

How Leaders Should Navigate Higher Ed's Biggest Challenges

Why higher ed's traditional approach to strategic planning is insufficient for the challenges ahead

Higher education leaders face unprecedented challenges to the operations and future of their institutions. These threats span from student success and recruitment to the financial future of the institution. Some of these challenges require immediate action, while others loom on the horizon.

Because of this rapidly evolving landscape, higher ed's traditional priority-setting method of exhaustive, static strategic plans is no longer sufficient. Today's challenges require a new framework for guiding campus decisions that allows leaders to quickly revise priorities and reallocate resources, both addressing immediate threats and preparing for those downstream. This market-responsive approach to priority-setting is called Dynamic Strategy.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

Take a Dynamic Strategy Approach

Regardless of what priorities you are addressing, use these key strategies to develop a dynamic and market-responsive approach.

- 1 Narrow Your Focus:** Traditional strategic plans try to address everything without prioritization or tradeoffs. Instead, pick the three top priorities for your institution and focus leadership attention there. If everything is a priority, then nothing is.
- 2 Keep Everyone Rowing in the Same Direction:** Build buy-in for key priorities within the cabinet and with other relevant stakeholders such as deans, faculty, and staff. Priority-setting needs to happen at the executive level, but conveying the intention of change initiatives ensures trust and buy-in across campus.
- 3 Look Beyond the Immediate:** Long-term challenges may require your immediate attention. Be attentive to what you can do now to best tackle long-term threats.
- 4 Don't Be Afraid to Change Course:** These threats are ever-evolving; therefore your priorities will change. Regularly revisit your identified priorities and evaluate their threat level and impact on your institution.

Rapidly Declining Confidence in Higher Ed

A negative national narrative of declining ROI, spiraling student costs, and a link to lifelong debt leaves prospective students questioning the overall value of a degree.

The Reputational Risk of Responses

Higher education institutions face heightened scrutiny to respond to both internal and external events quickly (e.g., sociopolitical movements) and slow reactions can make or break your institution's leadership.

Missing the AI Boat

Many higher education leaders view AI as a passing trend and are resistant to integrating it into university practices, despite its enduring influence.

Severe Budget Pressures and Constraints

The combination of enrollment shortfalls, inflation, and rising wages has placed significant budget pressure on most institutions and led to leaders opting for damaging one-time cuts.

The Demographic Cliff Levels Up to Peak Population

The anticipated "demographic cliff" is just the beginning—by 2060, the United States will reach its peak population before it starts a steady decline, meaning fewer students and looming societal impacts.

Continued Learning Gaps Among the Next Generation

Students who will soon enter university experienced the most intense learning repercussions of unfinished K-12 learning caused by emergency remote instruction.

Higher ed leaders face more existential threats than ever before and need a planning and priority-setting framework that is up to the task. Our Dynamic Strategy framework helps leaders quickly analyze challenges to guide campus decisions, build cabinet consensus, revise priorities, and reallocate resources.

Speak to an expert about the foundational steps needed for institutional change and how EAB can help.

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