



Closing the authority gap between reputation, relationships, and the power to act

External Relations occupies a genuinely unusual position within the university. It is expected to act as the centre of excellence and authority for its domain — brand, communications, government relations, community and alumni engagement — the group other units defer to for how these things should be done. It carries responsibility for the institution's reputation, relationships, and story. And, at the same time, it functions as a service unit to the rest of the institution, delivering support that faculties and central units rely on but don't control. Leading and serving at once is a difficult needle to thread, and it produces real, ongoing tension between External Relations and the federated organization it sits inside. As one higher education strategy leader put it, describing the broader pattern this year across institutional cabinets: “overlapping committees, blurred decision rights, and inconsistent communication slow momentum,” a dynamic she attributes in part to “siloed protectionism” across the institution.¹

Staffing reflects the same tension. External Relations teams are typically a mix of centrally-held roles and unit-specific positions connected back to the centre by dotted lines rather than direct authority. Faculties, meanwhile, have their own goals and priorities — recruitment, donor cultivation, public visibility for their own programs — that can compete just as easily with each other as they do with the centralized priorities External Relations is trying to advance. The result is an authority gap: a group held accountable for outcomes it cannot fully control, working through relationships it cannot fully direct.



That gap doesn't stop at the edge of the portfolio. The same broad mandate that puts External Relations in tension with the rest of the institution also creates strain inside it. Alumni relations, communications, government relations, community engagement, and similar units all work toward the same underlying goal of furthering the institution's reputation, but they get there through different skill sets, different relationships, and different priorities. A government relations team and a community engagement team can both be right about what matters most this quarter and still be pulling in different directions. Prioritization strain isn't just something External Relations experiences from the rest of the organization; it's something the portfolio has to manage internally, among units that are nominally on the same team.

Closing the authority gap

External Relations functions that thrive going forward will be the ones that:

- **Clearly define their own role** – so that the rest of the institution understands what the function owns, what it advises on, and where its authority actually starts and ends.
- **Break down silos within their own division first** – resolving the prioritization strain between alumni relations, communications, government relations, and community engagement before asking the rest of the institution to fall in line.
- **Hold firm boundaries on scope** – what's in and out of the portfolio's responsibility, rather than absorbing every request that lands on the desk of the group perceived to own "reputation."
- **Take a hard look at trimming a bloated service catalog** – rather than continuing to stretch the same staff thinner across an ever-widening set of services.

Reliable delivery, plus clearly articulated value and boundaries, is the way out of the burnout spiral.

Getting there: from evidence to redesign

The starting point is always the same: an evidence-based understanding of the operation as it actually runs today. A Current State Capture gives leaders a foundation built on data — what the portfolio actually does, who it serves, and how — rather than on assumption or institutional memory. That foundation is what makes it possible to tackle tension both inside External Relations and between External Relations and the rest of the institution from a shared, factual starting point rather than a contested one.

From there, the next step is a review of services as they exist today: identifying and removing overlap, defining where teams within the portfolio serve each other, and optimizing for integrated, cross-silo ways of working rather than parallel ones. That review produces a service catalog — a clear, outward-facing answer to who External Relations is, what it does and does not do, and how the rest of the institution accesses its services.

The deeper work comes after: a genuine service redesign. With a clear-eyed view of the current state in hand, leaders can make real choices about where staff time goes, what the portfolio supports, and how — starting not from what's always been done, but from purpose, vision, and institutional goals. This is hard work. It takes real thought and real leadership. But it is what gives an External Relations team the space to do what it exists to do: steward the institution's reputation effectively, for everyone it serves.



Case Study

A large research university's External Relations portfolio brought in Aligned Outcomes (AO) in the aftermath of a reorganization. Communications and Community Engagement had just been pulled out of a portfolio previously grouped with Advancement and Alumni Engagement, and combined into a new External Relations portfolio alongside Government Relations and an international-facing unit — both previously fully independent — plus a newly created Operations and Strategic Enablement division. Four units that had never operated together, two of them newly answering to a structure they hadn't been part of before, were now expected to function as one portfolio.

AO ran a 6-week Current State Capture across the entire portfolio: **26 SMEs interviewed, roughly 800 activities captured** — each documented with a description, decision-making detail, health rating, SME-recommended improvement, and the technology used — resulting in **61 distinct processes documented** and **four key friction drivers identified**.

The result was immediate: portfolio-wide clarity on what the team does today, how it delivers that work, where services overlap, and where the portfolio's own units serve each other. The newly formed Strategic Enablement division used the data to build a service catalog, giving the rest of the institution a clear answer to what External Relations offers and how to access it — precisely the outward-facing clarity a federated organization needs to stop routing ad hoc requests to whichever unit seems closest to the problem. The work also set up two follow-ons: a future service review, including expanding self-service in areas like branding, and engagement with an institutional move toward centralized service intake.

One department in the portfolio chose to go further. It was the unit carrying the most daily pain from the federated-authority problem, and it was showing the highest change fatigue of any group in the portfolio, having just been moved out of Advancement. It moved forward anyway. An Opportunity Assessment built on the Current State Capture data led to two active projects: a pilot for more integrated cross-team working, and a Target State Design aimed at reducing administrative friction, on track to complete at the end of July 2026. Outcome figures will follow once that work is complete — but the decision to lean further into the process, from the department with the least reason to trust that this reorganization would be different from the last one, is itself a signal of what evidence-based clarity can do for buy-in.



Conclusion

External Relations will always sit in genuine tension: leader and servant, centre of excellence and shared resource, one mandate delivered by several distinct disciplines with different priorities. That tension can't be organized away. What can change is whether the portfolio is working from evidence or from assumption when it decides where to spend its time, what it owns, and where its boundaries sit. A Current State Capture gives leaders that evidence; a service review turns it into clarity, internally and externally; and a genuine service redesign turns clarity into a portfolio built around purpose rather than history. AO's Team Enabled Transformation methodology exists to carry External Relations leaders through all three stages — quickly, with the buy-in of the very units whose cooperation the federated-authority problem depends on.

1 Franklin, Khadish O. 2025. "EAB experts reflect: The conversations that defined higher ed in 2025." EAB. December 5. Accessed July 22, 2026. <https://eab.com/resources/blog/strategy-blog/eab-experts-reflect-conversations-defined-higher-ed-2025/>

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