EAB

Scoping Strategic Initiatives

Designing for Implementation Success and Adaptability

PART

5

Argument in Brief

1   Teams charged with scoping strategic initiatives – translating strategic intent into planning and action steps – should go beyond the traditional task of amassing wish lists for new programs and student services to exercises that remove barriers to implementation success and promote out-year funding stability and adaptability.

2   One scoping workstream focused on strategic clarity assesses whether initiative investments are *market-matching* (catching up with industry practice but conferring no competitive advantage) vs. *differentiating* (potential pillars for a distinctive value proposition). This ensures funds aren't over-committed to projects conferring no competitive advantage, and guards against the incrementalism that can occur from mistaking "new to us" with real innovation.

3   A second workstream takes an eye to implementation by surfacing "strategy killers" – process, technology, policy and cultural barriers that, if unaddressed, can derail rollout. Pre-mortem failure analysis and interviews/focus groups with institution staff about what worked and didn't in similar past efforts yield invaluable information that exists in the organization, but isn't regularly communicated upward.

4   Finally, scoping teams (supported by finance specialists) should attempt multi-year cost models, building in review points for deliverables reprioritization, scale-up triggers for successful pilots, and sunset triggers for lower-impact pilots whose resources can be reallocated. This transparency enables central strategy teams to best allocate strategic investment funds across parallel initiatives, and gives board and advancement visibility into debt and fundraising needs.

Together, these activities represent the gold standard for initiative scoping in the era of *dynamic strategy*, essential for strategic execution focus, and de-risking implementation. Properly directed and equipped teams are capable of much more than generating wish lists.

Optimizing for Agility

Strategic Initiatives Shouldn't End with Wish Lists or Project Calendars

Strategic initiatives are where upstream strategy formation and imperative prioritization pivot to planning and execution. They're the investments and new capabilities that, if successfully implemented, elevate the institution from current to aspirational performance.

In the quickly-ending era of traditional, multi-year strategic plans, strategic initiatives often were defined by signature projects with a defined beginning, middle, and end: a new academic or research program, a student service launch, or community outreach campaign.

Some institutions are moving from multi-year plans to *dynamic strategy*, where priorities, resources and activity are constantly adapting to market developments. In this context, a different mindset is needed by the campus working groups responsible for scoping strategic initiatives. In the past, working groups kept either a public relations and advancement mindset (optimized to create compelling branding and fundraising themes) or in some cases a project management mindset, optimized for GANTT-charting deliverable milestones. In the future, a more strategic mindset will be at a premium, where initiatives are scoped in ways that ensure strategic clarity and promote downstream flexibility.

Most strategic initiative working groups aren't expected or well-equipped to address strategic flexibility in the scoping efforts. This section provides a framework for doing so – activities, analyses and failure paths to avoid so that working group time is used to maximal effect and central leaders can have confidence that initiative proposals are of high quality and actionability.

Why is Traditional Scoping Un-Strategic?

Five Common Missteps Hampering Strategic Initiative Working Groups

The scoping work of strategic initiative working groups often produces ambitious wish lists, but rarely plans that are actionable or adaptive, ready to direct institutional resources or react to emerging market developments. Scoping tends to focus on "*whats*", rather than the "*hows*" and "*what ifs*" essential to strategic execution, and as a result, doesn't advance strategy. Below are some of the classic missteps of un-strategic scoping.

▶ **Mistaking Catch-Up Investments for Differentiation**: Often, working groups are unaware of industry-wide state of practice – the standards attained not just by traditional or regional peers, but by national leaders and disruptive entrants. Without external competitive context, the tendency is to scope initiatives too incrementally, content to improve on institutional performance, merely matching what's common in the industry, rather than creating sustainable differentiation. As one partner put it: "We thought it was innovative, just because it was new to us. But from students' vantage, it wasn't." Every working group should clearly define whether proposed investments are intended to match the market and no more, versus those that are pillars in the institution's differentiated value proposition.

▶ **Failing to Anticipate Implementation Success Barriers**: Working groups tend not to spend enough time on what might be called "de-risking" due diligence – surfacing internal process, technology, policy and cultural barriers that, if unaddressed, impede implementation and beneficial impact. This knowledge exists internally but isn't regularly communicated upwards. Every initiative's scoping recommendations should present a ranked list of such risks that central strategy teams can choose to redress proactively.

▶ **All Ends, No Means**: Working groups usually devote the vast majority of scoping effort to detailing the attributes and hoped-for benefits of new academic and research programs, student services, and outreach activities, without analyzing how much the project costs to launch and sustain. This disconnect between scoping and resource planning invites implementation delays, and unsteady funding that undermines impact.

▶ **No Hardwired Pull-Ups for Reprioritization, Scale-Ups and Sunsetting**: Many strategic initiatives are scoped assuming success and completion – once started, project plans continue using base-case assumptions until the last GANTT chart milestone is delivered. This approach ultimately misallocates resources, by under-funding pilots whose success exceeds projections, and continuing to fund pilots that underperform. Working groups should break up initiatives into yearly chunks for success evaluation and reprioritization.

▶ **Initiative Deliverables Are Too Small-Bore to Achieve Strategic SMART Targets**: In reviewing more than 300+ university strategic plans and supporting scores of partners in strategy formation, we are struck by how often there's a disconnect between avowed strategic goals and the impact of strategic initiative proposals. In one breath, the institution posits ambitious strategic SMART targets: achieving R1 status, improving completions by 10%, raising net tuition by $25 Million over five years, and in the next catalogs a slate of initiatives that individually and collectively have no chance of meeting those goals. Every working group should be able to make the case that proposed deliverables will meaningfully move the dial on institutional targets.

Building a Foundation for Success

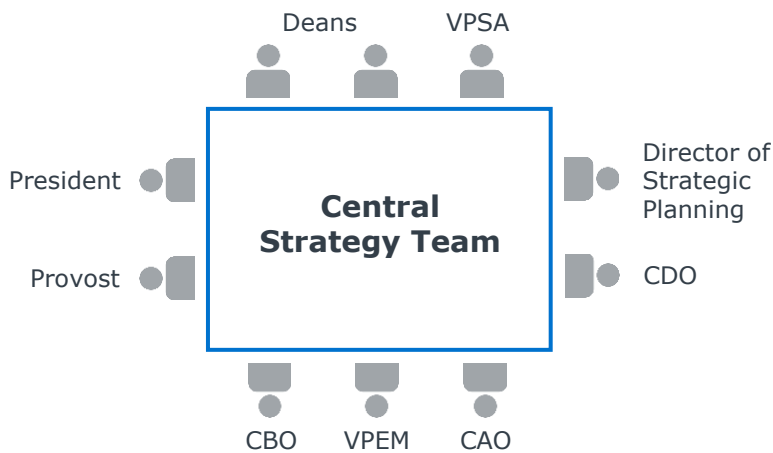## A Framework for High-Performing Strategic Initiative Working Groups

After finalizing the slate of strategic priorities, central leadership delegates committees to translate high-level strategic vision into plans for new academic programs and research activities, student services, or community outreach approaches.

Strategic Initiative Working Group Team Composition

To begin our framework for high-performing strategic initiative scoping, let's start with the composition of working group teams.

Central Strategy Team

Cabinet-level academic and business leaders supported by Director of Strategic Planning or project manager, responsible for strategy formation


Strategic Initiative Working Groups

Cross-functional teams of 6-12 rising academic and administrative leaders, with faculty and student representation, chaired by member of central strategy team. Responsible for initiative project scoping and resource modeling.

Key Activities

- Define and monitor external market risks and opportunities
- Define sources of differentiation and comparative advantage
- Set 5-10 year aspirational vision with SMART targets
- Prioritize 5-7 strategic imperatives
- Manage strategic investment fund
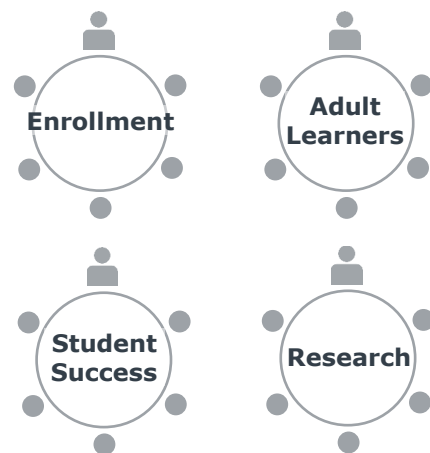
Key Activities

- Defining "market-matching" vs. "differentiating" goals
- Develop multiyear revenue and cost models, with "scale-up" and "sunset" triggers
- Identify process, policy, IT, and organizational barriers to success
- Develop multiyear project plans and 6-month quick wins

Director of Strategic Planning

Dedicated staff position of focused part-time role providing project management and access to finance and IR experts
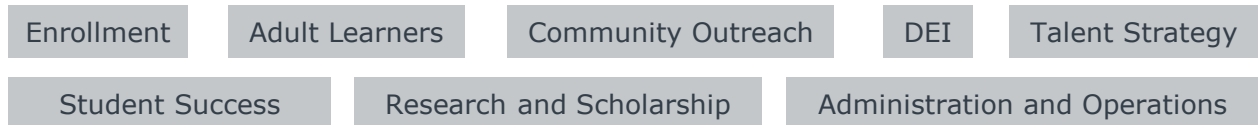
Key Activities

- Project management and communications
- Create and maintain dashboards and action plan templates
- Provide or facilitate market research, IR data, and financial modeling for working groups

Building a Foundation for Success (cont.)

A Framework for High-Performing Strategic Initiative Working Groups

Charter one working group for every strategic priority, chaired by a member of the central strategy team
Institutions should limit the number of strategic priorities to no more than 5-7; more than that tends to dilute resources and effort. EAB's review of strategic plans indicates that most priorities fall into the following common categories:

| Enrollment | Adult Learners | Community Outreach | DEI | Talent Strategy |

| Student Success | Research and Scholarship | Administration and Operations |

Staff capacity permitting, establish one working group dedicated to each of its main strategic priorities, headed by a member of the central strategy team. Strategy team representation signals senior attention, maintains accountability for alignment and deadlines, and facilitates two-way upward communication.

Make working groups cross-functional and inter-generational
Working groups shouldn't be larger than 10-12, and benefit from mixing professional and generational perspectives. Every group should include faculty and student life, as well as administrative representatives from finance, HR and IT as appropriate for the terrain. Include current students and recent alumni in student-facing terrains.

Recruit rising leaders for development and relationship-building opportunities
Working groups are opportunities to expose high-potential, early-career faculty and administrative leaders to senior issues and develop relationships in other areas of the campus.

Use kick-off meetings to educate working groups on strategic SMART targets and outline key strategic initiative scoping activities
Schedule a two-hour kick-off meeting, for the working group chair to scrub the team in on the overall strategic priorities and overview the inputs and output of their scoping efforts. In the kick-off, chairs should clearly establish that the purpose behind subsequent activities is to avoid classic failure paths of traditional, unfocused strategic initiative scoping above.

It's also imperative to scrub working groups in on the strategic goals their initiatives should seek to attain. A previous installment in this series examined SMART target-setting: translating high-level strategic vision into explicit objectives with time-bound measures for progress and goal-attainment. Strategic institutions invariably set objective SMART targets before starting to scope strategic initiatives. Without senior guidance about how far and fast the institution wishes to advance, the teams working on strategic initiatives will understandably tend towards the incremental, recommending marginal improvements to business-as-usual, rather than dial-moving new approaches.

Key Scoping Activities for Working Groups

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Activity #1
Develop a Consensus View of What's Differentiating vs. Market-Matching

Terrain Background Reading and External Landscape Benchmarking

Following the kick-off, working groups' first effort should be immersive reading in the terrain, to develop a shared sense of national practice and where institutional performance meets, lags, or potentially exceeds the norm in ways that could harm or strengthen competitiveness.

EAB provides a wealth of unique resources for working groups at this stage, to save time and improve the rigor of external landscape analysis:

- **Terrain Primers**: Curated news, statistics, and best practices on the most common strategic initiative terrains – get up to speed in two hours

  - Student Success

  - Community Impact

  - Enrollment Growth

  - Online Education

  - Program Innovation

  - Operational Efficiency / Financial Sustainability

  - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

  - Research Innovation

  - Advancement

  - Teaching and Learning

- **Facilitated Terrain Briefings**: EAB expert live presentation overviewing industry trends and best practices in key terrains

- **One-on-One Expert Consultations**: Schedule conversations with EAB experts for interactive Q&A about the industry landscape and evaluation of working group thinking

Benchmarking Maturity Against Others

Visual Comparison Reveals Gaps and Potential Differentiators

After scrubbing in on industry trends and national best practice, a useful team reflection exercise to crystallize and visualize where *as-is* and *could-be* institutional performance falls relative to national and peer practice is the **Strategic Initiative Maturity Map**. Plot the 8-10 most important impact and audience value dimensions of the strategic initiative against relative maturity, from *lagging* (so far below standard practice as to threaten performance or reputation) *market-matching* (achieving common performance standards, but not distinctive) *advanced* (reflecting the sophisticated end of national practice) and *frontier* (so different in degree or kind from national norms as to be differentiating). Don't get overly precise about maturity adjective semantics here; the goal is simply to define a continuum for showing relative differences in performance.

The working group then plots institutional performance against that of targeted regional, competitive, and aspirational peers (often requiring visits to peer websites or interviews to complete). The resulting visuals help assess where the institution lies in the external landscape through alternative competitive lenses, and—most important—provides a guard against unintentional incrementalism.

Strategic Initiative Maturity Map - *Illustrative*

Student Success: Retention and Completion

Performance and Impact Driver
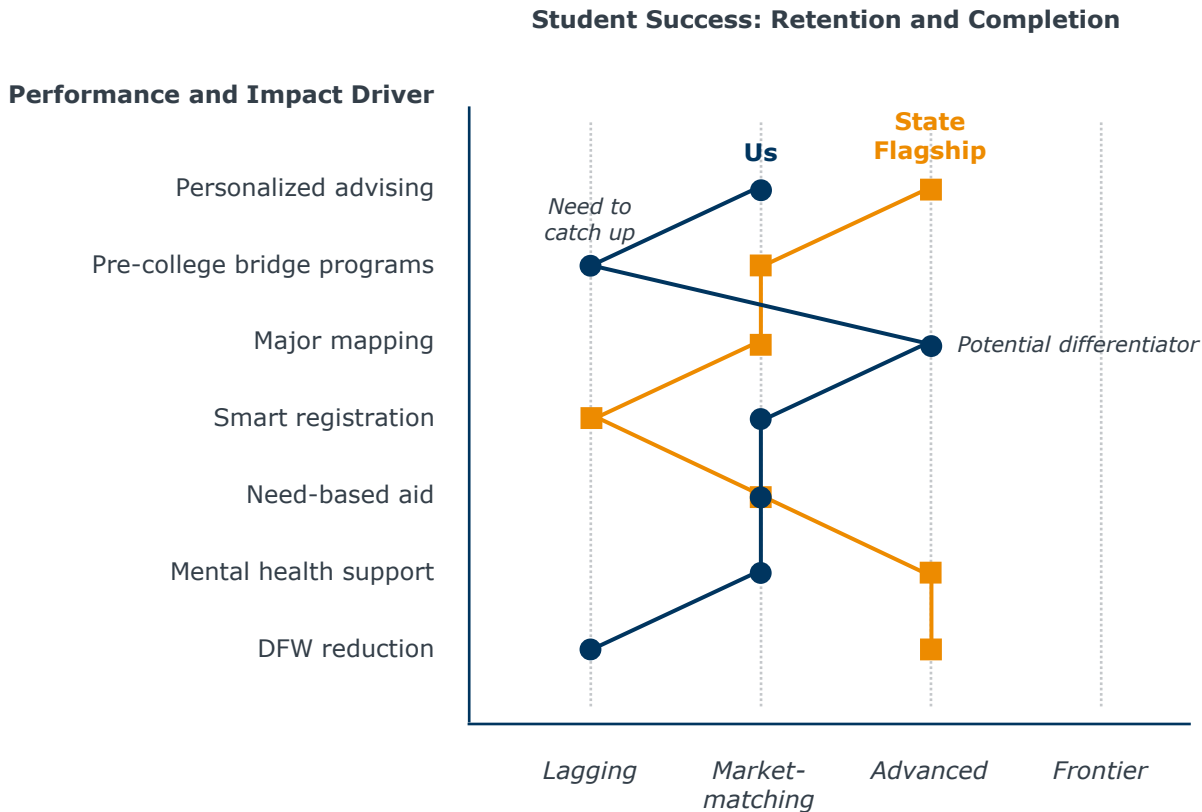
Choosing Where to Match vs. Outperform Peers

Differentiation vs. Market-Matching Matrix

After visualizing as-is institutional performance vs. competitive and aspirational peers, a useful complementary exercise is completing a **Differentiation vs. Market-Matching Matrix**. No institution has resources to be distinctively proficient in every performance dimension; the art of scoping is making informed judgements about where to try to lead the pack, versus match the market. In fact, in some instances, the best recommendation a working group can make is to focus resources on improving from *lagging* to *market-matching* in areas that matter in audience decision-making, where conspicuous underperformance might be costing enrollments, grants, or reputational capital.

To complete the Differentiation vs. Market-Matching Matrix, array a similar list of initiative performance dimensions to that used in the previous maturity map exercise described above. But in this case, the objective is to clarify whether the Working Group considers each individual dimension to be:

- A potential source of differentiation, where extensive investments can produce outsize competitive advantages ultimately improving mission and financials (e.g., the more investment the better), or…

- A candidate for market-matching, where the institution should invest enough to reach and maintain common industry practice, but no more.

Combining these exercises ensures working groups avoid the classic error of unintentionally and detrimentally mischaracterizing proposals that would merely catch up to where the market already is as innovations that are genuinely differentiating.

Differentiation vs. Market-Matching Matrix - Illustrative

Strategic Action Item	Differentiating or Market-Matching?	Required Investment
Personalized advising	☑ Differentiating ☐ Market-Matching	Expanded case management tech, 10+ additional staff
Pre-college bridge programs	☐ Differentiating ☑ Market-Matching	Additional instructor pay, placement test development
Major mapping	☑ Differentiating ☐ Market-Matching	None needed
Smart registration	☐ Differentiating ☑ Market-Matching	Update scheduling software, 10+ new classrooms

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Activity #2
Surface Process, Technology, and Policy Implementation Barriers

Strategic Initiative Pre-Mortems

After scoping which performance dimensions are to be differentiators vs. market-matching, working groups should begin to develop the outline for the strategic initiative—new academic and research programs, student support services, and community outreach efforts. Typically, working groups iterate drafts until a final proposal is ready to submit to the central strategy team's review and approval.

Strategic institutions temper proposal design with a de-risking effort known as a *pre-mortem*. Empirically, more than half of ambitious initiatives fail, for reasons both external and internal, uncontrollable and controllable. Pre-mortems raise these issues rather than ignore them and try to systematically discover information that exists within the institution, but isn't automatically communicated upward, that if unaddressed may pose a barrier to initiative success.

Best-in-class pre-mortems are conducted in two phases, the first a brainstorming and prioritization session by working group participants, the second a series of interviews or focus groups conducted with campus stakeholders.

Pre-Mortem Failed Future Analysis

The working group leader starts this exercise by informing everyone that the initiative has failed spectacularly. Over the next few minutes participants independently write down every reason they can think of for the failure—especially the kinds of things they ordinarily wouldn't mention as potential problems, for fear of being impolitic. With a robust list generated, the group determines:

• Which factors are "show stoppers" that might completely derail the initiative if unresolved

• Which are most likely to occur

• Which are controllable vs. uncontrollable

Finally, the group posits potential solutions to the problem that can be included in the final proposal to central leadership.

Accept that the plan has failed + Consider the reasons for failure + Assess and prioritize the reasons for failure → Strengthen the plan to address potential points of failure

Key Scoping Activities for Working Groups (cont.)

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Pre-Mortem Stakeholder Success Barrier Interviews

Most institutional leaders discover that similar strategic initiatives have been attempted in the past, often within living memory of longer-tenured staff. When this is the case, working groups can capture valuable information by interviewing faculty and administrative about the reasons why previous initiatives didn't achieve liftoff. Even 5-6 one-on-one interviews or a handful of hour-long focus groups generate invaluable information often invisible to senior leaders about change management barriers: conflicting incentives, lack of training, clunky business process or IT design, and (often) skepticism about leadership commitment. Interview results are kept anonymous for candor and are equally valuable in surfacing material problems that can be fixed in advance, and abiding cultural perceptions that need to be addressed during rollout to generate confidence that "this time will be different."

Make Time for Pre-Mortems – They're Worth It

These two *pre-mortem barrier analyses* require working group time commitment, but they're more than worth it considering the many downstream benefits enabled:

Alignment: Stakeholder consensus on key weaknesses in the project and how to prevent them

Quality: Reduces overconfidence and groupthink in initiative scope

Efficiency: Pre-emptively identifies high-priority issues, avoiding future work

Engagement: Involves multiple stakeholders and ensures everyone contributes with candid discussion

Agility: Alertness and effective response to potential issues before they occur

EAB has created resources for working groups to conduct pre-mortem exercises:

Pre-Mortem Stakeholder Interview Guide
Q&A Script for one-on-one interviews and focus groups

Pre-Mortem Summary Worksheet
PowerPoint template for reporting key insights and conclusions from Pre-Mortem conversations

Key Scoping Activities for Working Groups (cont.)

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Activity #3
Develop Multiyear Total Cost Models

Another important scoping task working groups should undertake is creating multi-year total cost models for strategic initiatives, that create a more accurate picture of costs in the short and longer term.

In typical practice, strategic initiative scoping is uncoupled from resource forecasting – attributes of the new programs and practices are proposed and approved first, and only later is rigorous costing and performed. This disconnect has numerous downsides to the overall ROI of the portfolio of central strategic investments:

• Not knowing the likely costs of strategic initiatives, the center overcommits investment funds, underestimating true resource requirements, or partially funding too many initiatives, causing many to underperform relative to expectations

• The opposite problem is under-committing strategic investment funds. When institutions discover additional, uncommitted money partway through the year, they often look to fund something that can be completed in the same budgeting cycle, regardless of strategic impact

The fix for both challenges is developing a more accurate picture of initiative costs, for the entire portfolio of strategic initiatives. Each individual working group should be expected (with the support of a finance team specialist or Project Management Office) to develop an eight-year forecast of initiative costs, specifying total costs needed to support projected levels of activity should the initiative ramp to success.

Such estimates enable central strategy teams to better prioritize investments that match institutional resource availability, selecting initiatives they are confident can be fully funded across time.

There are two immediate advantages to multi-year cost models in socializing strategic initiatives with key stakeholders and ensuring stable funding:

Teeing Up Development: Realistic cost estimates enable more precise fundraising targets

Engaging the Board in Approving Debt: Insight into key cost assumptions increases board trust and forward visibility for debt issues

Working Group Resource: Sample Total Cost Model

[Read more here](#) for an EAB profile of total cost modeling best practice, in an excerpt of our study, *Increasing Central Fungible Dollars*

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Activity #4
Set Reprioritization, Scale-Up, and Sunset Triggers

Strategic Operating Rhythm Dashboards

A shortcoming of traditional strategic initiative scoping is their relatively static assumptions and sticky resource commitments. Every ambitious strategic initiative carries uncertainty; it is impossible to tell which will exceed expectations, and which will fall short. Accordingly, a high-value analysis for strategic initiative working groups is to propose what we'll call *scale-up* and *sunset triggers*.

Working groups should propose signposts of initiative performance appropriate to the terrain (enrollments, research grant applications, advising interactions, mental health referrals, etc.) that prompt additional resources to scale up successful pilots, or phase out and reallocate the funding of those not getting traction.

The University of Montana has elegantly synthesized strategy mapping, project management updates, and budget reprioritization prompts into a single visual called a *Strategic Operating Rhythm Dashboard*. The approach was introduced by their president, a former strategy executive at General Electric, who adapted the conglomerate's strategy processes for an academic environment.

The dashboard uses nomenclature that divides strategic activity by time horizon:

Strategic Priorities are long-term/perennial objectives that don't change much (if ever), expressed in high-level terms like "Placing Student Success at the Center" and "Partner with Place". These high-level, mission-centric aims aren't intrinsically competitive, and sound similar to analogs at other institutions.

Objectives are the equivalent to what we've called initiatives in our analysis—intermediate-term projects and programs with 2-3-year time horizons. They are more specific in nature, and subject to scaling and sunsetting.

Action Strategies are their term for term-by-term deliverables – next modules on multi-stage projects, target levels of student adoption or research grant generation, etc. They are the short-term goals that in principle the team should be trying to hit 100% of the time.

The point here isn't the terms of art used—it doesn't make a difference if you call something a *strategic priority* versus a *strategy* vs a *strategic pillar* (these are all equivalent terms EAB sees used frequently in the field.) The active ingredient instead is the disaggregation of different levels of delivery certainty and priority permanence that allows enables precise examination of initiative executional performance (did we deliver as we promised?) side-by-side with whether pre-existing assumptions bore out (did audience preferences work out as we predicted? Did the economy recover, etc.) This visibility allows senior leadership to make informed judgements about struggling initiatives – was it good execution/flawed assumptions, or sound assumptions/bad execution? On an annual basis, they are able to renew intermediate-term objectives and swap in new action items, while keeping true with the more permanent strategic intent. *Strategic Operating Rhythm Dashboards* break the compromise between flexibility and continuity.

Key Scoping Activities for Working Groups (cont.)

Four Recommendations to Get Groups from Ideation to Execution

Activity #5
Demonstrating How Initiatives Achieve SMART Targets: The Waterfall Test

A classic oversight of strategic initiative scoping is failing to model and demonstrate whether initiative action items collectively sum up to achieve the institution's strategic SMART Target goals. In the absence of this self-check, working groups tend to endorse worthy-sounding investments that represent improvements on current campus practice. Unfortunately, these ideas may not be enough for dial-moving performance gains.

The *waterfall test* asks working groups to array the major action items scoped in their initiative proposals, using assumptions about how input activities translate into outcome KPIs. There's nothing binding about the goals at this stage; it's simply an analysis and visual to give central strategy teams confidence that that the initiative's scope is commensurate with institutional goals.

Student Success: Retention and Completion Waterfall Test (Illustrative)

SMART Target: Increase 6-year graduation rate from 65% to 75% within 3 years

- 100% of majors mapped
- Reduce unproductive credits from major changes by 20%
- 3% increase in completions