Five Threats of Silos for the University Management Team

What We've Learned Working with Senior University Managers

Silos pose the greatest risk to university mission. No matter the institution's strategic objective—whether increasing student success, growing enrolment, expanding one's global footprint, or promoting a diverse and equitable culture, to name just a few—inevitably it's silos that seem to get in the way.

All signs point to the silo problem becoming even more complex. We live in a world of rapid change and uncertainty. The future will require even more specialised skill sets and roles (e.g., business intelligence), not fewer—many of which are designed to bridge silos but that also bear the risk of increasing complexity even further.

On both sides of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, EAB has been conducting frank conversations with hundreds of senior university leaders. Collectively, we have taken our observations from these conversations—as well as from presenting in front of countless governing boards—and identified the five greatest threats that silos pose to institutional aspirations.

The pain of silos can be felt—and needs to be solved—across all levels. But the ability to overcome the dysfunctions of silos is what will make or break the ability of the seniormost to drive institutional success in the decade ahead.

Unclear decision rights and responsibilities stall or halt cross-silo leadership decisions.

Silos keep innovation trapped in pockets, rather than scaled.

Silos cloud our ability to spot and prevent future risks.

Siloed thinking leads to incrementalism in future planning.

Silo challenges apply not only intra-university but also extra-university.

A Conversation Starter for the Senior Management Team

Our aim with this brief is a modest one: to create a shared vocabulary and spark honest dialogue among university leaders about where their institutions' aspirations are most at risk from the problem of silos. On the pages that follow, you will find elaboration on each of the five silo threats listed above, as well as representative prompts and questions for executive team reflection and conversation.

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Executive Summary

Silos exist for a reason. It's rare for an organisations of any type to be small and simple enough for everyone to wear all hats, all the time. Specialised skills and knowledge—disciplines, we might say—have been a hallmark of complex organisations since the turn of the 20th century. But now we live in a multidisciplinary world: as in the domain of academic scholarship, solving higher education's own strategic and operational challenges requires crossing traditional boundaries. Our leadership and practices need to catch up.

> **A note on segments**

These challenges transcend Carnegie classification or size. At research universities, the complexity Clark Kerr once dubbed the "multiversity" brings not only great potential but also countless opportunities for disparate units to trip over or undermine one another. Meanwhile, smaller colleges may have a more focused mission but still lament that even two offices sharing a hallway might as well be galaxies apart.

1 Swim Lane Confusion

Unclear decision rights and responsibilities stall or halt cross-silo leadership decisions.

More issues today are cross-cutting—either living in the "white space" of organisations (not owned by one single functional area) or that require cross-functional collaboration. It's often unclear who needs to be at the table, who has decision rights, and whether they have the right lines of sight into the information needed to move forward.

2 A Thousand Flowers

Silos keep innovation trapped in pockets, rather than scaled.

Higher education's critics often complain that the sector lacks innovation—a patent falsehood. Visit any campus and it's clear that entrepreneurial thinking abounds. What the sector does lack is disciplined ways of harnessing and scaling innovation in service of strategic aims.

3 The Butterfly Defect

Silos cloud our ability to spot and prevent future risks.

Where the best-laid plans often go astray is unintended consequences. The phrase "butterfly defect" has been used to describe the challenge of interdependent systems; a single action in one silo can have cross-functional ripple effects, either unforeseen or where those aware of the likely challenges feel helpless to avoid or mitigate them.

4 Tunnel Vision

Siloed thinking leads to incrementalism in future planning.

A silo is not only an organisational structure but also a mindset—one that focuses individuals on what's right in front of them, the activities in the here and now where they've developed deep expertise and skill. The flip side is tunnel vision, making it harder for universities to pursue visions that cross organisational boundaries and practices.

5 Difficult Dance Partner

Silo challenges apply not only intra-university but also extra-university.

Many university executives note they spend much more time on external partnerships than in years past, and expect that to increase in the future. Both the university and the communities of which it is a part (local, national, global) face problems that cannot be solved absent collaboration between higher education institutions, primary and secondary educators, industry, government, and NGOs.

Silo Threat #1. Swim Lane Confusion

Unclear decision rights and responsibilities stall or halt cross-silo leadership decisions. Shared governance between academic and administrative staff typically receives much of the blame for the slow pace of change at universities. But even in decisions that rest wholly with management, and even when there's general agreement that something needs to be done, executives worry that they don't have the right frameworks and infrastructure for making effective decisions as a leadership team.

It's often unclear who needs to be at the table, who has decision rights, and whether they have the right lines of sight into the information needed to move forward. This confusion and uncertainty stalls decisions and actions, sometimes to the point of permanent paralysis or leading to tentativeness when bolder action is required.

Why Swim Lane Confusion Is More Difficult
(and More Important to Solve) Today

1	**Cross-Cutting Issues Now the Norm**	What's become increasingly difficult in the past few years is that more issues today could be defined as cross-cutting: either living in the "white space" of organisations (not owned by one single functional area) or that require cross-functional collaboration.
2	**Market Landscape Changing More Quickly**	Evolving student needs and intensifying competition demand agile and creative responses, often in areas that require vast coordination and multistep decisions.
3	**Higher Stakes Communications and Response**	Especially given the power of social media, an ill-timed campus crisis—and how the response is developed and received—can have a real impact on enrolments, development, and advocacy (along with executive leader effectiveness and tenure).
4	**More Frequent Executive Turnover**	In the absence of clear decision rights and responsibilities, ad hoc structures rely on personal relationships or historical knowledge—which is fine until someone transitions roles. With turnover increasing, executive teams need processes and structures that can last beyond the current team composition.
5	**"We Can No Longer Afford to Waste Time"**	At their best, cross-cutting issues foster opportunities for leaders to collaborate in new ways. But leaders also can become overwhelmed by endless meetings and email/text back-and-forth about today's fires. More than mere inconveniences, these distractions can crowd out time for larger discussions and decisions with long-term mission and financial import.

Management Team Conversation Starter

How Do We Make 1 + 1 = 3?

> A recent Deloitte study notes that executive teams must learn "to act as a symphony of experts playing in harmony—instead of a cacophony of experts who sound great alone but not together." When does our executive team currently play in harmony vs. where do we most need to improve?

What Topics Have Been Crowded Out?

> Are there day-to-day fires or discussions that we could spend less collective time on together as a group with the right delegation, policies, processes, and infrastructure in place?

> What important strategic issues are we not discussing enough as a cabinet due to them being crowded out or the lack of a single owner?

What Support Infrastructure Do We Need?

> Do cross-cutting priorities have the right support infrastructure to carry our collective work forward?

> What else could we benefit from (project management support, decision-making frameworks, different meeting ecosystem, communications vehicles)?
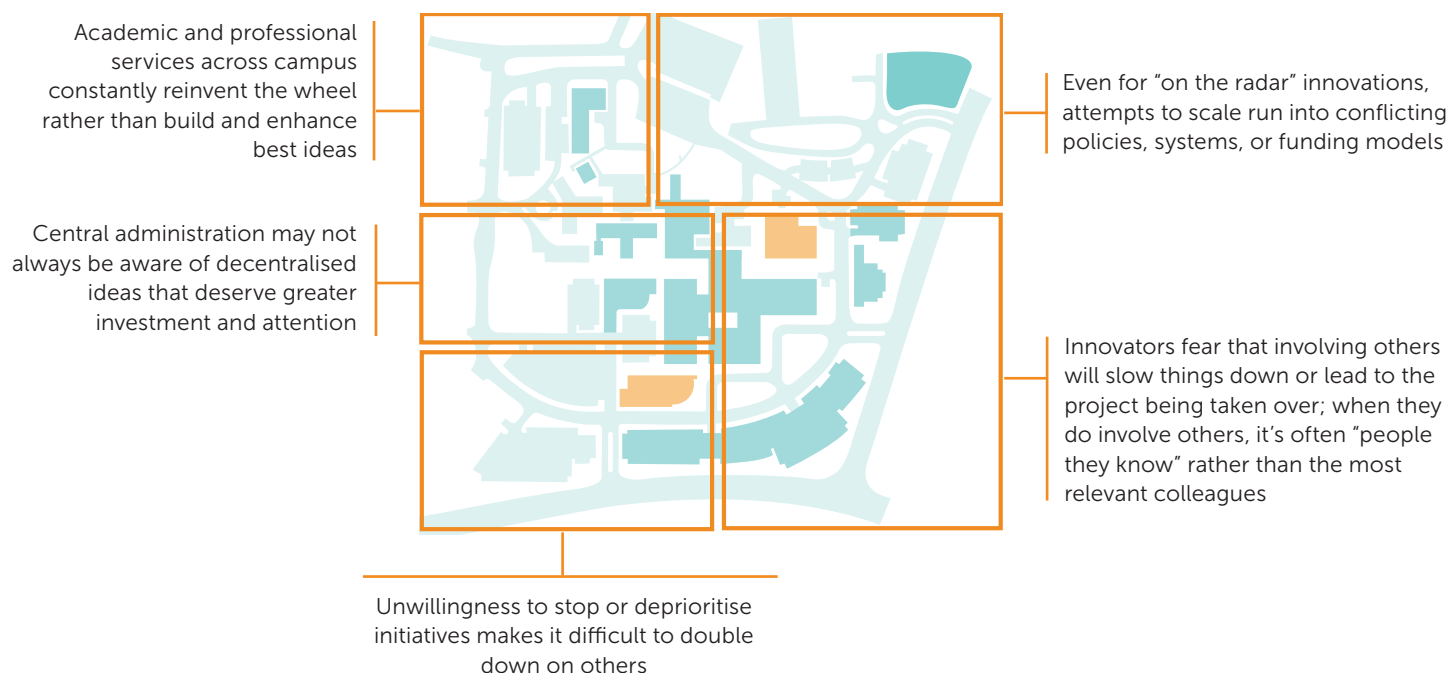
Silo Threat #2. A Thousand Flowers

Silos keep innovation trapped in pockets, rather than scaled. Higher eeducation's critics often complain that the sector lacks innovation—which is a patent falsehood. Visit any campus and it's clear that entrepreneurial thinking abounds. What most universities lack turns out to be true across sectors: how can organisations ensure that the right innovations scale?

To Thrive Amidst Uncertainty, Organisations Need a Discipline for Scaling Innovation

Jim Collins's *Great by Choice* looks at why certain organisations thrive amid uncertainty and others do not. One of his main takeaways is that the most successful organisations over time aren't those with the boldest, riskiest bets. Instead, they combine the pursuit of many small experiments and pilots, paired with the discipline of knowing which ones to scale (and which ones to discontinue).

This should be good news to most universities, who fear that boards, donors, politicians, and other stakeholders enamored with the "next big thing" will waste the institution's time and resources. At the same time, senior leaders know that letting a thousand flowers bloom isn't the way to a sustained, distinctive advantage.

How Do Silos Keep Innovation Trapped in Pockets?

Academic and professional services across campus constantly reinvent the wheel rather than build and enhance best ideas

Central administration may not always be aware of decentralised ideas that deserve greater investment and attention

Unwillingness to stop or deprioritise initiatives makes it difficult to double down on others

Even for "on the radar" innovations, attempts to scale run into conflicting policies, systems, or funding models

Innovators fear that involving others will slow things down or lead to the project being taken over; when they do involve others, it's often "people they know" rather than the most relevant colleagues

Management Team Conversation Starter

Analysing What Leads to Breakthrough Change

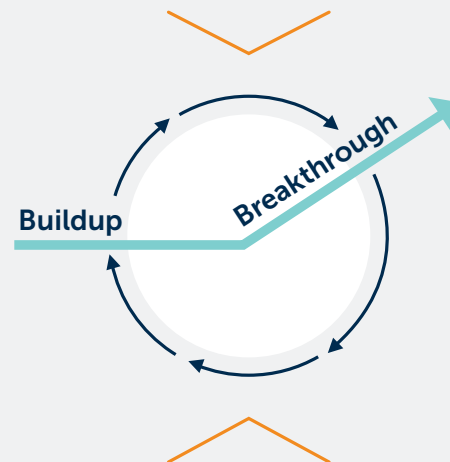*Jim Collins, Turning the Flywheel (2019)*

Question:
How do you get a 5,000-lb. metal disc to rotate on its axle as long and fast as possible?

Answer:
Small turns build momentum—what from the outside appears to be a big-bang change, from the inside was the compounding of many efforts.

Management Team Discussion Questions

> What strategic initiatives would benefit most from ensuring we create a "flywheel" out of disparate efforts?

> What early wins or pilots should we prioritise? How would we "go bigger" on these than planned?

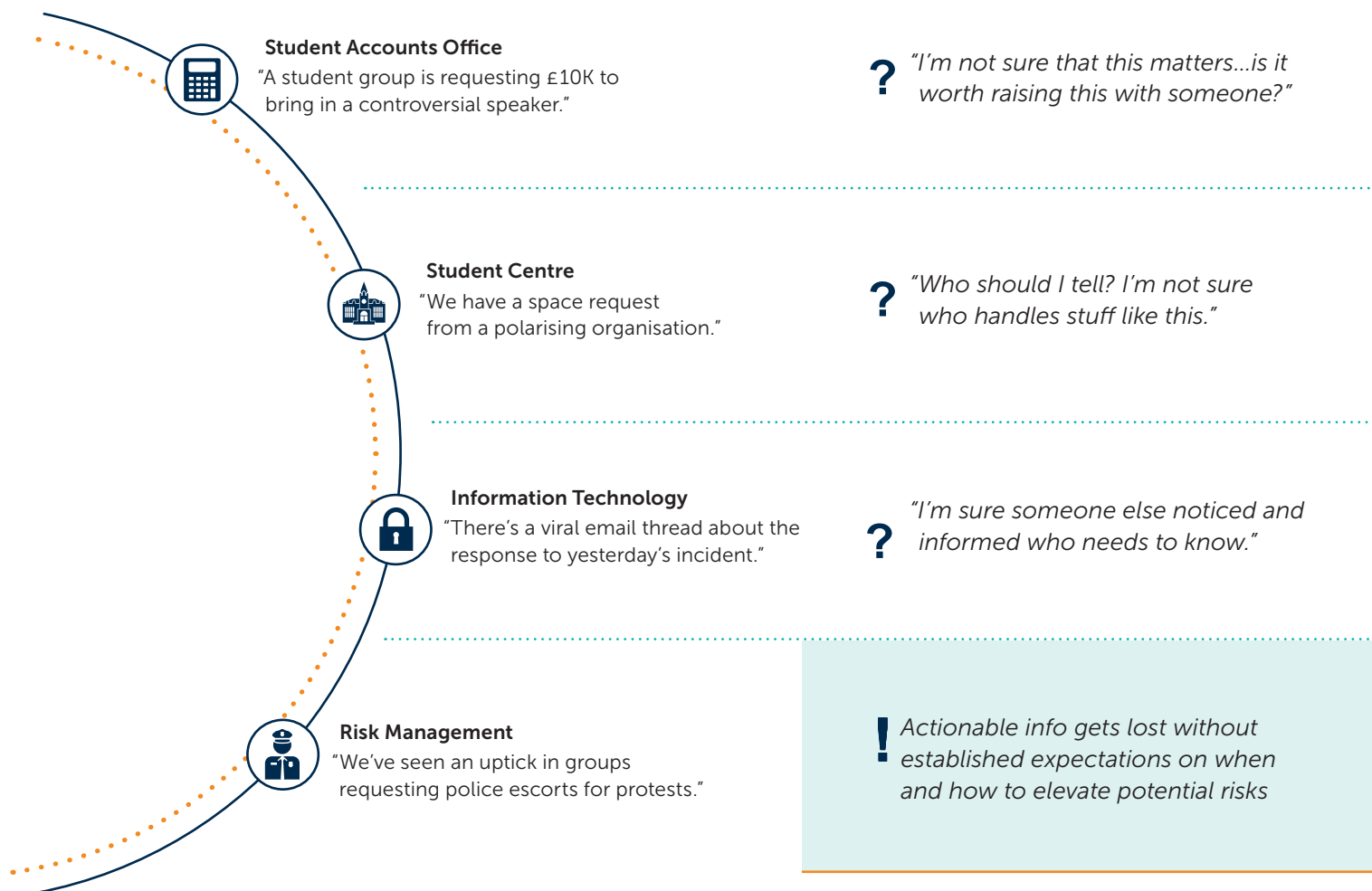# Silo Threat #3. "The Butterfly Defect"

Silos cloud our ability to spot and prevent future risks. Where the best-laid plans often go astray is unintended consequences. The phrase "butterfly defect" has been used to describe the challenge of interdependent systems; a single action in one silo can have cross-functional ripple effects. Individual stakeholders and "loosely coupled" units often don't have the information or training to see the impact of one discrete event on the whole; meanwhile, those aware of the likely challenges feel helpless to avoid or mitigate them. Additionally, a type of bystander apathy can set in, whereby individuals are less likely to act when they assume someone else is handling the problem.

We hear worries about the butterfly defect across campus. The director of student services might express frustration that a decision to reduce writing center capacity was made without a discussion about the disproportionate impact on international students, a current recruiting target for the institution. A chief financial officer worries that current financial and facilities commitments are being made across campus without projecting future, cumulative costs. A Registrar notes that the information to get ahead of campus climate flashpoints is often out there—but not yet aggregated (see illustration below).

Campus Climate Flashpoints:
Example of Where Ad Hoc Risk Elevation Falls Short

Many Offices Have Access to Potentially Important Information

...But Uncertainty and Confusion Hinder Consistent Risk Elevation

Student Accounts Office
"A student group is requesting £10K to bring in a controversial speaker."

? *"I'm not sure that this matters...is it worth raising this with someone?"*

Student Centre
"We have a space request from a polarising organisation."

? *"Who should I tell? I'm not sure who handles stuff like this."*

Information Technology
"There's a viral email thread about the response to yesterday's incident."

? *"I'm sure someone else noticed and informed who needs to know."*

Risk Management
"We've seen an uptick in groups requesting police escorts for protests."

! *Actionable info gets lost without established expectations on when and how to elevate potential risks*

Management Team Conversation Starter

Management Team Discussion Questions

> **Where are we most worried—individually and collectively—that we're not spotting or getting ahead of future risks?** Where do we think we're doing well?

> **When we think about our own leadership teams (1–2 layers down), what are the best examples of cross-functional communication to get ahead of the butterfly defect?** Where do we need more?

> **What cross-campus objectives would benefit from rotations or other "day in the life" exposure across academic staff, professional staff, or other senior leaders?** (For example, in the private sector, all Zappos employees, regardless of seniority or function, must spend a week in the call centre to better understand the customer.)

Silo Threat #4. Tunnel Vision

Siloed thinking leads to incrementalism in future planning. In candid moments, senior university leaders admit that strategic planning is one of the most time-consuming but also one of the most frustrating endeavors. Countless hours too often result in plans that provide little guidance for resource prioritisation, and too often sound exactly the same as the institution down the road. And even when strategic plans start with bold directions, they end up losing ambition when it comes to translating vision statements into action plans.

While there are many reasons why strategic planning efforts disappoint, silos can explain much of why incrementalism is the norm.

Challenge #1:

The Siloed Mindset Focuses on What's Right in Front of Us

A silo is not only an organisational structure but also a mindset—one that focuses individuals on what's right in front of them, the activities in the here and now where they've developed deep expertise and skill. Specialisation and focus are necessary for running complex organisations, but the flipside is tunnel vision, making it harder for individuals leading or participating in change to imagine bold visions that cross organisational boundaries and practices. Lack of exposure to other departments or institutions can make tunnel vision worse.

Challenge #2:

Stakeholders Can Be Skeptical of Cross-Silo Execution Required for Bold Vision

The most aspirational visions for higher ed typically transcend multiple functional areas—often leading to execution discussions marked by cautiousness or defeatism, with stakeholders focused on all the reasons something can't happen due to conflicting processes or incentives, trapped data, or that even the most collaborative team members simply don't have time to work together.

> " Getting to a strategic plan with bold visions was our first challenge. But then turning those visions into concrete next steps provided a new challenge. Our teams are so immersed in their day-to-day that when they tried to come up with future plans, these ended up being what we're doing now, just slightly better.
>
> University Executive

Management Team Conversation Starter

Management Team Discussion Questions

> **What's our "Moonshot"? Where can we dream bigger?**

What's one student, market, or regional economic development or social challenge that we'll address as an institution across the next 3–5 years? What would it look like to think bigger and bolder about how we'd address that challenge?

> **What are some "big ideas" we've discussed but don't think we can achieve because of silos?**

Example:

"We wish we could better leverage our alumni base as a market for our professional education programs, but there's too much competition over contacting alums and everyone is using different CRMs."

Silo Threat #5. Difficult Dance Partner

Silo challenges apply not only intra-university but also extra-university. Across the senior management team many university executives spend much more time on external partnerships than in years past and expect that only to increase in the future. Both the university and the communities of which it is a part (local, national, global) face problems that cannot be solved absent collaboration: between higher education institutions, primary and secondary institutions, industry, government, NGOs. What types of partnerships would truly lift educational outcomes across the continuum? Can we stem the rising cost of education through more expansive multi-institutional consortia and shared services?

Extra-university partnerships bring two types of silo challenges.
First, the university as a whole is its own kind of silo within the larger region or community.

Second, the university's own silos make higher education a challenging partner for other organisations to navigate. In the area of industry partnerships, for example, a single company may have dozens of touchpoints at one university. The lack of a single concierge can be frustrating to potential partners. Perhaps more unfortunate is that this siloed approach stymies universities from designing a comprehensive strategy to maximising "business" from any single partner or, even worse, leads to destructive internal competition.

Illustrative Example
How Do We Coordinate Siloed Activity?

What Each Area Brings to the Table for Industry-University Partnerships

Research
Partnership opportunities for industry investment

Schools and Departments
Subject-matter expertise, research space, and corporate partner networks for both research and professional education

Fundraising
Extensive donor pool and established giving network of individuals and companies

Tech Transfer, Innovation, and Economic Development
IP, innovation assets, and regional partnership support

Athletics
Access to a diverse pool of companies and highly valued branding opportunities

Career Services
Employment programmes and recruiter relationships that are a high priority for talent-seeking firms

Management Team Conversation Starter

Management Team Discussion Questions

How would we rank our partnership needs in terms of the ability to "make or break" our success at our financial and mission objectives?

_____ Other higher education institutions

_____ Further education colleges

_____ Primary and secondary institutions

_____ Industry

_____ Community organisations

_____ Other _____

_____ Other _____

For industry partnerships specifically:

> **Do we have a single 'virtual' face to the market?** A centralised website signals accessibility and alignment with industry needs.

> **How do we manage our relationship data?** A common CRM would enable effective collaboration and information transparency between units and staff.

> **Are our staff incentivised to collaborate?** Expanded incentives for lead-passing contributes to better staff cooperation and engagement-based performance metrics.

Prioritising Silo Threats Worthy of Senior Management Attention

Part A: What is a strategic goal that we are not accomplishing as quickly, successfully, or ambitiously as we'd like where silos are a large part of the problem?

Part B: In the space below for each silo, what are concrete and specific ways that each of these silo threats gets in the way?

1 **Swim Lane Confusion**

Unclear decision rights and responsibilities stall or halt cross-silo leadership decisions.

2 **A Thousand Flowers**

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3 **The Butterfly Defect**

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4 **Tunnel Vision**

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5 **Difficult Dance Partner**

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LEGAL CAVEAT