



EAB

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Aligning Institutional Budget Models to Strategic Goals

How to Make the Best Decisions to Impact Cost, Growth, and Strategy at Your Institution

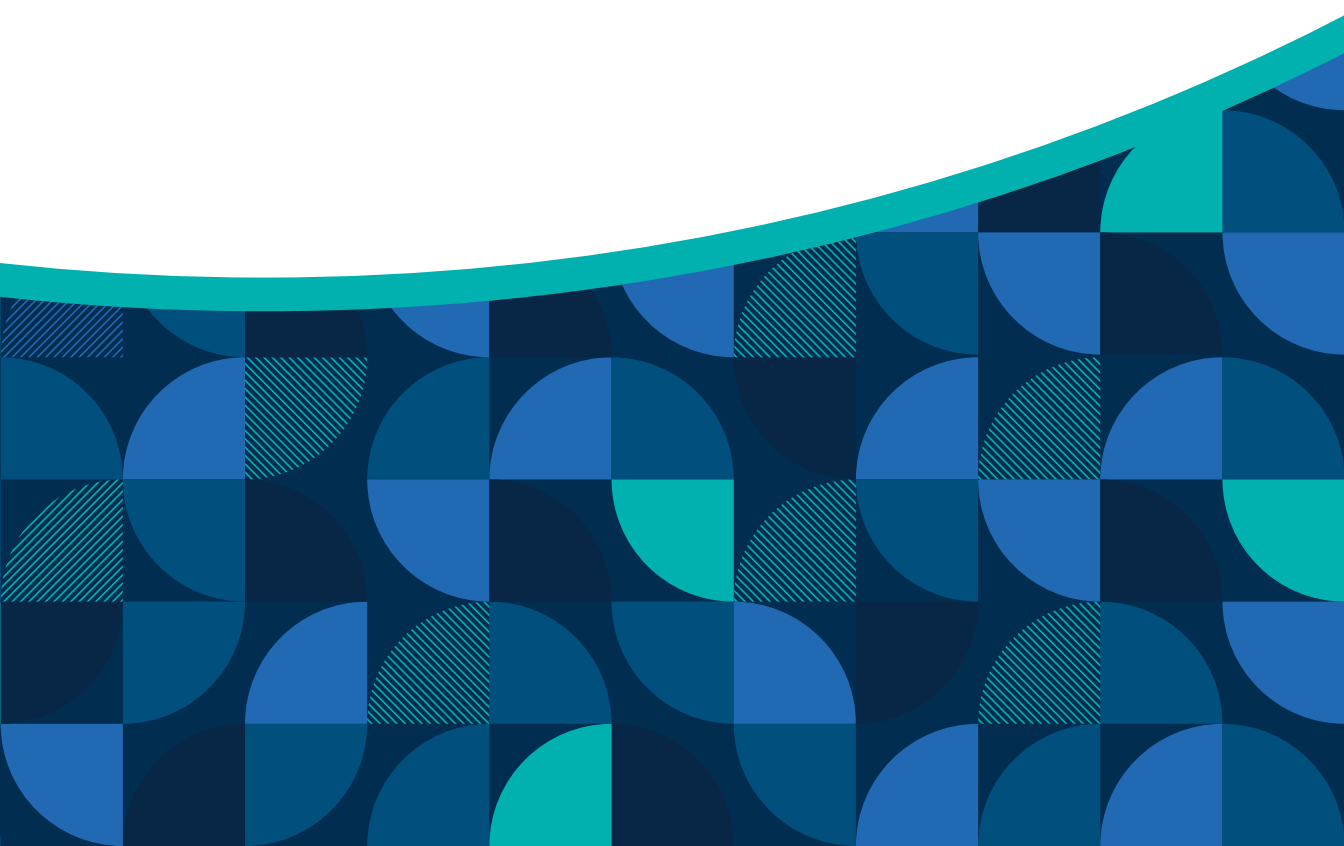


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Foreword

A Push for Sustainable Business Models Amid Rising Higher Ed Costs

Persistent inflation rates, rising material and utility costs, wage pressures, and deferred maintenance are increasing overall operational costs in higher ed. Moreover, continual enrollment shortfalls are leading to greater losses in tuition revenue, further straining institutional budgets.

Unfortunately, this environment is the new norm for higher education, meaning institutions must learn how to do less with less and seek cost-containment measures. Institutions need to look beyond onetime cuts across departments and programs to more sustainable business models. Even schools in a financially advantageous position are proactively seeking cost-saving measures to prepare for oncoming challenges.

Budget Models Are an Essential Component of Institutional Financial Sustainability

Institutions need to rethink their budget models to achieve long-term financial sustainability. Most models tend to be either centralized (i.e., resources available for central investment) or decentralized (i.e., resources automatically shifted to growth areas). Neither model is perfect, and higher ed leaders are increasingly adopting hybrid models that utilize the best of both worlds.

The right budget models help institutions respond to immediate pressures and proactively prepare for future financial challenges. These models facilitate understanding and buy-in from campus stakeholders, automate resource allocation, and offer a more concrete and effective approach to strategic planning.

Targeting the Most Important Budget Model Design Decisions

This report discusses three ways business executives should focus their redesign efforts to have the most impactful budget model elements and align their model to their strategic goals. First, institutions must allocate some revenues and costs to create financial accountability for units. Second, institutions must structure and deploy strategic reserves and subvention to safeguard mission-critical activities. Finally, institutions should incorporate strategic goals into the model through a mix of decentralized incentives and centralized funding to ensure units invest in institutional priorities.



Create Unit-Level Financial Accountability

Allocate some revenues and costs to align unit-level operational responsibility with institution-wide financial imperatives



Incorporate Institutional Strategic Goals

Align stakeholders with strategic goals through performance funding, seed funding, and governance policies



Preserve Mission-Critical Activities

Protect mission-critical but financially dependent units from harm in the new model to protect institution brand, and build central reserves for major investments

Note: The content presented in this brief is excerpted from a longer research study. For more information or to access the full study, please contact us at EABForumComm@eab.com.

Section 1

Understanding Budget Models in Higher Education

Understanding Higher Education's Budget Models

Budget models are essential frameworks for financial planning and resource allocation within universities. These models delineate the distribution of funds across departments and programs and are tailored to meet an institution's specific needs and objectives. Budget models facilitate informed decision-making by offering a comprehensive view of revenue streams, expenses, and priorities.

Additionally, budget models help administrators evaluate their institutions' financial health by identifying areas for investment or cost-saving measures. From there, resources are allocated in support of academic excellence, research endeavors, student success initiatives, institutional growth, and more to fit the needs of higher education's ever-changing landscape.

Higher education leaders typically use six different types of budget models to manage their institutions' finances.

Higher Ed's Six Budget Models

1

Centralized Budgeting

Upper-level administrators have the decision-making authority. While advantageous for addressing financial challenges and managing known expenses (e.g., purchasing equipment), it may reduce departmental motivation to generate revenue for their own costs.

2

Performance-Based Budgeting

Colleges and universities allocate funds based on performance, linking tasks to outcomes. Although this is good for transparency, it can potentially demand significant time for performance review by boards.

3

Incremental Budgeting

This model relies on previous figures for proposals and allocations, adding revenue from new sources while ensuring stability and ease of implementation for boards. It may obscure cost origins and their contribution to revenue and value creation.

4

Zero-Based Budget

The board starts fresh each year by discarding the previous budget, requiring all departments to justify their expenses. However, this is a time-intensive process and may pose challenges for some boards.

5

Activity-Based Budgeting

These models aim to maximize institutional revenue by separating direct and indirect costs, challenging allocation for general activities while enabling strategic resource alignment. But these demand substantial input and time from campus leaders and board members.

6

Responsibility Center Management (RCM)

RCM is the most common budget model in higher education. It is structured around promoting academic achievement by granting operational authority to institution divisions, schools, or units.

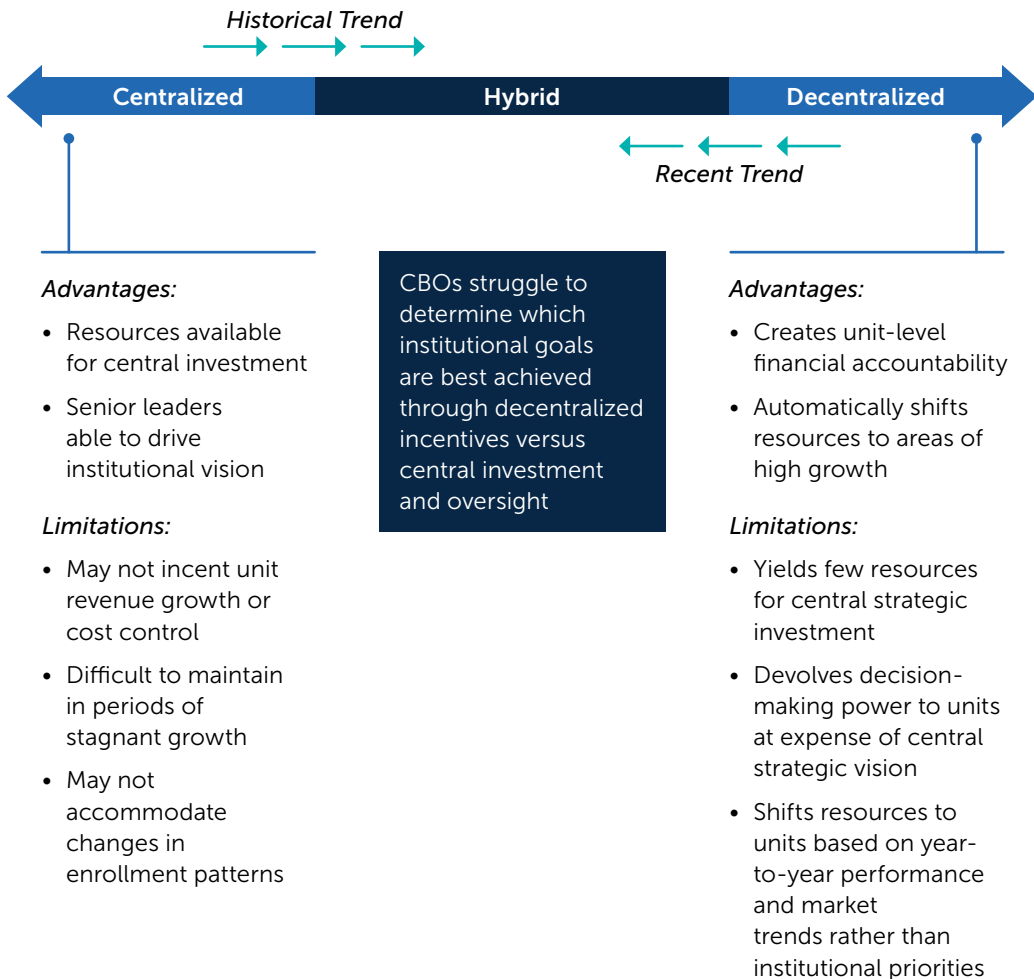
The Middle Ground in Model Designs

Most colleges and universities adopted the RCM budget model following the Great Recession, seeking to create stronger incentives for new growth opportunities and to quickly reallocate existing revenue. However, some financial leaders believe the RCM model doesn't provide sufficient centralized resources or support research growth. While RCM creates strong incentives to grow revenue, it also reduces central control and discretionary resources. This lack of discretionary central spending is proving untenable for many institutions amid rising operational costs.

Institutions are now adopting a more hybrid model that includes elements of both classic centralized and decentralized budget models. The primary advantage of centralized models is the availability of resources for senior leaders to invest in strategic priorities and drive the institutional vision. Conversely, decentralized models create unit-level financial accountability and automatically shift institutional resources to areas of high growth. Given the merits of each model type, many institutions have tried to design hybrid models that capture the benefits of both while minimizing or eliminating their respective limitations.

There is not a single one-size-fits-all hybrid model that every institution should implement. Institutions have adopted various hybrid models, ranging from fully activity-based tuition revenue allocation to models focusing on incremental changes and using activity-based formulas for new tuition revenue. The challenge for business executives is to create a model that suits their institutions' needs.

The Answer Lies in a Hybrid Model



Pressures Cause Reactive Budget Model Redesigns

Persistent inflation rates, escalating material and utility costs, predicted enrollment shortfalls, and uncertain legislative funding strain university budgets. Leaders are turning to dramatic revenue and cost plays in the name of financial sustainability. For example, some large universities are listing campus residencies (e.g., the president's residence) to generate cash while others are making damaging, onetime cuts across departments and programs. Even institutions in a financially favorable position are proactively seeking cost-saving measures as tuition and revenue stressors will likely worsen as enrollment trends accelerate.

Regardless of the budget crisis cause (e.g., enrollment misses, increased competition), finance leaders tend to encounter the same response. However, these responses are no longer valid given higher education's ever-changing landscape. Rather than continuing to try to "do more with less," many should be pursuing a "less with less" mentality of strategically shrinking—reduced footprint, fewer offerings, fewer students—to become leaner and more resilient.

Typical Reactions to Rising Costs Not Viable in Current Conditions

Myth		
"We will grow our way out of it."	"Cutting admin bloat will resolve the problem."	"Only fair strategy is across-the-board cuts."
Reality		
Growth Remains Important but Is Less and Less Achievable	Administrative Organization Relatively Lean After Decade of Reductions	Blanket Cuts Rarely Lead to Sustained Savings—and Damage Capacity
<p>62%</p> <p>of institutions will see flat or shrinking enrollments by 2030</p>	<p>-5.5%</p> <p>change in <i>public</i> 4-year institutions' administrative costs per student, 2016-2021</p>	<p>43%</p> <p>of organizations achieve desired savings in first year of blanket cuts</p>
<p>566</p> <p>of institutions will see flat or shrinking enrollments by 2030</p>	<p>-0.6%</p> <p>change in <i>private</i> 4-year institutions' administrative costs per student, 2016-2021</p>	<p>67%</p> <p>of HE institutions' three-year average cost growth increased following blanket cuts</p>

Proactively Anticipate Future Financial Needs

While certain institutions are adapting their models as a response to immediate pressures, the most astute universities are proactively making changes to reorient institutional decision-making and build resilience against unknown, future threats. For finance and administration leaders, the budget model is one of the most impactful ways to reinforce their institution's financial goals and strategic priorities. There are a few key reasons why leaders aspire to budget model change.

One is that the budget model aligns campus stakeholders to financial realities. Rather than requiring time-consuming town halls or educational sessions, the model can efficiently and effectively help leaders understand and buy in to necessary financial trade-offs. Additionally, the budget model automates smarter resource allocation decisions. The right budget mechanisms ensure funds naturally flow to high-growth or high-demand areas, preempting politically contentious reallocation and downsizing decisions. Last, budget models serve as a work-around to weak strategic planning. Unlike broad and all-encompassing strategic plans that are common in higher education, a budget model provides more concrete direction with funds and incentives for top institutional priorities.

Institutions must use their budget models to effectively allocate resources and respond to both internal and external pressures. However, four major shortfalls prevent this from happening. First, incoming executive leaders often initiate budget model transitions at their new campuses, which occurs more often as the average president and provost tenure declines. Second, some institutions have been forced to make model changes to meet stakeholder (e.g., faculty and staff) demands for greater financial transparency.

Third, as higher education's shifting business model requires resource reallocation and strategic investments to fuel growth, many institutions look to new models to create greater flexibility. Last, as institutions face increasingly limited budgets, some change budget models to incent mission-focused academic leaders to make program decisions with financial impact top of mind.

The Challenges of Budget Model Redesigns

Internal Mandates



Executive Leadership Change

- New presidents and provosts bring their preferred budget model to the institution



Demands for Transparency

- Faculty push for greater budgeting transparency, particularly in a tight budget environment where administrators make necessary but unpopular decisions

Industry-Wide Threats



Shifting Business Model Requires Major Investments

- Evolving business model requires large, strategic investments, yet financial pressures strain the ability to fund investments with incremental, new revenue
- Budget models offer greater flexibility for reallocating funds away from costly, historical activities and toward new growth opportunities



Academic Leaders Not Incited to Balance Mission with Financial Impact

- Financial responsibility and operational responsibility are not aligned
- Colleges and departments often make decisions based on mission- and college-specific considerations
- Units do not prioritize programs with high-growth potential, drive academic efficiency initiatives across programs, or reposition units to support strategic goals

Section 2

Creating Unit-Level Financial Accountability

Use Deans to Manage Costs and Grow Programs

As the heads of academic units, deans have special insight into departmental needs, making them key stakeholders for unit-level financial accountability. Their granular knowledge allows them to identify untapped opportunities for program growth and efficiency improvements that may not be apparent at the executive level. Further, they are often intimately familiar with the intricacies of budget allocation within their unit, making them key players in cost-containment efforts.

Deans also serve as liaisons between faculty, administration, and external stakeholders. They are uniquely positioned to gather the diverse perspectives necessary for decisions related to growth and savings and can help build consensus around executive-level strategic initiatives. Collaborating closely with deans also fosters a culture of accountability and continuous improvement within academic units. By empowering deans to take ownership of program growth and cost-saving initiatives, overall institutional financial goals are aligned to departmental units.

Deans Fill In Potential Knowledge Gaps



CBO Knowledge

- Overall institutional financial health
- Strategies for long-term financial sustainability
- Unit alignment with institutional goal and priorities



Dean Knowledge

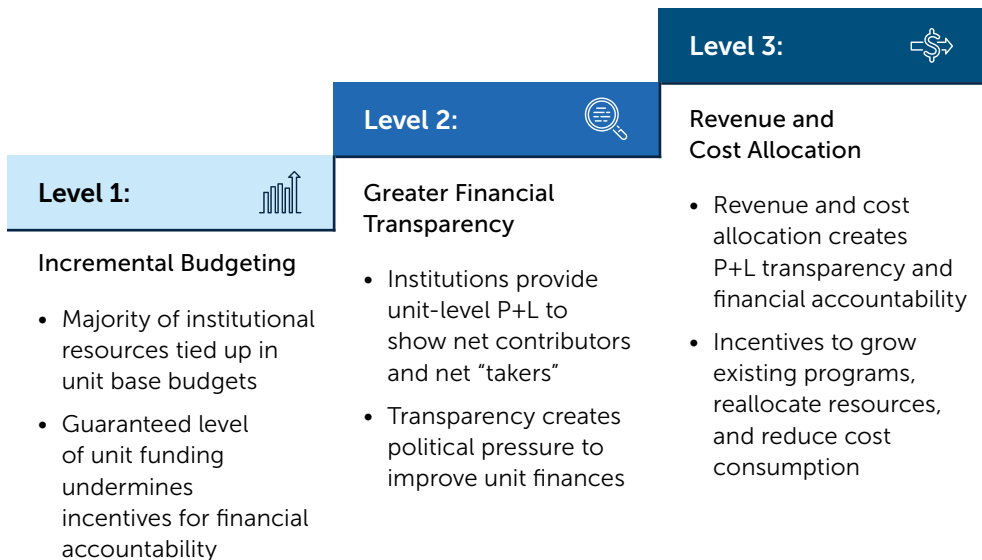
- Academic programs in high demand
- How to adapt existing curricula to changing market
- Opportunities to reduce space utilization

Identify the Right Level for Dean Accountability

There are three financial accountability levels that financial leaders can use with deans to better align unit-level incentives. These steps are designed to build a relationship between executive leaders and deans, with each level representing a more effective and complex method.

- **Incremental Budgeting:** Incremental budgeting means units receive a guaranteed amount of resources each year, regardless of activity. However, it does not create sufficient accountability and is the status quo for most schools.
- **Greater Financial Transparency:** Many institutions have begun to produce clear unit financial and contribution margin data, with the partial goal of creating social pressure for academic unit leaders to improve unit finances. While greater transparency is valuable overall, it may not provide a meaningful incentive for units to better manage their process and loss statements (P+L).
- **Revenue and Cost Allocation:** Institutions create the greatest financial accountability by directly allocating some revenues and costs to academic units. In addition to creating financial transparency, revenue and cost allocation ties unit resources to performance. This compels units to identify opportunities to grow programs, reallocate resources, or reduce costs.

Incentives to Increase Unit Growth Rise with Financial Accountability Level



The Varying Degrees of Activity-Based Allocation

The highest level of financial accountability is revenue and cost allocation. One way to implement this level is by determining the percentage of tuition revenue allocated to academic units through an activity-based formula. In activity-based revenue allocation, units receive financial resources based on their share of student activity as defined by the institution (e.g., number of students enrolled, student credit hours taught). There is a wide range in the percentages of tuition revenue institutions allocate to their units. The far left of the spectrum represents institutions with incremental or zero-based budget models that do not allocate any tuition revenue through an activity-based formula.

Moving to the right, some institutions utilize predominantly incremental models with small performance pots that reward credit-hour activity. The University of Utah allocates a small percentage of funds to reward activities. Others, such as The Ohio State University, allocate only new revenue while maintaining historical unit base budgets. While functionally similar to the University of Utah’s model, this approach may be easier for some academic leaders to understand and react to.

The far right side of the spectrum represents institutions that allocate the vast majority of tuition revenue through an activity-based formula. At the University of California, Davis (UC Davis), 70 percent of tuition revenue rewards activity, while the remaining 30 percent is allocated incrementally. Institutions on the far right use full RCM models, allocating all tuition revenue based on activity.

Percentage of Tuition Revenue Allocated Through Activity-Based Formula



Section 3

Incorporating Institutional Strategic Goals

Rebalancing the Scales

Ensure Financial Accountability Does Not Distract from Central Priorities

While creating meaningful revenue and cost incentives promotes financial accountability, it can also increase the risk of units becoming independent actors focused solely on process and loss (P+L) management. This could distract from campus-wide goals or even create counter-inspired incentives. For example, units may divest from research activities to grow annual student credit hours (SCH) revenue or cancel low-registration sections of courses important to institutional completion goals.

To prevent this scenario, institutions must establish incentives and policies that reward progress on institutional strategic goals plus P+L objectives during budget model redesigns.

Ensure a Balance Between Financial Accountability and Central Institutional Priorities



Sole Unit Focus on P+L Risks Derailment of Long-Term Strategy

- Academic departments at one institution reacted to revenue incentives by cutting under-enrolled summer courses critical to student time to degree and completion goals
- At another institution, funds allocated to academic units specifically for research faculty hires were instead used for discretionary needs



Central Intervention Necessary to Focus Unit Effort on Campus Goals

- Centrally defined strategic goals position the institution for long-term financial success but require unit-level focus and investment
- Central incentives and policies align unit focus on P+L management with institution-wide priorities

Align Local Decisions to Central Strategies

Institutions can incorporate any strategic, campus-wide goal into the budget model using this three-part framework. First, build unit-level incentives for departments to advance the most important outcomes or metrics. Second, institutions should direct seed funding to initiatives that support strategic goals. These first two steps form a virtuous cycle, as units receive funds to make targeted changes and then are rewarded for improvement. Last, institutions must monitor and correct for unintended consequences or perverse incentives in the model.

When using this framework, it's important to incorporate the three common institutional strategic goals into the budget model: advancing student success, growing research, and launching targeted new programs.

Advance Strategic Goals Through Departmental Investments

1 Incent Outcome Measures

Determine metrics that track progress toward strategic goals and use performance funding to incentivize units to advance those metrics

2 Direct Seed Funding

Award seed funding to units that propose resource-intensive investments in initiatives that advance institutional strategic goals

3 Correct Perverse Incentives

Implement oversight and policies to correct unintended consequences or perverse incentives of new model

Three Common Institutional Strategic Goals



Advancing Student Success



Growing Research



Launching Targeted New Programs

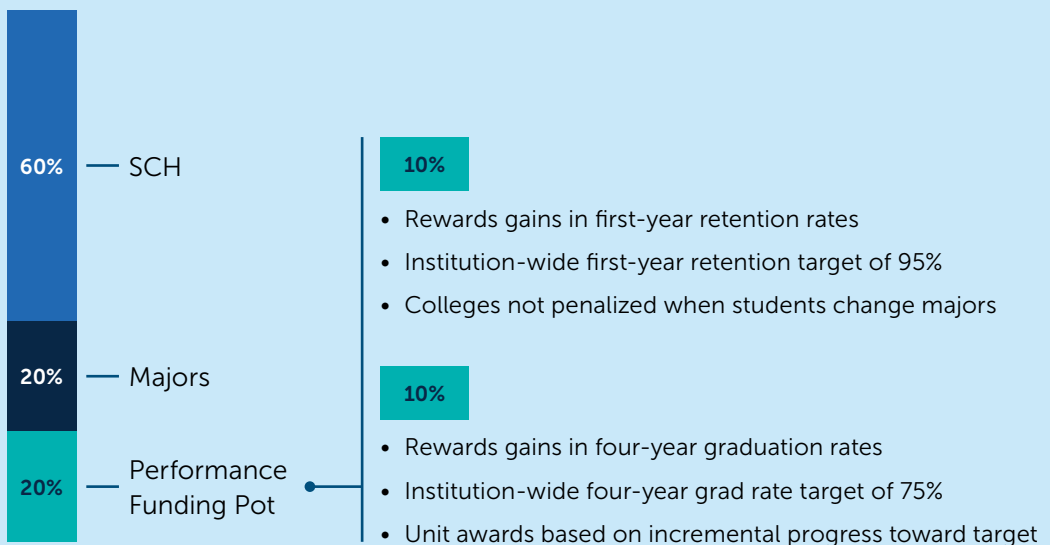
Moving Beyond Credit Hours and Majors

UC Riverside Builds Student Success Metrics into Tuition Allocation Method

As previously mentioned, one way leaders can advance strategic goals through departmental incentives is by incenting key metrics or outcomes. The University of California, Riverside (UC Riverside) incorporates student success metrics into its tuition revenue allocation formula. The first two parts of the formula represent the typical allocation by student credit hours and majors that reward instruction and enrollment; the remaining 20 percent of the formula rewards two student success metrics.

The first 10 percent of performance funding is tied to improvements in first-year retention rates from the previous year. Allocations are based on retention rate improvements rather than raw figures to create a level playing field. Units with low rates can still earn meaningful dollars while high-rate units are still motivated to improve. The last 10 percent of performance funding rewards four-year graduation rates, which is also based on units' year-to-year improvement.

UC Riverside's Tuition Revenue Allocation Formula



Section 4

Preserving Mission-Critical Activities

Controlling the Impact of Allocation Incentives

Incorporating decentralized elements into the budget model creates meaningful revenue and cost incentives. But this can also create two new challenges. First, allocating most revenue to the academic units can leave central administration starved for resources. The cost allocation methodology ensures enough funding for day-to-day business operations, but activity-based models often leave the center without sufficient funds for large, strategic, or cross-campus investments. Second, making resource allocation contingent upon performance exposes units to enrollment declines or revenue shortfalls that could threaten operations.

To address this, institutions must build well-resourced, centrally controlled strategic investment and subvention funds without undermining the financial incentives created by revenue and cost allocation. Financial leaders should ask themselves three main questions.

Three Questions for Designing Subvention Structure

Structuring Subvention and Strategic Reserves in the Budget Model

How do we ensure sufficient central reserves for strategic investments?

- Institutions that haven't established a dedicated funding mechanism for central reserves may struggle to finance cross-campus strategic investments
- Ensuring the budget model provides some central funding for institutional priorities is critical to achieving strategic goals
- Structure used to secure and deploy strategic funds can impact stakeholder buy-in for the model

EAB Guidance:

Create a separate 3–5% tax on all revenue to fund central strategic reserves

How overt or hidden should subvention be?

- An overt subvention approach means units are taxed directly, with funds redistributed to support units facing deficits or crucial to the institution's mission; hidden subvention can prevent political conflicts and ensure budget model fairness
- Hidden subvention often leads to negative outcomes, including perverse incentives, a lack of control over allocations, and increased stakeholder criticism

EAB Guidance:

Implement an overt subvention policy through an explicit unit tax to maintain transparency

How do we motivate units receiving subvention to still make financial improvement?

- Bridge subvention is short-term financial support to help units avoid disruptive change
- Many institutions motivate units on bridge subvention by slowly scaling back funds over time, commonly known as "hold harmless"
- Confirming units are still motivated to improve unit P+L while receiving subvention is critical to maintain the financial accountability incentives created by the budget model

EAB Guidance:

Motivate units receiving bridge subvention by **setting a clear end date for subvention funds**

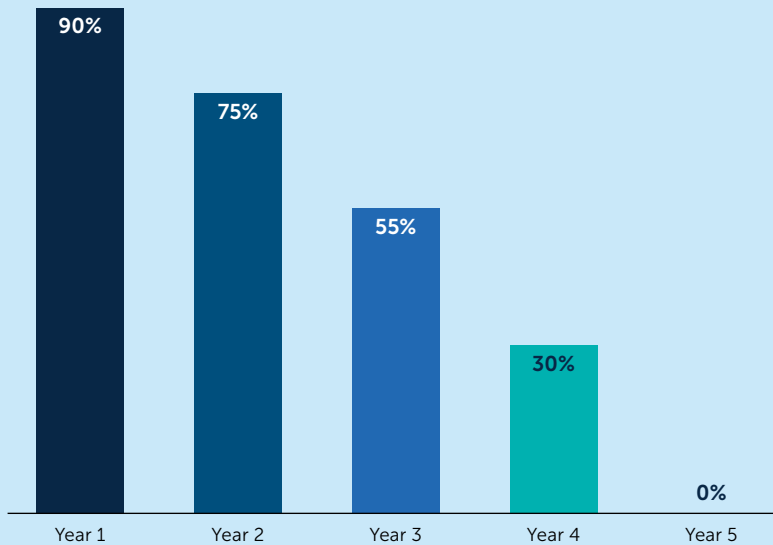
Setting a Clear End Date




Phasing Out Subvention Acclimates Units, Spurs Change

As previously mentioned, subvention structures can be designed by motivating individual units, which is best done by communicating a clear end date. Setting clear expectations for when subsidization will cease motivates units to prepare for financial independence. Many institutions also attenuate the subvention amount each year to provide further motivation to improve. For example, leaders at Queen’s University scaled back the percentage of guaranteed funds each year to help units prepare for complete independence by year five of the budget model.

Variations of bridge subvention are listed on the right, along with typical time frames.

Percentage of Guaranteed Pre-RCM Base Budget at Queen’s University



Type of Hold Harmless and Typical Length	Capsule Description	Representative Institution
Learning Year (1 year)	One-year data-sharing period to familiarize units with new allocation formula before changing budgets	
Phased Implementation (4-5 years)	Increase amount of funds subject to formula in predetermined increments	
Stop-Loss (4-5 years)	Set limit on how much funding individual units can lose in a single year	

Get the Budget Model Machine to work for you

01

Tuition Revenue Allocation Percentage

Allocate bulk of revenue (70% or more) via an activity-based formula.

02

Tuition Revenue Allocation Weighting

Define a range for SCH versus major weighting between 85/15 and 70/30; let deans set final weighting.

03

Enrollment Smoothing

Allocate based on prior-year actual or current-year projected enrollment; a central loan pool smooths unit budget volatility.

04

Differential Tuition Allocation

Do not directly attribute out-of-state tuition or financial aid; avoid weighted credit hours.

05

State Appropriation Allocation

Either allocate formulaically or use for subvention/strategic funds; decide early which option to use.

Budget Model Boosters

Institutions can use budget model financial incentives and seed funding to reinforce—rather than undercut—strategic goals.

11

Incenting Student Success

Example: Include student retention and graduation improvement metrics in revenue allocation formula.

The 13 Most Important Decision Points to Align Your Budget Model and Strategic Priorities

Seeking to boost unit-level accountability for revenue improvement and cost control, institutions across the country are tinkering with their budget models. But budget model changes involve hundreds of decisions and can lead to many unintended consequences.

Whether considering a wholesale model redesign or making targeted improvements, **focus on the 13 budget model design decisions below to align your model to your strategic goals**, ensuring that the remaining outstanding decisions fall into place.

Learn more with the Business Affairs Forum's full study, which contains specifics about each of these decisions as well as resources for implementation, available at:



Creating Unit-Level
Financial Accountability



Preserving Mission-
Critical Activities



Incorporating Institutional
Strategic Goals

06

Overhead Cost Allocation

Allocate 4–6 overhead cost pools most likely to incent behavior change, with 1–2 drivers per pool.

08

Strategic Reserves Funding

Create a separate 3%–5% tax on all revenue to fund central strategic reserves.

09

Subvention Methodology Transparency

Make subvention as overt as possible to avoid perverse incentives.

07

Unit Spend Monitoring

Integrate oversight of unit-level spending decisions with ongoing central resource planning.

10

Effective Subvention Incentives

Set a clear end date for units on bridge subvention and ensure long-term subvention is not a blank check.

12

Incenting Research Enterprise Growth

Example: Include grant funding in revenue allocation formula.

13

Incenting Targeted Program Launches

Example: Implement targeted revenue-sharing agreements.

How Can EAB Help?

Custom Research and Advisory Support
on Your Biggest Institutional Needs

Next Step: Start Your Budget Model Redesign Process

EAB's expert-led guidance and workshops help you educate stakeholders, focus your efforts, and make progress on your budget model redesign priorities.

Typical Stages of a Budget Model Redesign

Phase 1: Goal Setting

Speak with an EAB expert to identify your budget model redesign goals and timeline

Phase 2: Model Design

Plan a working session to align your budget model with strategic goals

Phase 3: Implementation

Build a communication plan and decide on phased or immediate implementation for your budget model

Schedule time to speak to an expert

eab.com/advisory-services



EAB's Strategic Advisory Services

Your Partner in Designing Your Institution's Future, Helping You to Implement Change with Confidence

Your Priorities



Strategy Development



Optimizing the Academy



Administrative Efficiency



Talent and Workplace Culture



Student Success

Our Approach

Institution-Wide Challenges Require an Agile Approach Focused on Cultural Change

Strategic Advisory Services is EAB's **campus-wide research and advisory support** that helps you accelerate long-term strategic initiatives while staying responsive to rapid landscape shifts. Our research agenda is driven by your priorities, so our tools and expertise are always at the forefront of your most pressing challenges.



Research for Your Biggest Challenges:

- Academic inefficiencies
- Declining persistence and completion rates
- Rising nonconsumption of higher ed
- Uncertain impact of AI and automation
- Inefficient use of campus space
- Declining student mental health
- Faculty engagement and burnout
- Competition to grow research enterprise

What Makes EAB Different

Exclusive Focus on Education

+

Deep, Collective Experience

+

Continuous Market Sensing

+

Rigorous Research and Data Backbone

15+

Years exclusively focused on higher ed

170+

Years of higher ed experience among research staff

15K+

Annual expert consultations and executive conversations

440+

Annual research interviews

► Find out how EAB can help your institution stand out at eab.com/advisory-services

Make the Most of Your College's Budget Model with Deans Advisory Services

Custom Research and Advisory Support on Your Biggest Institutional Needs

Our Approach

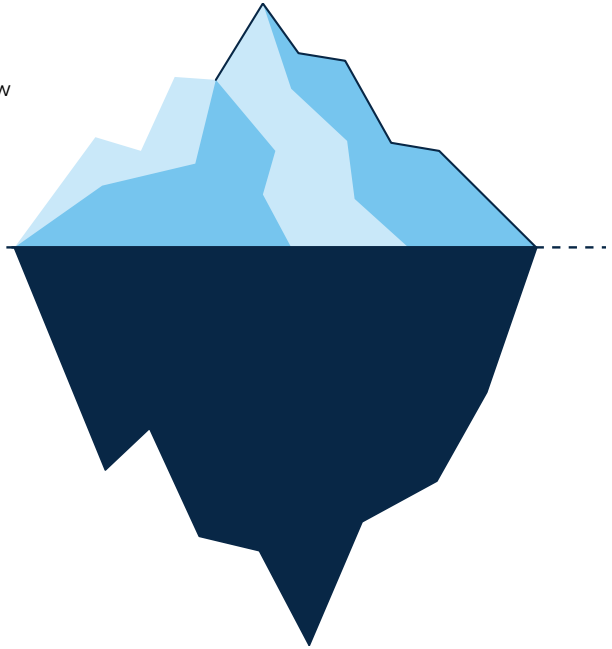
Meeting College-Level Challenges Requires Dedicated Support, Customized Insights, and Implementation Tools

Where We Engage Institutional Leaders

- University Strategy
- Future Visioning and Understanding the Student of Tomorrow
- Facilitated Board and Cabinet Retreats
- Demographics and Enrollment Trends

Partnership for University Deans

- Set compelling and differentiated college-level strategy
- Elevate research excellence within the college
- Develop effective fundraising strategies for college priorities
- Innovate within administrative units and departments
- Program portfolio review
- Professional development for the next generation of faculty, chair, and academic leaders



Four Pillars of Service for Deans and College Leadership Teams

1

EAB Insights and Actionable Advice to Guide Strategic Decision-Making

2

Peer-to-Peer Events and Networking to Share Learnings and Pressure Test Ideas

3

Executive Briefings and Presentations to Support Internal Case for Change

4

Dedicated Service and Expert Advisors to Accelerate Time-to-Impact

Focus on the College to Move the Needle on Your Institution's Future

“We can set direction at the university level, but we won't achieve any of our priorities absent strong leadership from our deans to galvanize the support of our faculty and departments. Our success is the sum of their individual efforts.”

Provost, Large Research University



Schedule time to speak to an expert

eab.com/deans-advisory-services

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