



Who Should Read

CIO

Project Management
Directors

IT Governance Participants

Project Prioritization Frameworks That Work

Tactics for Maximizing Institutional Value in Project Evaluation

Study in Brief

This report profiles tactics that make IT project prioritization decisions faster, fairer, and better aligned to institutional strategic needs. Institutions can achieve these goals by more carefully shaping prioritization body workloads, assessing projects in a uniform manner, and reducing the potential for project assessment bias.

5 Ways to Use This Research

1. Establish criteria for determining which project requests require formal prioritization
2. Communicate project cost, impact, and risk with prioritization participants
3. Create standardized project evaluation criteria for prioritization bodies
4. Ensure projects are prioritized on the basis of institutional value
5. Address systemic bias or favoritism in the prioritization process

The Project Prioritization Challenge

When demand exceeds resources—and it almost always does—deciding which project requests to approve and which to reject is a challenging and sensitive problem. CIOs and project managers want to see the best interests of the institution served. But without effective ways to discover, develop, and prioritize project requests, IT units often find themselves with a confused project portfolio.

At the root of the project prioritization challenge is a competition between campus units, each trying to get IT to dedicate resources to its requests. Because technology touches so many aspects of university operations, the project request pool is diverse and complex, but requesters see only the thin slice representing their needs. They naturally look for ways to advance their interests—minimizing project costs, submitting requests to friendly parties, exaggerating the benefits of their particular initiative. Effective project prioritization must tame these tendencies and assert the interests of the institution as a whole.

Institutional Interests Undermined by a Parochial Scramble for Resources



Project Profusion

- IT touches everything and everybody
- Multiple uncoordinated pathways for submitting project requests
- Legacy of “go-to” project accepters/approvers



Weak Project Assessment

- Requesters lack project cost and effort estimation skills, make self-serving guesses
- No standard mechanism for comparing value of different projects
- Governance committee overloaded, indecisive



Clashing Interests

- Units and individuals favor pet projects over institutional benefit
- Back channels circumvent prioritization process



Unstable Priorities

- Constant change puts priorities in flux
- Political influence overturns prioritization decisions, undermines credibility of process



“There are way more ideas than resources. We are looking for tools that assist in prioritizing the projects that add the most value to the organization — to develop a prioritization system that optimizes our project work.”

Project Management Office Director
Public Research University

Mastering the Project Pipeline ▶
Available at EAB.com



Organizing a Network of Prioritization Actors

Weak Processes Lead to Arbitrary Prioritization—Or None at All

Effective prioritization is a collective effort. While some projects relate entirely to the IT domain, most involve business and academic initiatives whose relative importance is best settled by a prioritization body committed to optimizing institutional value. But rather than winnowing project approvals down to a high-value core commensurate with available resources, prioritization processes often make arbitrary choices reflecting local influence, or worse yet, simply say “Yes” to everything. The result is missed opportunity and misallocation of resources.

Multiple Problems Compound to Compromise Prioritization Results



Some of these challenges stem from higher education’s culture of consensual decision-making and aversion to managing “by the numbers.” But weak processes also contribute. Prioritization bodies may be asked to assess projects they are not really equipped to evaluate. Institutions may lack transparent and consistent criteria for measuring project value—or, if they have such criteria, permit them to be subverted by gaming or circumvention. Over time, problems like these produce insufficiently discriminating or unstable prioritizations which weaken stakeholder confidence in the project approval process.

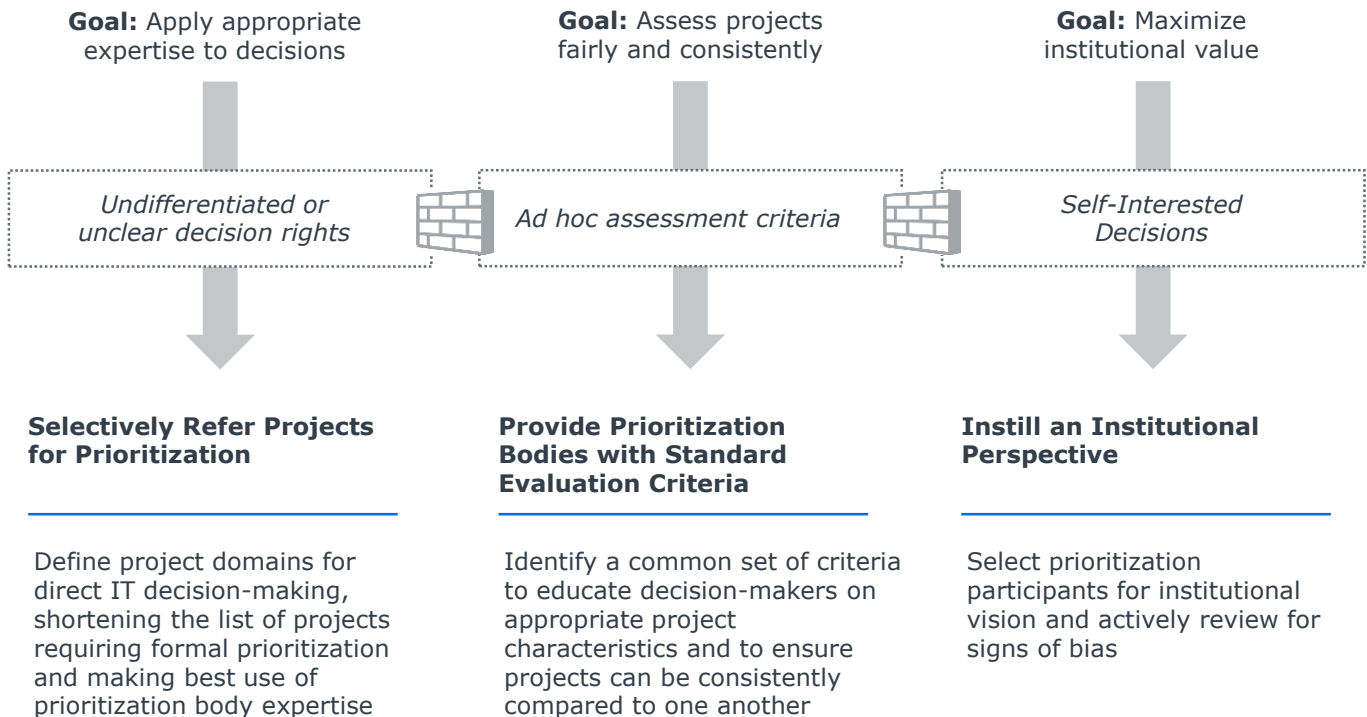
Not Just a Lucky Guess

Effective Prioritization Requires Standardized Processes and an Institutional Perspective on Value

The key goal of prioritization is ensuring that the institution's resources are being best used to serve institutional goals. In part, this means assigning project requests to parties who have the expertise needed to evaluate them. It also demands a common understanding among prioritization participants of the characteristics that make a project valuable to the institution.

The process of applying such criteria must also overcome the natural biases and special interests of project requesters and approvers alike. The IT organization's responsibility is to provide prioritization tools for standardized review, select and train participants to promote an institutional perspective, and ingrain a culture of accountability in prioritization decisions.

Overcoming Obstacles on the Road to Better Project Prioritization



Looking for Frontier Practices

— “ —
"How can we ensure that we prioritize the right projects to maximize institutional value?"

Members asked the Forum to find promising, replicable approaches to address the problem of arriving at fair, transparent project prioritizations that deliver the best possible value. From our interviews with CIOs and Project Management Office Directors, three scalable strategies emerged.

Best Practices Sourced From Across Higher Education

This study developed from the IT Forum's Project Management Functional Collaborative, a short-term research study that worked with project management leaders in higher education. We are grateful to the project management interviewees for sharing institutional insights and practices. Our conversations generated the best practices within this executive brief.

Featured Institutions—With Sincere Appreciation



David Underwood
Assistant Director, Project
Management Office



Gary Pratt
Chief Information Officer



Amy Kerr
Project Management Director

Selected Research Participants

Pepperdine University

Rita Schnepf
Director of Project Management

University of Maryland Baltimore County

John Fritz
Assoc. VP Division of Information
Technology

Joe Kirby
Assistant VP, DoIT

Simon Fraser University

Jennifer Casey
Director Digital Transformation Office

Boston College

Denis Walsh
Associate Director, IT Planning & Portfolio
Governance

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Troy Gagne
IT Project Management Manager

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Karen Hansen
Assistant Director of Project
Management

William & Mary

Courtney Carpenter
Chief Information Officer

What the Best Are Doing

Frustration with IT project prioritization is all but universal among higher education institutions. To arrive at fair prioritizations that deliver maximum benefit, the best differentiate between projects requiring formal prioritization and those that can be managed by IT, make use of standardized evaluation rubrics when making prioritization decisions, and protect the prioritization process from gaming and evasion by asserting intuitional benefit ahead of personal or unit interests.

Choosing the Right Prioritization Path



Request Filtering for Prioritization Bodies

Assign Projects to Different Decision Pathways Based on Scope and Size

Project requests are assessed to determine appropriate decision pathways. Simple pre-approval scorecards or prioritization matrices sort requests into tiers that determine whether IT management or a governance body has the final say about approval and priority. Characteristics that typically distinguish between approval paths include the technical versus business or academic nature of the project, cost and effort required, and whether a non-discretionary compliance issue is involved.

Ensuring Fair Prioritization Decisions



Standardized Project Assessment Rubrics

Build a Customized Scorecard for Your Institution

While pre-approval scorecards are useful for determining decision pathways, it is also advisable to provide downstream prioritization participants with scoring rubrics focused broadly on institutional value. These rubrics clarify which characteristics are institutionally important and assure that projects are evaluated in a consistent and transparent way. Criteria are tailored to the university's strategic vision and resources.



Game-Free Project Evaluation

Discourage Gaming Throughout the Prioritization Process

To minimize the possibility of biased evaluations or rules evasion, prioritization participants are selected for commitment to institutional benefit rather than as representatives of a particular unit. When prioritization decisions are in progress, project evaluation scores contributed by participants are made visible to the whole governance body. Finally, IT or the PMO periodically reviews scores for signs of favoritism.

Request Filtering for Prioritization Bodies



Assign Projects to Different Decision Pathways Based on Scope and Size

Practice in Brief

Project requests are assessed to determine appropriate decision pathways. Simple pre-approval scorecards or prioritization matrices sort requests into tiers that determine whether IT management or a governance body has the final say about approval and priority. Characteristics that typically distinguish between approval paths include the technical versus business or academic nature of the project, cost and effort required, and whether a non-discretionary compliance issue is involved.

Implementation Steps

- Determine filtering criteria for distinguishing between projects that require formal prioritization and others that may be approved by IT management. Projects that bypass the prioritization body are typically below some cost/effort threshold, purely technical in nature, and/or mandatory due to compliance requirements. A complete project assessment is not necessary at this stage.
- Develop distinct project approval pathways based on the filtering criteria (e.g., technical projects go to an IT directors council, larger enterprise projects to IT governance).
- Develop a scorecard or matrix to capture filtering criteria for each project request and sort requests into tiers that determine approval pathways.
- Coordinate project decisions across the different approval pathways to ensure that all parties are aware of shared resource constraints.
- Periodically review the filtering process to ensure that thresholds remain relevant, errors can be addressed, and decision pathways can be adjusted as needed.

Benefits to Institution

- » Optimize prioritization body's time
- » Fast-track small and technical project approvals



"Our first step of review is to score how difficult a project will be to deliver. The scores sort projects into tiers to identify the support each needs."

Director, Project Management Office
Private Research University



Spotlight Practices

Old Dominion University
Bowdoin College

Limits on Prioritization Resources Call for Targeted Project Referrals

Time

Overloaded agendas can overwhelm committees and slow decision-making

Knowledge

Committees contribute business perspective, lack expertise to judge purely technical projects

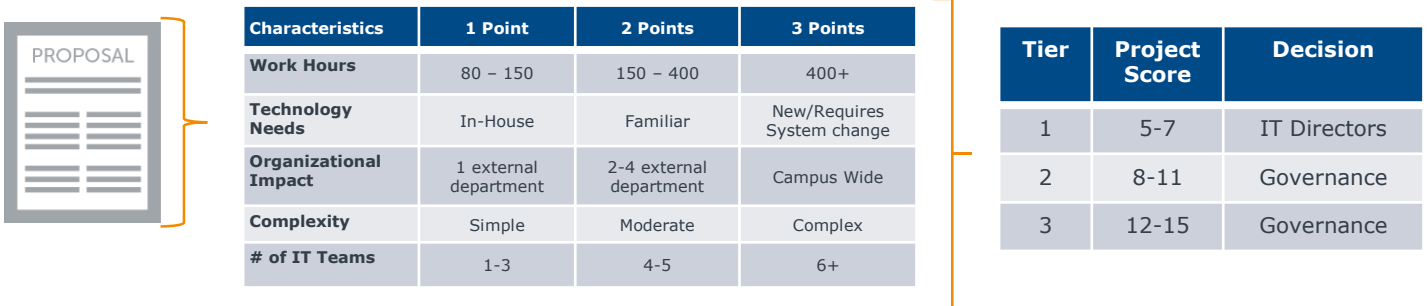
Discretion

Non-discretionary compliance or operational issues have automatic priority, don't need governance

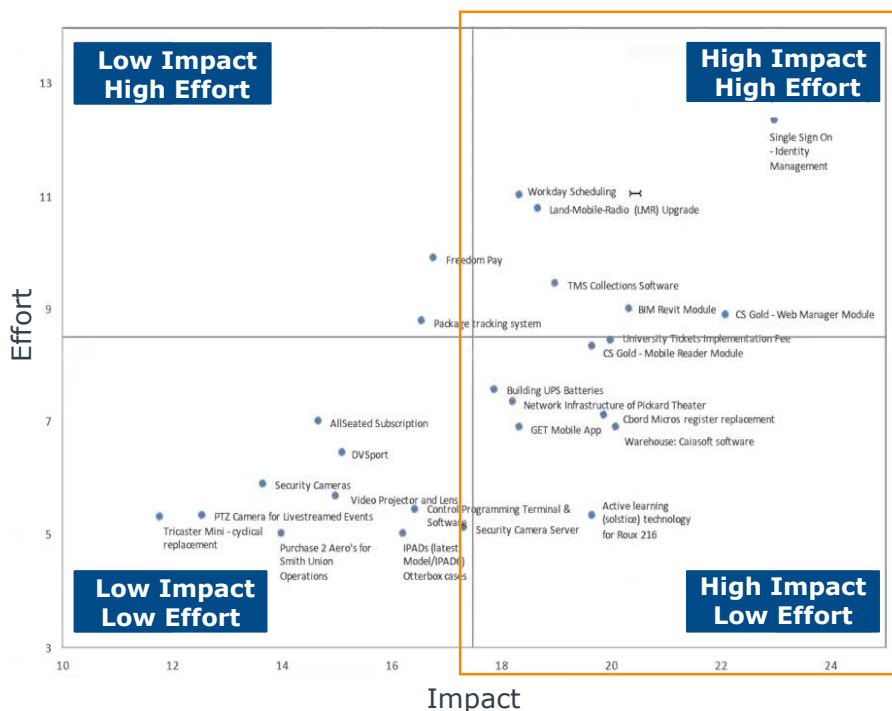


Option 1: Project Scores Add Up to a Decision Pathway

Old Dominion University's Project Review Team uses a rubric to score project size, complexity, and scope, then guides project approval by tiers based on the summed scores.



Option 2: Matrix Graphically Sorts Proposals for Committee Attention



At Bowdoin College, the PMO prepares effort and impact estimates for projects and places them on a 2x2 matrix.

For prioritization, high impact/high effort items get the most scrutiny. High impact/low effort projects are placed on a fast track, while other quadrants are IT-managed.

Standardized Project Assessment Rubrics



Build a Customized Scorecard for Your Institution

Practice in Brief

While pre-approval scorecards are useful for determining decision pathways, it is also advisable to provide downstream prioritization participants with scoring rubrics focused broadly on institutional value. These rubrics clarify which characteristics are institutionally important and assure that projects are evaluated in a consistent and transparent way. Criteria are tailored to the university's strategic vision and resources.

Implementation Steps

- Develop scoring criteria based on university strategic goals, resources, and culture. Essential items include strategic relevance, risk, criticality or impact, and cost/ROI.
- Assemble criteria in a scorecard format with a specified range of values for each response and a box for total project score (typically the sum of the individual responses). The scorecard must be short and easily completable.
- Decide on the parties who will respond to the scorecard. Rubrics may be filled out by project proposers, IT, governance body members, or a combination. Restricting the number of respondents may produce more expert responses, but lessens the political weight of the score.
- If multiple parties fill out the rubric, use the sum or mean of all participant scores to rank project proposals. Scores should be seen as guidelines to complement discussion and decision-making, not as absolute prioritization outcomes.
- Periodically review the rubric to ensure that it remains aligned with institutional needs.

Benefits to Institution

- » Increase prioritization transparency
- » Ensure institutional priorities are consistently applied in project review



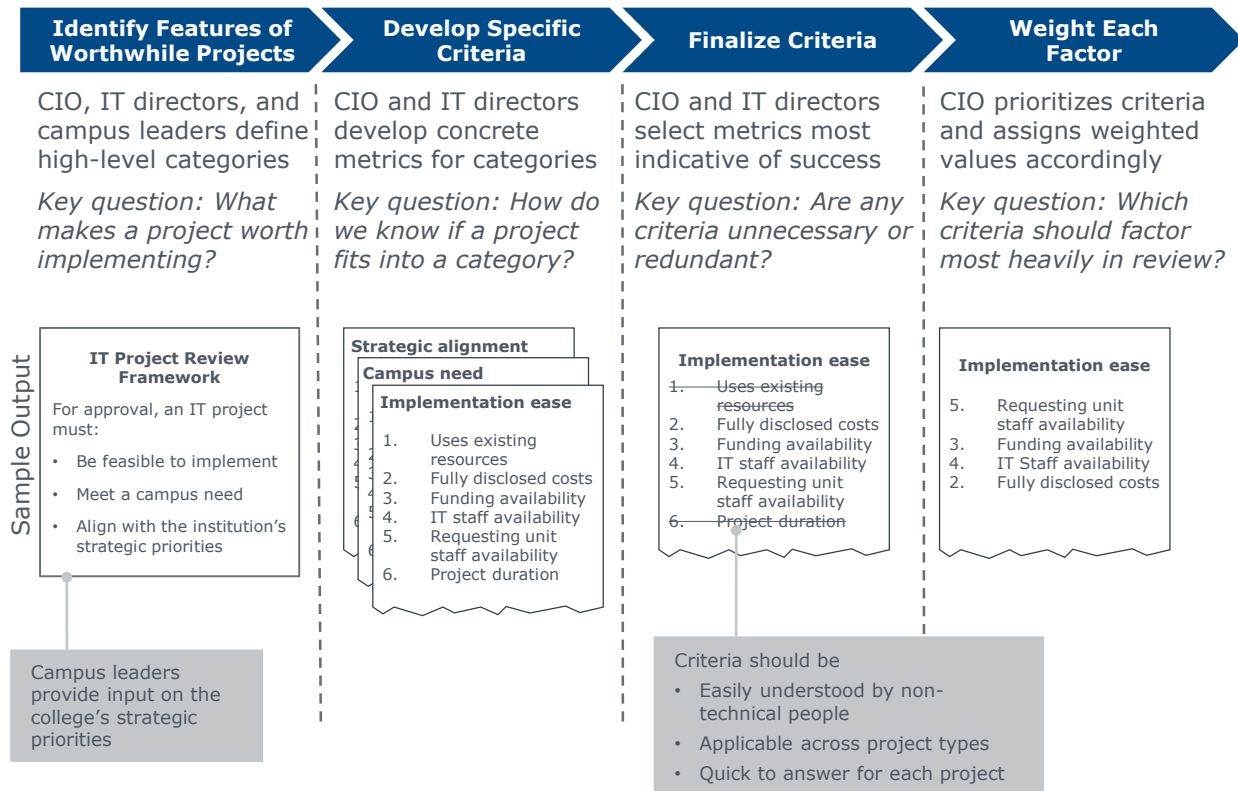
"As a PMO we realized that we needed prioritization and asked a senior leadership team to build a set of criteria. The criteria were put into a scorecard to assist our stakeholders in prioritizing projects and standardizing assessments. The scorecards are constantly reviewed to ensure that they reflect the University's needs."

Associate Director IT Planning
Private Research University



Building an IT Project Scorecard Customized for Institutional Needs

At one research institution, the IT organization developed a project scorecard in a four-step process focused on strategic institutional needs shaped by practicality and simplicity. Consultation with campus leadership helped identify broad categories of project worth, and iterative refinements of specific evaluation criteria and value ranges produced a simple final rubric.



Elements of a Simple Prioritization Scorecard

Scoring Criteria	Value Key	Value
Strategic Goal How closely does the project request align with strategic goal(s)? Answer for each of the institution's major goals.	0 = No Effect or Negative 1= Indirect Positive Effect 2= Direct Positive Impact 3= Significant Positive Impact	Capturing a score for each major institutional goal is a good way to reward projects that serve multiple purposes. Relative weights of items may be built into answer values, or added in a separate weighting column.
Risk To what level of risk does this project expose the university?	3 = High Risk 6 = Medium Risk 9 = Low Risk	
Criticality How vital is this project? Is it required to enable other projects, or needed to avoid loss of critical capabilities?	0 = Low 3 = Medium 6 = High 9 = Critical	
Return What is the project's project benefit to the university, considering value add, cost avoidance, etc.?	0 = No positive return: 3 = \$0 -\$100,000 6 = \$100,001 -\$250,000 9 = > \$250,000	
Total Project Score		

Game-Free Project Evaluation

Discourage Gaming Throughout the Prioritization Process



Practice in Brief

To minimize the possibility of biased evaluations or rules evasion, prioritization participants are selected for commitment to institutional benefit rather than as representatives of a particular unit. When prioritization decisions are in progress, project evaluation scores contributed by participants are made visible to the whole governance body. Finally, IT or the PMO periodically reviews scores for signs of favoritism.

Implementation Steps

- Promote the principle of institutional decision making over local unit interest.
- Choose prioritization participants intentionally with their institutional perspective and experience in mind. Explicitly reject the proposition that participants are “representatives” of their units.
- Use project scoring rubrics and make scores and project approval votes visible to all prioritization participants. If faced with pushback, stress that the motivation is to provide transparency into the prioritization process.
- Review scoring decisions for patterns of bias and confront participants who repeatedly show signs of favoritism or playing politics (e.g., trading votes). If the behavior continues, raise concern with the whole body.

Benefits to Institution

- » Improved focus on institutional value
- » Greater stakeholder confidence in prioritization process



“It’s not a democracy. The Provost said, ‘We don’t want a representative group, we want people who can think institutionally.’ Its exciting to have leadership who can think that way. It stabilizes project management”

Gary Pratt, CIO
Kansas State University



Spotlight Practices

Assorted Institutions

Warning Signs of a Gameable Prioritization Process

Prioritization participants consistently act as unit advocates, not institutional adjudicators

Contrived or exaggerated impact on strategic goals

"I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine."

Induction

Strategic Impact

Cost

Voting/Scoring

Business Case

Approval?

Some projects held to higher standards of documentation and evidence

Uncertainties exploited to minimize cost and effort of favored projects

Prioritizations are lopsided, misaligned to strategy, or prone to post hoc revision

Anti-Gaming Practices Minimize Temptation, Improve Transparency

Induction and Review

Select Institutionally Aware Participants

Educate Participants and Stakeholders

Pre-Process Actions
 Look for participants who have a history of institutional thinking and have a solid understanding of institutional strategy.

Explicitly convey the principle that projects are prioritized on their contribution to institutional goals.

Project Governance

Prioritization Process Actions
 Emphasize that process transparency applies to scoring and voting decisions. Keep records and use them to review behavior over time.

Examine Governance Scores for Favoritism

Make Governance Scores Visible



Approval



Decision Guide

Selecting Project Prioritization Tactics for Your Institution

Using this Report to Speed Consensus for Change

The purpose of the IT Forum's Executive Briefs is to kickstart targeted innovation on our members' campuses. Many IT Forum members use our research as an occasion to convene IT and campus stakeholders to review best-practice lessons from innovative higher education institutions and deliberate about the need to implement them.

To that end, IT Forum reports feature decision guides that IT leaders can use as a backbone for focused working sessions at staff and task force meetings. We recommend that members distribute the report to the relevant stakeholders as pre-reading to establish a common vocabulary and fact base, then spend time going through the worksheets to consider the applicability and resource requirements of the practices in this brief.

IT Forum staff are happy to facilitate such discussions live on your campus or on a private web conference as helpful.

Creating an IT Team Working Session

- Send report to project management and IT leadership for pre-reading
- Convene group to discuss diagnostic questions and assess need for adopting profiled practices
- Contact IT Forum for implementation support:
 - Unmetered consultation with Forum researchers
 - Networking contact with profiled institutions
 - Model policy and process templates

Request Filtering for Prioritization Bodies

Use the worksheet below to consider whether prioritization filtering (see pp. 7-8) is right for your institution, and to identify actions need to implement one.



Is This Practice Appropriate For Us?

Indicate whether each statement accurately describes your institution, and use the box below for implementation guidance.

- Our prioritization body receives more project proposals than it can effectively manage.
- We lack clear criteria for deciding which projects are approved by IT and which require formal prioritization or governance review.
- We often ask our prioritization body to review projects that are purely technical in nature.
- Customers are frustrated with the speed and/or results of the prioritization body.
- Non-discretionary compliance or operational issues are not given automatic priority.

How many of these issues are present on our campus?

4-5 Project request filtering system is recommended	2-3 Removing outlier projects from the main pipeline may be sufficient	0-1 Project request filtering not needed
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What Do We Need to Do to Implement?

Indicate whether each item below is already in place, partially in place but needs enhancement, or must be created.

Capability/Resource	In Place	Partially in Place	Create
Criteria for discriminating between projects to be approved by IT and to be submitted to a prioritization body (cost/effort, technical nature, mandatory, etc.).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fully developed parallel pathways for project approval via IT management decision and via formal prioritization body.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scorecard or decision matrix to capture information needed to assign projects to appropriate decision path.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Coordination process to ensure that prioritization bodies are aware of the resource impacts of IT-managed project decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Plan for periodic review of the project request filtering criteria and approval processes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Standardized Project Assessment Rubrics

Use the worksheet below to consider whether a standardized project assessment rubric (see pp. 9-10) is right for your institution, and to identify actions need to implement this practice.



Is This Practice Appropriate For Us?

Indicate whether each statement accurately describes your institution, and use the box below for implementation guidance.

- Our project prioritization body often makes ad hoc project decisions on arbitrary grounds.
- Stakeholders are frustrated by a lack of clear reasons for project approval or denial.
- Prioritization participants struggle to make sound comparisons of the value of different projects.
- We do not use project evaluation scorecards, or if we do, the scorecards are not tailored to the university's strategic priorities.
- Prioritization bodies struggle to complete project workload in the required amount of time.

How many of these issues are present on our campus?

4-5 Develop and apply a standardized project assessment rubric	2-3 Modest adjustments to current practice are sufficient	0-1 Standardized assessment rubrics are not called for
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What Do We Need to Do to Implement?

Indicate whether each item below is already in place, partially in place but needs enhancement, or must be created.

Capability/Resource	In Place	Partially in Place	Create
Process and personnel to develop standardized project evaluation criteria.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Simple scorecard/rubric to capture evaluation criteria for projects using predefined value ranges and item weights.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guidelines on who will fill out project scorecards and how to derive overall project scores when there are multiple scoring participants (sum, mean, etc.).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Communications and education plan for educating prioritization body participants and/or other stakeholders in applying project evaluation criteria.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guidelines on the use of evaluation scores alongside other evidence and special considerations when making project decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Game-Free Project Evaluation

Use the worksheet below to consider whether a game-free project evaluation culture (see pp. 11-12) is right for your institution, and to identify actions needed to implement this practice.



Is This Practice Appropriate For Us?

Indicate whether each statement accurately describes your institution, and use the box below for implementation guidance.

- Prioritization participants often act as advocates of units or other interests, not as institutional adjudicators.
- We do not observe the principle of prioritizing projects on the basis of maximizing value to the institution.
- Project evaluation scores or approval votes often involve a degree of favoritism or misrepresentation.
- We often approve the “wrong” projects.
- There are no disincentives for gaming the prioritization process for personal or unit benefit.

How many of these issues are present on our campus?

4-5 Process should be redesigned with preventing gaming in mind

2-3 Present gaming incidents should be targeted but the issue is not widespread

0-1 Project gaming is not a large issue on your campus



What Do We Need to Do to Implement?

Indicate whether each item below is already in place, partially in place but needs enhancement, or must be created.

Capability/Resource	In Place	Partially in Place	Create
Leadership-backed principle of prioritizing IT projects on the basis of maximizing institutional value or benefit.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intentional selection of prioritization body members on grounds of institutional perspective and broad understanding of institutional strategy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A standardized scoring process used by the prioritization body to inform project decisions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Established practice of making project scores and voting decisions known to the whole prioritization body.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Process for reviewing prioritization decisions for systemic bias, and for confronting participants who repeatedly show favoritism.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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