of doing formal coding, we designed our process to combat bias and subjectivity through principles of redundancy, diversity, and democracy.

Examples of *redundancy* included (a) assigning two different employee groups to respond to the same focus group protocol and (b) commissioning two analysts to draw independent insights from a given focus group report or interview record. Redundancy arguably tended to enhance reliability and validity.

Because it was impossible to involve the entire organization in the full process of strategy development, the Library Administration designated selected employees to perform specific data collection and analysis functions. Assignments were based on a balance of two key factors: (a) assessment of employees' capacity to contribute in a particular role and (b) an overall concern for *diversity*. Library leaders sought to demonstrate inclusion in regards to factors such as employee gender, age, race, classification, and organizational role.

We took several measures to promote *democracy*. The Steering Team's work began with the introduction of three rules of engagement, one of which was the equality of participants. To protect the voice of group members who did not hold powerful positions, we employed a combination of appreciation and anonymity techniques. For example, drafts of statements were presented anonymously, only positive remarks about those statements were allowed at certain stages, and some voting regarding strategy statements and goals was done anonymously. Collectively, these safeguards helped to level the playing field in group decision-making.



In order for us to expedite the processes of analyzing qualitative data and making decisions, we purposefully divided the work among multiple participant-researchers. We deliberately assigned tasks to take advantage of the contributions of individuals and groups.

We sequenced individual and group work (tagged as *I* and *G*, respectively, in the graphic) to produce high-quality outputs efficiently and build shared ownership. We employed variations of this sequence to produce each deliverable. Below is an explanation of the eight steps:

1. Drawing on raw or abstracted data, individual members of the Steering Team wrote initial drafts of the desired deliverable and submitted them to the facilitator. As implied by the diverse colors in the diagram, the drafts exhibited substantial differences.
2. The facilitator presented each initial draft to the group without identifying its author, soliciting positive remarks about each one in turn.
3. Having heard appreciative feedback on their own and others' drafts, individual members improved on their own drafts, often adopting language



or features from others' drafts.

4. The facilitator presented the revised initial drafts to the group, again without attribution. The group then voted anonymously for the revised draft that they believed best fit the organization's needs.

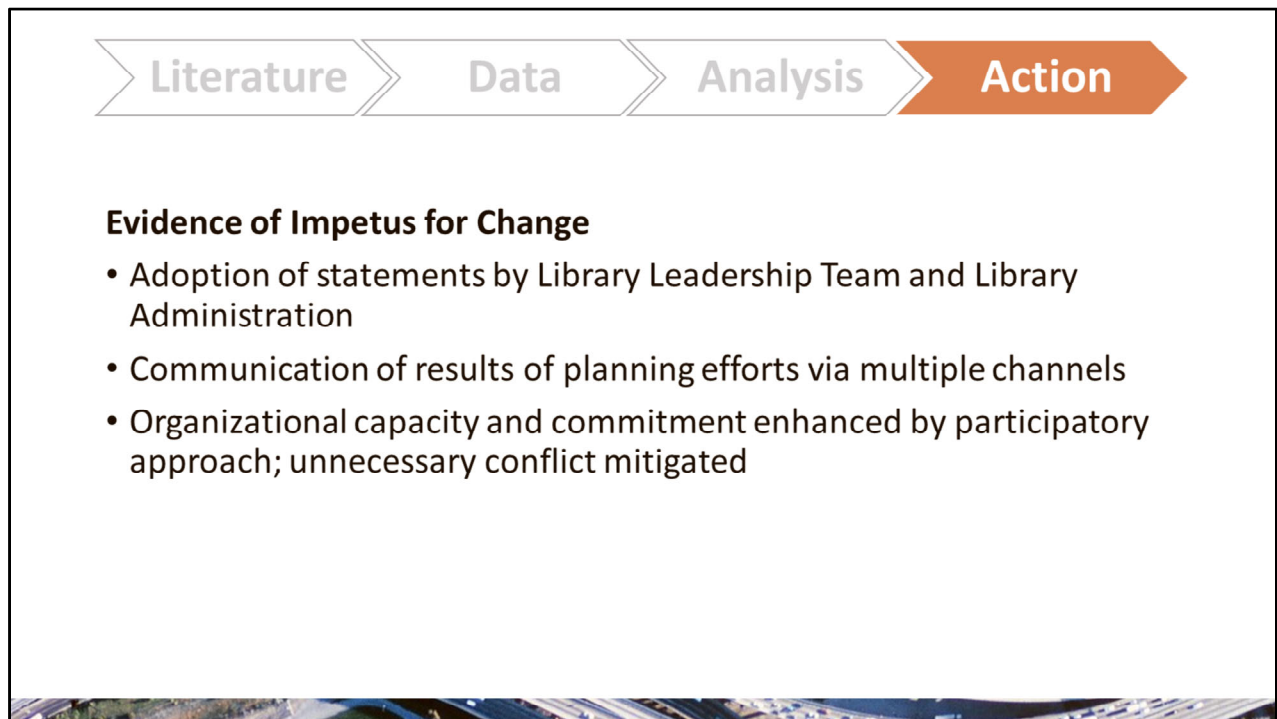
5. Each member attempted to improve on the draft that had received the most votes by suggesting specific adjustments. The resulting variations exhibited much more consistency.

6. The group voted anonymously to identify the best variation.

7. The group openly critiqued the draft selected in the previous stage.

Whereas only positive feedback had been allowed previously, this stage allowed for open discussion of a draft's strengths and weaknesses.

8. The group voted to resolve differences of opinion regarding the prevailing draft, thus producing a mature draft to be presented to a representative body for feedback or ratification.



There's evidence to suggest that our process mobilized change. We produced statements that attracted wide support. Our outputs have been communicated widely in various settings. We engaged broad participation and avoided unnecessary conflict.

## Strategic Planning = Action Research?

### 3 Talking Points

- Precedents in the literature—prescriptive and descriptive
- Conditional viability
- Reservations about analytical rigor

Thus we return to our questions: Is strategic planning a form of action research? How might approaching strategic planning as action research shape the process and outcomes?

If action research is a useful frame for strategic planning, one would expect to find published evidence to support that claim. In fact, two kinds of literature supply such evidence. Sources about research and planning methods *prescribe* the use of action research in strategic planning. Additionally, accounts of specific strategic planning efforts *describe* how action research methods have been applied fruitfully in planning contexts.

Action research isn't the best approach to strategic planning in every setting. Action research is likely a viable frame for an organization or community that values participatory management, organic design, and collaborative innovation practices. Conversely, action research likely *isn't* a viable frame in a setting where the planning process is founded on mechanistic, bureaucratic assumptions.

The determination of whether action research fits with strategic planning depends on one's concept of leadership. If being a leader means birthing a vision and

persuading others to buy into it, then strategic planning is more of a means to a predetermined end, and action research is superfluous. On the other hand, if one views being a leader as stewarding relationships between individuals and groups, then strategic planning entails the collective creation of the organization or community's future, and action research might well support it.

The apparent fit between an open approach to strategic planning and the participatory nature of action research brings us back to the question of analytical rigor. We employed unconventional methods of analysis in the conduct of our strategic planning process, and on this basis, it's difficult to claim that we carried out action research.

Based on the precedents cited earlier in this section, there can be little doubt that it's possible to carry out action research in support of a strategic planning agenda. If such integration is to be achieved fully, the wedding of strategic planning and action research should be designed into the process from the outset, and timeline expectations might need to be adjusted. Unconventional analysis notwithstanding, the JFL's experience with something approximating action research proved to be an effective means of engaging broad participation, setting a course for change, and building capacity for future strategy work.

## References

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