The Power of Systemness

Why public higher education's next chapter belongs to systems.

Our strategic plan, *The Power of Systems,* named the ambition: degree completion, social mobility, and lower student debt. *The Power of Systemness*, our new impact framework, defines the operating model.

Three integrated parts make it work: a **Success Accelerator** that diagnoses where each system is ready and supports the implementation that follows; **NASH Solutions**, the proven tools, partners, and technical assistance every system can draw on; and the **Social IPO**, not a typical financial public offering but a five-year, $40M strategic investment plan that supplies the durable capital to sustain and scale the work.

This is the framework for what NASH and its member systems will do next to continue advancing prosperity for the nation.

The original deal is under negotiation.

For decades, higher education had a clear job: credential more people, and the rest would take care of itself. That deal no longer holds.

Public higher education has always carried two responsibilities at once: to prepare people for the work of their time and for the rest of their lives – as citizens, neighbors, thinkers, contributors.

This initial promise has not changed. The conditions for delivering on it have – and they are shifting faster than at any point in our lifetimes. **Three forces are converging at once.**

Washington is changing its approach. The U.S. Department of Education is being reshaped, and federal education policy is being reprioritized. As a result, much of this decision-making is shifting back to the states. Fifty of them, with very different priorities, very different politics, and no national playbook for what comes next.

States are stepping in and rewriting the deal. Legislatures are tying funding to workforce outcomes, attainment goals, and economic development metrics. Governors are asking sharper questions about the return on public investment. Communities are asking whether the institutions in their region are actually serving them. The performance bar is now state-defined, state-by-state, and rising.

The student is no longer a captive customer. A high school senior believes they can pick up skills on TikTok, earn a certificate in six months with AI, or follow a bootcamp directly into a tech job. And they're

being told, true or not, they can do all of that without risking going into debt. The degree remains powerful, but it is no longer the only signal students, employers, and states are using to judge value.

If higher education must transform to stay relevant, public systems are the only actors built to do that work at meaningful scale – and without abandoning what higher education was built for.

Consider what's already moving. According to the National Governors Association, more than half of states have been removing degree requirements from government job postings since 2020, and seven states posted double-digit increases in degree-free listings between 2019 and 2024. The largest employers in the U.S. are signaling that the degree they once required isn't the credential they need.

That matters because that degree has been our core product. Per the Bureau of Labor Statistics, roughly one in four American workers already holds a professional certification or license – a non-degree credential – and those workers earn measurably more than peers with similar education but no credential. The market has been quietly reorganizing itself around competencies, not classrooms, for over a decade. We are behind on a shift we should have led.

And it accelerates from here. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* projects that 39 percent of workers' core skills will be transformed or rendered outdated between 2025 and 2030. That is not a degree problem. **That is a continuous-learning problem, and it is the problem public higher education systems are uniquely positioned to solve, if we get moving.**



Relevance is now the measure of success.

Students, families, states, and employers are all asking questions. Some want to know whether a credential leads to a job, a wage, a career, or an answer to “Was this worth it?” Others are asking whether higher education still does what it was built to do: prepare people for citizenship, community, and a life of contribution. Both questions are legitimate. Both kinds of students are the ones public higher education was built to serve.

The answer lies in refusing the choice. **Student success and workforce development cannot be pulled apart, nor can they be separated from the broader public mission that gave rise to them.**

This is the work the world is demanding of colleges and universities. One sector has the ability, authority, scale, data, and geographic reach to do it without trading a promise for another: **public higher education systems.**

Nearly 110 of them, overseeing over 1,400 institutions, serving more than 16.2 million students, rooted in every region of the country. NASH and its member systems are how that collective potential becomes action. *The Power of Systemness* reflects what those systems have built and what they have decided to do next. It was shaped by direct stakeholder input, refined through extended consultation with system leaders, and vetted by the NASH Board of Directors.

This is the moment systems were built for.

A single idea weaves a common thread.

NASH's work rests on a clear premise: public higher education systems can deliver outcomes through coordinated action that individual institutions cannot achieve on their own. We call this **systemness**.

In practice, systemness is what happens when institutions within a system align policies, data, pathways, and leadership around shared goals, so that a student encounters clearer expectations, fewer barriers, a high-quality curriculum, and more consistent support across campuses. It's coordination as a habit, not as an afterthought.

This idea has guided NASH since day one.

Founded in 1979, NASH began as a collective of system leaders who knew they had something unique – so unique that it required a new space to share best practices, tackle common challenges, and dream big, together.

Eventually, we put those aspirations into practice. NASH's Taking Student Success to Scale (TS3) initiative demonstrated that systems can move evidence-based practices beyond individual campuses.

When the pandemic hit, NASH members used the disruption to think bigger. Through its Big Rethink – the collaborative effort that led to our strategic plan, *The Power of Systems* – members established a broad vision for systems as drivers of large-scale change.

The Power of Systemness builds on that foundation by focusing on implementation: how we translate proven ideas into sustained, system-level results.

From concepts to capacity.

The Power of Systems established three big, audacious goals: **increasing degree completion**, **improving social mobility**, and **reducing student debt**. Together, we knew we could **seed** new ideas, **test** which worked, and **scale** the best solutions, all with a common north star.

NASH and its members have demonstrated that coordinated system action can produce measurable gains. NASH has implemented successful projects in content areas including data and AI infrastructure, transfer culture, strategic planning, fiscal sustainability, workforce alignment, and leadership development – and is continually supporting members by sharing proven solutions to help manage persistent challenges.

Through our Center for Postsecondary Improvement, NASH Improvement Communities (NICs) have helped over 21 systems strengthen transfer pathways, remove barriers to credit mobility, and improve student completion.

The Transfer NIC, our longest-running, has contributed to measurable gains nearly everywhere it's been tried. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, participation contributed to a 22-point increase in transfer enrollment over two years. Texas A&M College Station, after three years in the NIC,

added 508 transfer students in a single year. Kutztown University, after joining, saw a 72% increase in one department. Return on investment across the cohort: 400–1,200%.

One story captures what this actually means. At a single institution, a review of transfer credit practices revealed that 456 students were owed credit they'd already earned elsewhere. NASH helped the system fix the process – 2,414 credits were awarded retroactively, averaging 5.3 per student. Every one of those 456 students was closer to a degree than their own transcript said.

These numbers aren't just percentages; they're real people making real decisions about their lives. After participating in our Course Sharing NIC, the Southern Illinois University System created the SIU System Course Exchange, **making online classes accessible across campuses without requiring students to formally enroll at another institution**.

Allison, a student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, dreamt of working in sports public relations. But her ideal course was only available at the Carbondale campus. Because of the new exchange, she could take the class on her own schedule, flourish in her St. Louis internships, and eventually land a job with the Cardinals and the Blues.

This is the same machinery now scaling across the field. Our Center for Data and Analytics (CDA) is working with the National Student Clearinghouse to **turn labor market data into a foundation for evidence-based decision-making** and teaching system leaders how to apply that data through Metrics Academies and our work with the WestEd Center for Economic Mobility. We're a partner in building CourseWise, an AI-enabled credit mobility platform, now piloting across 120+ campuses, and we continue to release Systems Dashboards, a groundbreaking suite of interactive tools. We've also compiled and disseminated findings through reports on Course Sharing and Higher Education in Prison and Reentry.

Through the Office of Workforce Development, Talent Readiness-New England is **aligning seven systems around regional workforce demand**. Our Executive Fellows program is building a pipeline of well-prepared system leaders graduating into the field. And 17 systems are engaged in our Microcredentials Community of Practice in partnership with Google, which has already benefited over 20,000 learners interested in improving their career readiness.

Every one of these is already live, already real.

One engine. Three parts.

The next phase of work for NASH and its members will focus on harnessing *The Power of Systems* to translate student success into lasting social mobility and shared prosperity.

How will we do it? Three integrated parts work as one engine. The Success Accelerator diagnoses where each system is ready and supports the implementation that follows. NASH Solutions delivers the proven tools, partners, and technical assistance. The Social IPO supplies the durable capital to sustain and scale the work.

1. Success Accelerator

A cohort of 8–10 public higher education systems working together to implement and scale what we've already proven works.

The Accelerator begins with a readiness assessment we call ***Systemness in Action*** – a practical diagnostic that tells each system where it's aligned and where it's fragmented. From there, NASH provides targeted coaching, networked learning, and implementation support – all aimed at helping systems adopt proven strategies more effectively and more quickly than they could alone.

Shared data. Peer learning. Concrete results.

When the first cohort has built its evidence base, we expand. Alumni systems become mentors. The network grows. What works in one place starts working in many places.

2. NASH Solutions

How we translate what we've built into practical tools, supports, and pathways every member system can use — whether they're in an Accelerator cohort or not.

NASH Solutions operates through three channels:

- **Direct: NASH delivers.** Technical assistance, diagnostic assessments, Improvement Communities, Metrics Academies, data and analytics services, AI governance support, workforce systems development, leadership development, academic publications, and more.
- **Guided: NASH coordinates.** Access to vetted partners for specialized work like executive search, change management, stakeholder assessment, compensation analysis, teacher preparation, and more. Vendor relationships are reviewed every two to three years to keep the bench sharp.
- **Cooperative: NASH connects.** Cooperative purchasing and vendor relationships that give systems access to the best tools and features on the best terms.

At launch, NASH Solutions will target six areas aligned with member demand. To make the cut, providers and partners must ensure their solutions are uniquely addressed at the system level, deliver measurable results, are operationally feasible, and are fundable without hype.

The discipline is the point. NASH does what we can do well, and engages trusted partners who can do the rest.

3. Social IPO

To deliver this work consistently and at scale, NASH will need a more durable capital strategy than project-based funding alone can provide.

The Social IPO is not a financial offering. It is a disciplined, $40M, five-year investment strategy that moves NASH from project-by-project grant funding to the kind of sustainable footing serious transformation requires. It is in active design, with a structured launch to follow once design, legal, and capitalization questions are resolved.

It borrows from the IPO concept: a readiness signal to the world that something is ready to grow. In our case, what's ready to grow is a national backbone for transforming public higher education systems, organized around $40M in investment across areas that will best drive education and workforce outcomes for the nation.

Investors become partners — with regular engagement, meaningful decision points, and returns that show up across three dimensions:

- **Individual:** Lives changed through education, training, and access to good jobs.
- **Corporate:** A workforce strategically prepared for what the economy actually needs.
- **Community:** More educated, economically secure residents in every region NASH serves.

This is the cycle that keeps us moving forward.

The IPO funds NASH's national backbone – including the operational infrastructure to manage investor relationships and deploy capital responsibly – and the standing capital to fund new interventions as the Accelerator surfaces which systems need them. NASH Solutions delivers those interventions, and earned revenue from members reinforces the backbone over time. Each element compounds the others. The longer it runs, the more durable it gets.



Success is recognizable.

We know what success will look like, today and for years to come.

It looks like public higher education seeing around corners — building durable pathways for the work people do now and the work that doesn't yet exist.

It looks like states writing workforce policy from shared metrics rather than campus-by-campus. A regional employer who talks to one system, not forty campuses. A working parent who started a degree in Louisiana and moved to Texas, finishing it without losing credit to a leaky transfer pipeline. A governor looking for workforce impact who knows exactly who to call. A new system president, three weeks into the job, with a national peer network, a diagnostic of her own system, and a shortlist of proven interventions before her first board meeting.

The specific measures that get us there will be developed with our members through the Success Accelerator's gap analysis and framework design. That work is intentional, with the systems closest to the problem shaping the framework that holds them accountable to solving it.

The three goals from The Power of Systems remain our north star. How we drive and measure that success is the next step.

That's not a utopia. It's what **we** deliver when the engine of **systemness** runs on all cylinders.

The foundation is strong. Now we build.

The Power of Systemness launches at our 2026 Superconvening in Washington, DC.

Sooner than later, the big questions about who leads American higher education, and what counts as a credential in this country, will be substantially settled.

Public higher education either takes its seat at that table through its systems, or it doesn't.

NASH exists to make sure systems arrive at that table ready with the vision, evidence, infrastructure, and coordination that turn presence into power. That's why system heads show up. It's why employers, policymakers, and philanthropy partners are paying closer attention.

And it's why, at this particular moment in history, no one else can do this.

NASH and its members have spent the past several years testing ideas, building capacity, and demonstrating that coordinated system action can improve results. The Power of Systemness builds on that foundation. It is the next stage of a long-term vision to ensure that systems can deliver stronger outcomes for students, states, and communities.