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# HIGHER EDUCATION'S EVOLUTION

## A PLAYBOOK TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

# Introduction

The doom and gloom surrounding higher education (HE) has reached a tipping point. Discussions about the demographic cliff, the debate on the ROI or value of traditional HE, proliferation of tools and methods, closures, cost to operate, has reached ad nauseum.

This playbook sets out to do just the opposite, and instead, focuses on the positive ways HE can find their path to evolve during these changing times. Leadership in HE need not despair, rather ride the cusp of this evolution into the next era of HE.

# Contents

# Chart a Course

Striving to be all things to all people is a futile endeavor that leads us down a fruitless path. In a world where many of our peer institutions grapple with harsh challenges, and a few even confront the threat of closure, it becomes more apparent that learning is an enduring, lifelong journey. HE institutions, being seasoned experts, are well-versed in meeting the needs of adult learners.

Just like in the rest of the world, the HE industry needs to make the hard pivot to learner-centric existence. It's not about delivering what we always have in more appealing ways, it's about delivering what's more appealing.

Delivering this appeal will require a BIG step back to ask fundamental questions:

Why do
we exist?

What kind of future society
do we envision?

What impact do we
want to achieve?

What behaviors do we
value over all else?

These collectively are North Star Statements, and the answers to these essential questions drive everything an organization does. Or at least it shoud. If your institution needs to chart a new direction, picking the right North Star is essential.

Like navigating open waters, organizations orient themselves towards destinations that may not yet have materialized on the horizon. However, they chart their course with faith and data, and make the necessary adjustments to ensure they stay the course as they sail forward.

So, where to start? Rewriting or evolving your MVV shouldn't be something that's taken lightly. "Your gut" instinct simply won't do. Identifying stakeholders that matter most need to be uncovered and feedback needs to be collected from multiple groups. For universities this can include everyone from current students, former students, alumni and faculty at varying levels of tenure.

Acquiring this intelligence shouldn't stop there. Universities should consider the ever-evolving influencer audiences as well. Now, we're not referring to those kids on Instagram and YouTube, rather, influencers like the parents of current and former students and community leaders who depend on your institution's success for their own ability to thrive. When considering your influencer audiences,

ask yourself, "who stands to benefit the most when your institution succeeds?" All these individuals and groups should be audiences whose opinion matters because you recognize the value their stake in your institution offers.

The reason it's crucial to collect stakeholder feedback is so that when the result is revealed, the acceptance of the proposed outcome is more welcoming. After all, these stakeholders were given a voice and the ability to shape something bigger than themselves.

Institutions can arrive at their North Star Statements through a comprehensive and inclusive insights process combining informative, custom research on their niche in the HE industry. Mixed methods of stakeholder research (interviews, focus groups, and far-reaching questionnaires) to inform institutional leaders as they engage in workshops to either refine or completely reinvite their organization's PVMV statements is how to make headway through today's rough seas.

## Commit to Your Purpose

In for-profit sectors, leaders must grapple with their unique position in terms of their purpose: Do we exist to generate profit or impact? And this isn't an either-or condition, it's a continuum.

HE institutions must ask the same sort of question, but with different poles. More than ever, university stakeholders are requesting a focus on purpose and future direction. Why is this happening? If you haven't been able to pinpoint it for yourself, it's most likely due to a gnawing feeling about being disconnected from your stakeholders.
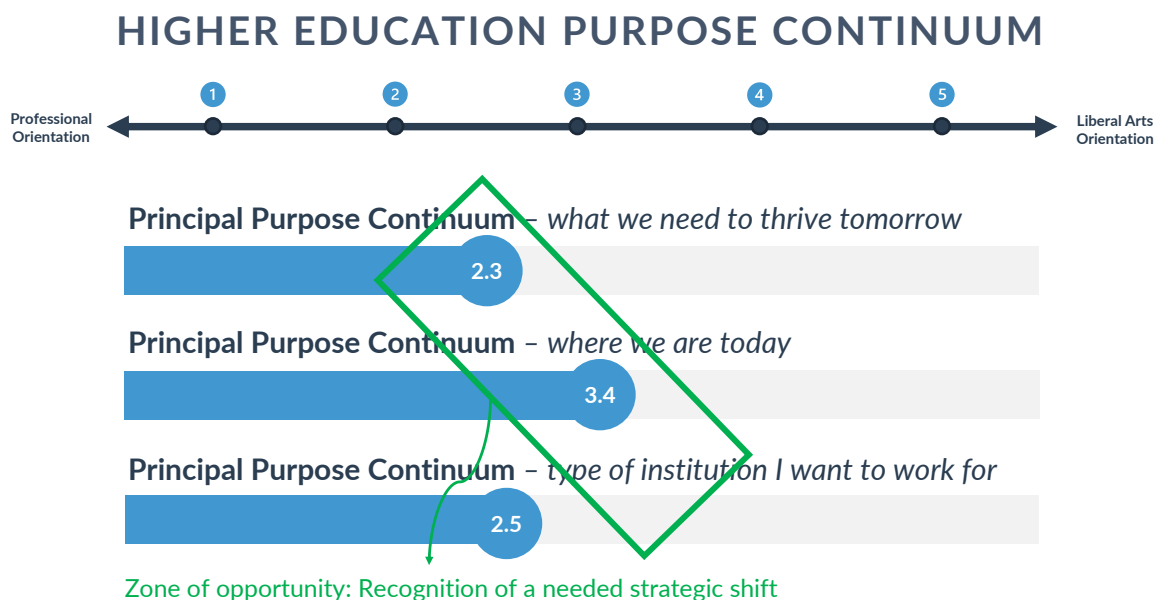
Many institutions are questioning their core identity with requests from pure professional orientation, or Liberal Arts orientation. Institutions that haven't revisited their North Star Statements (Purpose, Vision, Mission, and Values) should consider a refresh of these statements to meet the changing needs of their stakeholders.

# Case:

Here's how one HE institution used a Purpose Continuum exercise to engage stakeholders in meaningful discussion regarding the institution's position balancing a liberal arts foundation/ethos with the need to equip graduates in explicit ways for employment, not only in terms of skills, but also in terms of competitiveness in the job market with marketable/employable credentials and experiences.

The exercise resulted in stakeholders with a variety of often polarizing perspectives arriving at a shared definition of purpose that honored the ethos of liberal arts ed with the real needs and expectations of students preparing for the workforce.

## HIGHER EDUCATION PURPOSE CONTINUUM

Professional Orientation ←————①————②————③————④————⑤————→ Liberal Arts Orientation

**Principal Purpose Continuum** – *what we need to thrive tomorrow*

2.3

**Principal Purpose Continuum** – *where we are today*

3.4

**Principal Purpose Continuum** – *type of institution I want to work for*

2.5

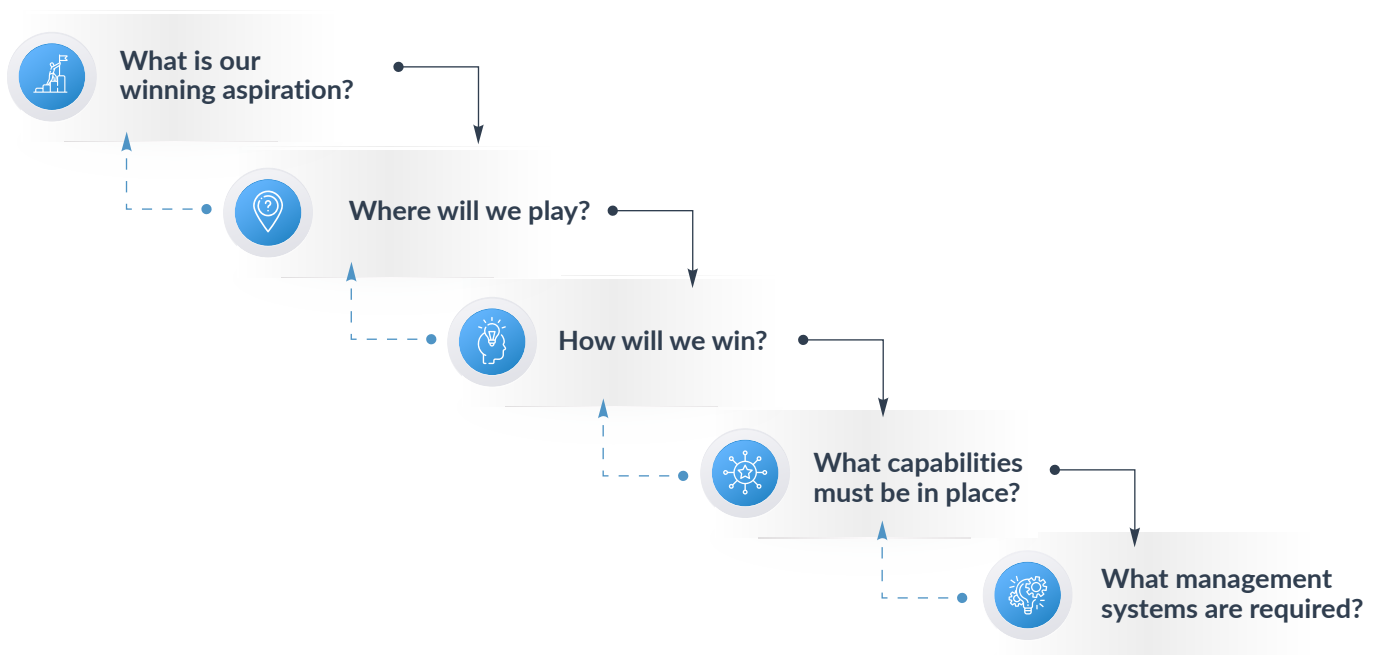Zone of opportunity: Recognition of a needed strategic shift

# Choose to Win

Instead of believing that HE is sprint to the bottom, institutions should consider running a marathon where those who are destined to win will start to break away from the pack.

But any good distance runner knows that preparing to win a marathon doesn't set you up to win a 100-yard dash. To really excel in something, you need to specialize, and to specialize, you must make choices about where you will compete and—on the flip side—where you will not.

Without a doubt, this approach will require asking and answering the hard questions that make a difference. One framework we've seen success with is, Playing to Win, developed, and popularized by A.G. Lafley.

Lafley says, "When a company sets out to participate, rather than win, it will inevitably fail to make the tough choices and the significant investments that would make winning even a remote possibility."

The pace of change is increasing as technology makes us more connected and informed, and organizations are required to operate with more agility if they are to remain relevant and therefore afloat. HE Institutions are no exception. One of the main benefits of the Playing to Win framework is its quick drive from high-level aspirations (North Star Statements) down through strategic decisions, all the way to tactical and operational determinations. Colleges and universities are complicated organizations that can benefit greatly from adopting straightforward, elegantly simple frameworks that focus attention on answering the most critical questions to deliver on a thriving future.

What is our winning aspiration?

Where will we play?

How will we win?

What capabilities must be in place?

What management systems are required?

# Really Know Your Learners

There's a lot of discussion about the demographic cliff that will arrive by 2025: the steep decrease in college-age students (18-24). But learning is lifelong, and the overall US population continues to grow. Clearly, that means there are more learners in need of a home with a place to learn. Universities must ask themselves: What role will we play in educating learners who don't currently fall into the 18-24 age range, and what are learners in the 18-24 age range in need of and on the hunt for when it comes to education?

Tools and technologies are emerging that deliver exceptional value. One such tool is Reworc, a digital interview tool that ensures psychological safety while delivering a scalable solution to hearing from all your stakeholders. Reworc delivers dynamic lines of questioning that dig into the interest areas of individual respondents and delivers analytical power to drill into data by areas/departments, tenure, ethnicity, age, etc. Coupling these insights with comprehensive Environmental Scans (research) that further contextualizes your stakeholder insights can makes them actionable and prioritized.

## Case

One institution of HE was looking at demographic data and uncovered differences in student needs and priorities related to their age. They found their environmental scan was helpful to discern whether differences were attributable to generational or age differences.

- Age differences are more static; as groups age, needs/priorities change relevant to age.

- Generational differences are more dynamic; characteristics of a group of people dependent on when they were born and collective socialization, vs their age/life stage at any given time.

Discerning these differences is helpful for making decisions and prioritizing investments.

- **Gen Z:** Traditional students in this age group drive the institutional pattern due to their large numbers. What Gen Z is looking for most are successful careers, quality instructors, and an affordable quality experience.

- **Millennials:** As these students age, their preferences shift towards quality instructors as their top criteria followed by affordable quality experience and successful careers. Millennials also differ in other ways; an attractive campus, location and services matter the least to Millennials.

- **Gen X:** Student in this age range shift further from Millennials with an emphasis on academics and a de-prioritization of financial considerations. Gen X extends and widens the Millennial deemphasis upon traditional markers such as reputation, school pride, location, attractive campus, and quality facilities.

- **Baby Boomers:** These folks have a unique set of needs focused upon personal care attributes such as being treated equally and fairly and health & well-being as their top two concerns. Career and personal development follow.

The data indicates that different experience and messaging are required to make a meaningful connection with generational cohorts. What is valued by one generation is deprioritized by others. In targeting these demographics, tailored campaigns are essential.

Utilizing Reworc tools allows HE institutions to understand their learner experience, satisfaction, and needs from a variety of angles that help institutions move beyond comparing themselves to industry trends to deeply understanding the climate at their institutions. Furthermore, discovery can lead to when and where investments need to be made to move the needles that will matter most for their learners.

# Curate Educational Experiences

Regardless of age or generation, learners are increasingly expecting education to not just deliver outcomes, but also (or more so) experiences. We live in a world where business vie for our patronage based not just on the outcomes/results they deliver, but also based on the experiences we have as their customers. Any cellphone can help you make a call, but a smart phone allows you to navigate your world and manage your life – it creates a more immersive experience and permeates your day by providing a holistic solution to many of your needs and wants, and immense attention is given to creating highly usable, intuitive interfaces that encourage engagement.

Our collective tolerance for friction is decreasing. Institutions of HE that will eventually lead the pack should take note that doing their best to ensure learners are better when they are challenged in the classroom instead of by the university experience. Learners of all ages expect high-quality, easy-to-use, holistic experiences that anticipate and facilitate their needs. While certain amounts of friction are good and create resilience, learners will start gravitating towards and taking advantage of HE experiences that smooth the way forward using technologies that deliver a tailored and streamlined experience.

## Case

Institutions of HE will need to prioritize the ways their specific learners (and target learners) want to be served. These services may be delivered through on-campus experiences and services, or in terms of educational programming and delivery. Additionally, identifying the Learner Value Proposition (LVP) through the Reworc Digital Interview Tool may be an option. Bolstered with custom research and qualitative insights the LVP can help an institution differentiate, prioritize, make wise investments, inform strategy, and as a result, touch all areas including marketing and branding.

One university found through insights gathering that their unique LVP hinged on three main elements:

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| Providing high-quality instruction | Affordability | Career readiness |

Paired with other insights such as a work-trends occupancy study performed regionally, benchmark analysis of comparable costs and aspirational peers, and an environmental analysis on the future of work, this institution was able to prioritize strategic initiatives to address instructional quality and career readiness in ways that would deliver against the perceptions of their core learner population. At the same time, they were able to develop a strategic initiative to participate in addressing overall affordability in HE beyond the boundaries of just their own university, tackling it as a systemic issue, versus a localized one.

# Put Education to Work

Much can be gleaned from applying workforce trends to how you manage all or parts of your institution. Moreover, the workforce can be and should be considered an ally to HE. After all, employers count on local HE institutions for ready-to-work employees today and for future generations to come.

Is your institution looking at the workforce attributes for the communities you serve and then aligning your efforts towards those findings deliberately? Perhaps you should, as results from national workforce studies in both 2022 and 2023 indicate a strong need and benefit for collaboration from the workforce.

Regardless of the degree or credentialing program, employers expect learners to effectively collaborate in their work environments. Institutions should consider infusing collaboration in their programs to meet the needs of tomorrow's employers. Experiential learning opportunities could provide hands-on collaboration focused on real-world work problems.

The world of work is also changing rapidly, with employers calling for a broader range of learners with updated skill sets. The demand for jobs in healthcare, technology, and renewable energy is expected to grow significantly, and degrees most relevant to the job market of the future are

centered around technology, math, and computers. Business, health, social sciences, and engineering are the largest bachelor's programs and continue to be popular among students, including international students.

The New Learning Economy is emerging as a response to the increasing need for lifelong learning in today's fast-paced labor market. It includes various forms of education, such as skills-based credentials, online learning with alternative providers, and workplace learning. The growth of offerings and providers, combined with the need for faster results and returns on investments, is driving a shift in consumer investment of education and training. As a result, colleges and universities will have to speed up the development and delivery cycle for new, relevant, and cost-effective credentials while assuring the highest quality to compete with external entities.

# Create your Campus Climate

Campus climate refers to "the extent to which all students, faculty, staff, and visitors—regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability—feel welcomed, valued, and supported in their work, studies, or research." (National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments).

Our goal in HE is to see our learners learn, and campus climate plays a role in ensuring optimal learning outcomes, so as we move forward in new directions in HE, we have to know where our campus climate stands today and continue creating the climate that we want as we progress. Our strategies and tactics must drive for increased inclusion and support of our students, employees, and larger communities.
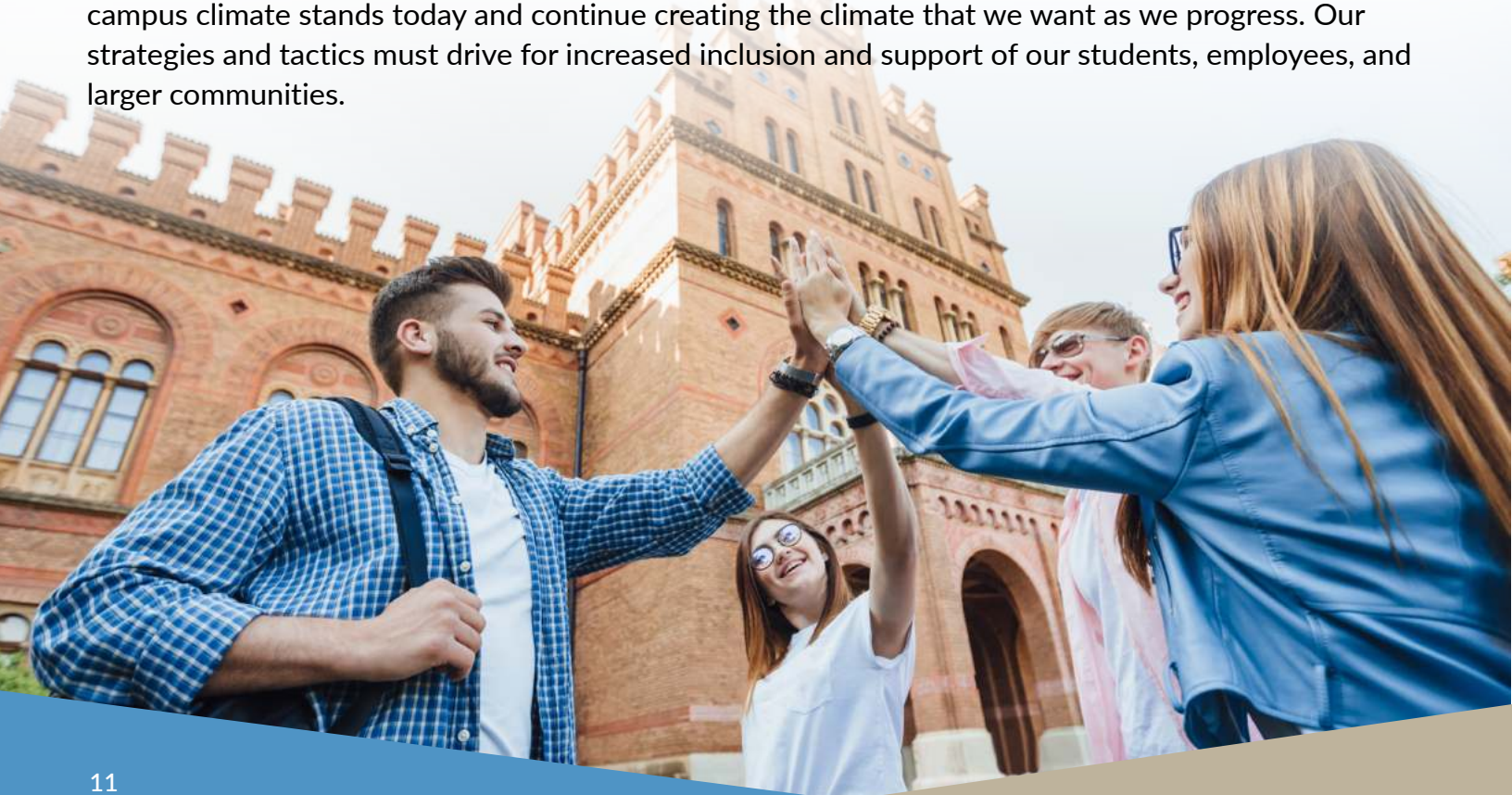
HE needs to implement a comprehensive approach to understanding their unique campus climate, relying not only on Reworc digital interview data, but also employing traditional qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and anthropological observation. Because the Reworc tool—when fully applied—also surveys for insights on physical space use and perceptions, work culture and values, and work networks and is distributed to students, faculty, and staff. It's possible to create an incredibly robust report on your campus climate with immediate, midterm, and long-term recommended actions to improve climate or maintain climate where needed.

For example, one recent university learned and acted upon the following regarding their students when examining their perceptions on campus climate by ethnicity:

- Black or African American students were missing opportunities for social engagement, which could be improved by more targeted and intentional activities.

- Hispanic or Latino students required more specific outreach and support regarding the transition to the university and efforts promoting health and well-being.

In this same study, faculty and staff indicated that a key characteristic of their campus experience was having a voice in decisions impacting their work. Specifically, through analysis of the quantitative survey results, they were able to pinpoint that Admissions, Advancement & Marketing, and Athletics were the groups with the most pronounced dissatisfaction with their levels of perceived inclusion. Through follow up with focused qualitative insights, root causes of this perception were identified and immediate solutions while integrating longer-term solutions to increase these departments' inclusion in strategic leadership at the university were enacted.

## Invest in Efficiencies

As important as what we are doing, is who is doing it, and how we are equipping them. Just like in any business, in HE there is a tendency to add more than we subtract; programs, initiatives, responsibilities, regulations. However, some things are worth letting go of, such as inefficiencies. All institutions of HE grapple with the challenges of declining admissions, an impending demographic cliff, and increased competition for students. One way of boosting financial health and sustainability is to emphasize efficiency efforts to free up resources to focus on higher value activities.

Whether as a part of a larger strategy engagement or a more direct dive into tackling inefficiencies, utilizing Reworc's dynamic interview tool can uncover and address workplace inefficiencies.

In a recent strategy engagement, a university client identified email correspondence takes 13% of time across the entire organization and searching for information another 6%. These figures indicated an opportunity to improve efficiency and free up resources. Interventions implemented by the university included:

- Better utilizing asynchronous communications platforms (such as Microsoft Teams) to reduce email burden.

- Reducing the overuse of cc'ing on emails, and "discussions" taking place over email, a painfully bad medium for improving understanding.

- Conducting RACI (responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed) exercises to better articulate decision rights in stemming unproductive communication.

- Creating meeting guidelines and conducting a "stop-continue" exercise to free up faculty and staff from meetings whose purpose is an information 'check-in' which comprises 37% of meetings.

# Bring Others Along

You've undoubtedly heard the proverb "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." The lesson holds true for leaders at the helm of institutions of HE. They believe that you can indeed go far and fast is possible if you communicate early, often, and well. And, there are tools to help with that.

The people within your institution are weaving their life stories with the story of your institution, and that story needs to be compelling, especially if the story is one of changing directions, which many stories will be in HE in the years to come. Just like in other service and socially oriented organizations, your faculty and staff members are most likely driven by passion and a personal level of commitment to education for the betterment of others; they want their work to be meaningful.

Working to develop compelling change narratives that combine North Star Statements with strategic focus areas and prioritized objectives, then utilize Journey Maps to visually tell the story of where your institution is going and how each stakeholder plays an important part along the path to your thriving future. These journey maps are used by our HE clients in transformative, interactive sessions to roll out new strategies to employees, alumni, boards, and even student leadership to create understanding, buy in, and the necessary momentum to propel their institution forward.

Combining Journey Maps with other "communication supports" such as a Strategy on a Page—a one page overview of your North Star Statements, strategic focus areas, and major strategic objectives—full Strategic Plans, and dynamic KPI dashboards to ensure that you are able to fully own your strategy management as you lead your organization in pursuit of your North Star and fulfillment of your purpose. These tools equip you to communicate your strategy and progress to others in clear, inspiring ways that ensure you have the support you need from a variety of necessary stakeholders.

# Getting Started

**01** **Headline #1** Chart a Course

**02** **Headline #2:** Commit to your Purpose

**03** **Headline #3:** Choose to Win

**04** **Headline #4:** Really Know Your Learners

**05** **Headline #5:** Curate Educational Experiences

**06** **Headline #6:** Put Education to Work

**07** **Headline #7:** Create your Campus Climate

**08** **Headline #8:** Invest in Efficiencies

**09** **Headline #9:** Bring Others Along

**10** **Headline #10:** Getting Started

If you've made it this far, you may be wondering, "Where do I start?"

Hopefully this paper has given you the inspiration you need for your institution to thrive in the changing landscape of an evolving HE reality. Even so, the path to implement these concepts may seem daunting.

If you're looking for a way to bring your institution and others along, I'd encourage you to reach out to Bâton Global, a strategic business management consulting firm to join you in this process. We've been able to support multiple HE institutions achieve all of the concepts outlined within this paper and would welcome to do the same for yours.