

USING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

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by

Dr. Daniel Overdorf, President &
Dr. Gregory Linton, Vice President for Academic Affairs/Provost



The purpose of planning is action, not planning. The purpose of planning is mission, not meetings. The purpose of effective long-range planning is accomplishments and achievements, not more activities and longer planning reports.—Kennon Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church: The Leaders' Guide*, p. 1

Benefits of Strategic Planning

1. Clarifies the mission and vision
2. Identifies the untapped potential of the organization
3. Guides the direction of the organization
4. Anticipates future opportunities
5. Prioritizes strategic goals
6. Provides strategies for enrollment growth
7. Promotes unity and team spirit
8. Inspires commitment and enthusiasm
9. Provides a solid basis for decision-making
10. Facilitates adaptation to change
11. Coordinates various departments so that their efforts support each other
12. Motivates fundraising and grant applications
13. Guides hiring of faculty and staff
14. Promotes effective allocation of resources
15. Provides a standard for evaluation

Overview

In the spring of 2024, Johnson University used a process for strategic planning called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which is a strengths-based approach to organizational transformation. It focuses on what is working well (appreciative) by engaging people in asking questions and telling stories (inquiry). The key question it examines is “What is working well in the organization?” It assumes that in every organization something is working well and that change can be managed through the identification of what works well and the analysis of how to do more of what works well. It seeks, identifies, and enhances the life-giving forces that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. It focuses on aligning the strengths of the organization with opportunities, aspirations, and desired results.

AI contrasts with the traditional problem-solving model of strategic planning that focuses on what is wrong or broken and finding solutions. The traditional deficit-minded model assumes that an organization can do better by doing less of what it doesn't do well. Instead, AI looks for what is working well and finds ways to

do more of that. It assumes that behind any problem is a desired state and that somewhere the desired state already exists. The shift in focus to the positive and what is working well generates energy within the group or organization, allowing it to move more effectively toward its goals.

To achieve these aims, AI uses the 5-D Cycle of Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver. Its approach is collaborative, highly participatory, and systemwide. Johnson University implemented this process in the spring of 2024. All employees were invited and encouraged to participate in the process for the first three meetings, which were called Vision Summits. These were 90-minute meetings held on Monday afternoons.



Source: <https://aicommons.champlain.edu/learn/appreciative-inquiry-introduction/5-d-cycle-appreciative-inquiry/>

Step 1: Define the Affirmative Topic

The Affirmative Topic was already defined by the strategic planning process: “Johnson University at its best in five years.” Before implementing the process, an institution needs to decide who will oversee the planning process. In our case, the President-Elect and Provost worked together on the process with occasional input from the Director of Institutional Effectiveness. In addition to full-time employees, other stakeholders who were invited to participate included a couple of local Trustees and officers of the Student Government Association.

In preparation for Vision Summit 1, participants were provided an interview guide that would be used during the meeting to gather information about the strengths, resources, perspectives, and aspirations of employees and other important stakeholders. The Interview Guide consisted of four questions:

1. *Best experience (past):* Tell me a story about when you saw Johnson University at its best, when it was most alive, effective, and successful. What made this experience a highlight for you? What about this experience made you proud to be a part of the University? What made this experience possible? What did you contribute? Describe the contributions of others.

2. *Values (present)*: What things do you value about Johnson University and your work here? When you are feeling best about your work, what do you value most about it? What is the most important thing Johnson University has contributed to your life and to others?
3. *Core life-giving factor (present)*: What do you think is the core value or factor that has allowed Johnson University to pull through during difficult times? If this core value or factor did not exist, how would that make the University different than it currently is?
4. *Wishes (future)*: What opportunities lie ahead for Johnson University? What are three wishes you have for the future of Johnson University? If a miracle occurred and you showed up at work tomorrow to discover Johnson University at its best, what would it look like?



Step 2: Discover: What gives life?

For Steps 2 to 4, it is crucial that the entire organization be invited to participate. The goal is to get all the people in the room at one time. The basic principle of change management is that those who have a say in creating change are more likely to implement it. By including everyone, the process honors the three universal human needs. Every human being has a need to (1) have a voice and be heard, (2) be seen as essential to the group, and (3) be seen as unique and exceptional.

The meetings utilized the SOAR process developed by Stravros and Hinrichs (2021). SOAR stands for Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results. As an alternative to the widely used SWOT analysis, SOAR seeks to identify and expand existing strengths and opportunities rather than drill down on problems, deficiencies, weaknesses, and threats. The SOAR conversations that took place in the meetings were “designed to help the organization’s stakeholders understand what happens when the organization is working at its best, explore what is possible, and how to apply that information to create a desired future, with defined results” (Stravros & Hinrichs, 2001, p. 21).



Step 2 was carried out in Vision Summit 1. It focused on the first two parts of the SOAR process: Strengths and Opportunities. This step focuses on what we *do* want rather than what we *don't* want. Threats and problems are not ignored but reframed through a lens of possibility and opportunity.

The outcome of this step is to identify the organization’s “positive core,” the sum total of its unique strengths, life-giving forces, assets, resources, networks, capabilities, and creative thought that give life to the organization and will carry it through to the future. In higher education, the positive core is found wherever people are working in ways that enhance learning and enhance the mission and purpose of higher education. The positive core can be the basis for what the institution might do next.

As participants came into the meeting room, they drew numbers from 1 to 14, which randomly assigned them to a table with the corresponding number. The goal was to assign eight people to each table.

The President-Elect began the meeting by providing an overview of the concept of Appreciative Inquiry, the 5-D Cycle, and the SOAR Process. Then, the Provost provided instructions about what would happen in that day's meeting.

Individuals paired up with someone they didn't know very well or work closely with. For 20 minutes, the pairs used the Interview Guide to evoke stories that illuminated the organization's strengths and capabilities. The interviewer took notes on the key points of the interview.

Participants then joined with three other pairs at their table and shared the key points of the interviews. Then, the groups distilled from the interviews three strengths and three opportunities of the University. "Strengths" answer the question "What can we build on?" What is Johnson University currently doing that is of value to its stakeholders? "Opportunities" answer the question "What are our stakeholders asking for that we are not currently doing?" What are areas of growth and innovation on which the University should focus its energy?

The strengths and opportunities identified by each group were reported to the Director of Institutional Effectiveness, who compiled them into a master list after the meeting.



Step 3: Dream: What might be?

This step, which was carried out in Vision Summit 2, involves identifying Aspirations (desired outcomes). The Aspirations would become the Goals of the Vision Plan. The group discussions focused on possibility thinking. The goal of this step is for each group to co-create a compelling vision of the preferred future that reflects high-potential opportunities, strengths, and aspirations of the stakeholders. This vision should inspire commitment and motivation and challenge the status quo. This step is intended to be *practical* in that it is grounded in the history of the University. And it is intended to be *generative* in that it provides time and space to expand the potential of the University.

In preparation for Vision Summit 2, full-time employees were provided with the list of Strengths and Opportunities developed by each group during Vision Summit 1. As participants came into the meeting room, they drew numbers to be randomly assigned groups of six. In his introduction, the President-Elect encouraged participants to consider the following questions during their discussions:

- What is God's desire for our University's future?
- What do we want more of the Strengths and Opportunities?
- What is the world calling for our University to be?
- What are the most enlivening and exciting possibilities for our University?
- What can we be best at in our world?

In the groups, participants developed three “Provocative Propositions,” which are affirmative possibility statements that describe where the organization wants to be based on the high moments of where it has been. They describe an ideal state of circumstances that will foster the environment to do more of what works. They are *provocative* because they stretch the realm of the status quo, challenge common assumptions or routines, imagine real possibilities for the University’s preferred future, and provoke action. They should describe the idealized future in the present tense as if it were already happening. In writing their propositions, participants were instructed to begin with “Johnson University” and follow it with a present-tense verb. The propositions should be stated as if the idealized future were already happening.

Participants were instructed to consider the following criteria for acceptable Provocative Propositions:

- Is it provocative? Does it stretch, challenge, or innovate?
- Is it grounded in examples of what has worked?
- Is it what we want? Will people defend it or get passionate about it?
- Is it stated in affirmative, bold terms and in the present tense as if it were already happening?
- Can we deliver it? Is it achievable?

The groups were given 40 minutes to write their propositions on a large poster sheet. Then, each group came to the front of the room to read their statements to the entire group. We referred to this as a “Provocative Proposition Parade.” The poster sheets were affixed to walls around the room. After all the groups reported, each participant was given five sticky dots to place beside their top five Provocative Propositions. They were encouraged to vote only once for a Provocative Proposition focused on a particular topic.

After the meeting, the President-Elect grouped the Provocative Propositions into categories and noted the number of votes for each statement. The Senior Leadership Team analyzed the list and narrowed the statements down to five Goals. These Goals are the top five high-level aspirations or achievements that will lead the University closer to achieving its vision and/or addressing significant gaps. They should be achievable but require a stretch in creativity, innovation, and energy to achieve. The Goals also aligned with larger institutional goals and priorities. And they should ultimately benefit stakeholders. Here are the Goals developed by the SLT (as they were later revised into final form):

Category	Goal
Academics	Johnson University offers robust face-to-face and online academic programs that integrate biblical, cultural, and professional studies to prepare students for Christian ministries and other strategic vocations.
Stakeholder Relationships	Johnson University partners with its internal and external stakeholders to address local and global challenges.
Community	Johnson University cultivates a thriving and diverse community that reflects the biblical ideals of hospitality, kindness, humility, and unity.
Resources	Johnson University develops and sustains high-caliber personnel, state-of-the-art facilities, and healthy financial strategies that foster a flourishing university environment.
Student Development	Johnson University recruits mission-focused students and develops them through an affordable, transformative experience to extend the Kingdom of God among all nations.

The Goals were emailed to all employees with instructions about what would take place in the next Vision Summit.



Step 4: Design: How can it be?

Vision Summit 3 focused on identifying Results in the SOAR Process. “Design” is the decision-making phase where convergent thinking is used to write directions to achieve the agreed-upon future. This step required identifying which opportunities have the most potential. Opportunities may lie outside the organization or inside the organization. This step looked at the practicalities needed to support the vision of the desired future.

To carry out this step, participants were randomly assigned to groups of four as they came in the room. Large poster sheets that listed one of the Goals were placed at tables around the room. The groups spent 15 minutes brainstorming Strategies that would achieve each Goal.

Strategies are specific, concrete, detailed activities needed to achieve the Aspirations/Goals. Strategies can focus on resources, policies, processes, personnel, and innovations. They should be stated so that the community will know when they have been achieved. Strategies answer the question “How can it be?” or “How are we going to make this preferred future happen?” In some planning systems, these are referred to as Objectives. Bryson (2017) offers this definition:

Strategy may be thought of as a pattern of purposes, policies, programs, projects, actions, decisions, or resource allocations that defines what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it.... Strategies typically are developed to deal with strategic issues; that is, the outline the organization’s response to the fundamental challenges it faces. (p. 222)

The task of strategy formulation typically involves highlighting what is good about the existing pattern; reframing, downplaying, or pruning away what is bad about it; and adding whatever new elements are needed to complete the picture. In other words, the Strategies can address what the University will (1) keep and improve, (2) initiate, or (3) stop. Strategies ensure alignment or consistency between what an organization says it wants, what it pays for, and what it actually does.

To come up with ideas for Strategies, the groups were encouraged to employ the Walk-the-Diamond method (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2021, p. 34). This approach (as I modified it) breaks down an organization into four parts: Programs, Processes, Policies, and Personnel. They were also encouraged to consider Strategies that related to the following departments at the University: Academics, Admissions, Advancement, Athletics, Campus Services, Communication, Community Engagement, Finance, Student Life, and Senior Leadership Team. This process produced numerous possible Strategies that would address each Goal.

At the end of the meeting, each participant wrote on an index card an answer to the question “What can I do to make the preferred future happen?” Their answers stated their intentions for moving forward. The answers included commitments (actions a person can do), offers (resources given to others), and requests (needs that others can provide). The group stood and read aloud together what they wrote as a Commitment Chorus. This produced energy for creating the future.

At the Senior Leadership Team Retreat, the leaders spent 90 minutes reviewing the list of Strategies for each Goal. The President-Elect did some editing and categorizing of the list before the meeting to facilitate discussion. The leaders used the following criteria to select Strategies:

- Is the strategy more specific than the Goal?
- Is the strategy attainable?
- Can the strategy be broken down into steps, parts, or tasks (Action Plans)?
- Will the strategy remove or minimize the forces that restrain change or progress (often called 'Threats')?
- Will the strategy strengthen or maximize the driving forces that promote change or progress (often called Strengths or Opportunities)?
- Will the strategy turn a Weakness into a Strength? Note that this takes more time and effort than expanding an existing Strength.
- Can we know when the strategy is accomplished? This may require including metrics, standards, measures, targets, statistics, etc.
- Is the workload for personnel to accomplish the strategy reasonable?
- Is the financial investment for the strategy reasonable?
- Will the strategy produce results that justify the human and financial costs?
- Does the strategy express the University's values?
- Will the strategy be acceptable to key stakeholders?
- Do the strategies for each goal reinforce each other rather than contradict or compete with each other?

By the end of the retreat, the leaders had identified three Strategies for each Goal with the exception of one Goal that had four strategies. Two co-chairs for each Goal were appointed so that they could form a committee to break the Strategies down into Action Plans.

Each goal committee meet during the summer to develop Action Plans, which are concrete, detailed tasks or steps that will need to be taken to implement the Strategies. In some planning processes, Action Plans are called Tactics. Action plans identify individuals or groups responsible for completion, establish realistic time frames for completion, and include reasonable and accurate estimates of costs. They will describe what will be done, by whom, and when. Action Plans answer the following questions:

1. How will it be done?
2. Who will do it?
3. When will it be done?
4. What resources will be needed?
5. How will it be evaluated?

Action Plans also include tangible and meaningful measures that can be used in monitoring intermediate outcomes and milestones. Action Plans can be developed by setting a deadline for completion of the Strategy and then working backward to set a deadline for each step. The wording of the Strategies continued to be tweaked through the fall of 2024. The final version of the Strategies is listed below. The details of the Action Plans are included in a larger document that is not included here.

GOAL 1: ACADEMICS	
Johnson University offers robust face-to-face and online academic programs that integrate biblical, cultural, and professional studies to prepare students for Christian ministries and other strategic vocations.	
<i>Strategies</i>	
1.1	Revisit the wording of the mission statement and ensure it is integrated into the curriculum for all students.
1.2	Expand offerings of academic programs and learning experiences at different levels that will promote increases in enrollment and advance our mission.
1.3	Promote the integrative, multi-faceted purposes of the Bible & Theology major to support and enhance the spiritual, intellectual, and professional development of students.
1.4	Optimize online education to promote quality, consistency, and growth.
GOAL 2: STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS	
Johnson University partners with its internal and external constituents to address local and global challenges.	
<i>Strategies</i>	
2.1	Expand local and global partnerships to increase mutual engagement of Johnson's community with the broader Knoxville community and beyond.
2.2	Cultivate grace-centered generosity in the context of Kingdom partner relationships.
GOAL 3: COMMUNITY	
Johnson University cultivates a thriving and diverse community that reflects the biblical ideals of hospitality, kindness, humility, and unity.	
<i>Strategies</i>	
3.1	Expand experiences, events, and activities that foster a hospitable community in which all students thrive.
3.2	Recruit and retain more faculty, staff, students, administrators, and board members from various backgrounds.
3.3	Inculcate biblical ideals of hospitality, kindness, humility, and unity throughout the campus community.
GOAL 4: RESOURCES	
Johnson University develops and sustains high-caliber personnel, state-of-the-art facilities, and healthy financial strategies that foster a flourishing University environment.	
<i>Strategies</i>	
4.1	Recruit and retain mission-aligned faculty and staff, and support well with competitive salaries, benefits, and opportunities for professional and spiritual development and advancement.
4.2	Develop systematic plans to optimize the design and usage of classrooms and other campus spaces.
4.3	Strengthen stewardship practices that lead to institutional sustainability and inter-generational equity.
GOAL 5: STUDENT DEVELOPMENT	
Johnson University recruits mission-focused students and develops them through an affordable, transformative experience to extend the Kingdom of God among all nations.	
<i>Strategies</i>	
5.1	Evaluate and implement enhanced plans and procedures to recruit mission-focused students.

5.2 Cultivate a student experience that fosters significant growth toward spiritual, personal, and professional maturity.

5.3 Review net price, tuition, and scholarships to ensure competitiveness, and develop effective means to communicate value, quality, and accessibility to all stakeholders.

The entire Vision Plan will be presented to the Board of Trustees at their February meeting for their review and approval, but committees have already been implementing parts of the plan.



Step 5: Deliver: What will it be?

The last step involves implementing, monitoring, improvising, innovating, and re-inquiring the Action Plans. As stakeholders begin to live out their preferred future, adjustments to the Goals, Strategies, or Action Plans may need to be made.

The committee for each goal will function as “champions” to monitor implementation of the Action Plans and then explicitly and widely communicate progress. At the end of each academic year, Goals, Strategies, and Action plans will be reviewed to see if they should be retained, modified, updated, or replaced. An additional year of planning will be added to the plan at the end of each year.

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