



Executive Summary



COORDINATING SPECIALIZED EXCELLENCE

Emerging Thoughts on Institutional Engagement Ecosystems: Brett Eden and Jake Sorensen

Universities already possess profound value.

Over the past several years, we found ourselves sharing similar observations across conversations with our peers in similar types of departments and generally, in higher education as a whole. One shared thought stands out in our minds and is a current focus in our work and research: Universities are formed around remarkably well developed and deeply specialized functional areas that, unfortunately often exist as individual silos. Informed by recent practitioner benchmarks from NACRO and innovation-system research, this work moves beyond viewing silos as a deficit, proposing instead a framework to steward specialized excellence at scale.

Institutions hold remarkable departmental expertise in areas such as research, teaching, student success, advancement, athletics, workforce development, commercialization, community engagement, philanthropy, and more. Such specialization creates enormous institutional strength and allows universities to address increasingly complex challenges facing higher education. Yet at the same time, the environment and pressures surrounding universities continue to evolve at a dramatic pace, forcing all of us to evaluate how best to respond to our rapidly changing industry.

One area where we see the significant impact of specialization and rapid change is in a university's external (corporate) engagement activities. Relationships, partnerships, agreements, and more that once may have existed within a single office increasingly span

multiple organizational boundaries. Corporate partnerships intersect with philanthropy. Research initiatives connect with workforce development. Student success efforts overlap with community engagement and external partnerships. We frequently see new opportunities sitting between traditional organizational structures rather than neatly within them. This is not a failure of institutional design. In many ways, it is the natural consequence of successful growth and specialization.

As corporate engagement activities spread across a campus, new challenges begin to emerge. Despite the extraordinary assets, relationships, expertise, and capabilities that exist within a university, individual corporate engagement relationships struggle to maintain visibility across the enterprise. The result is fragmented opportunities, relationships managed locally and carefully guarded rather than strategically stewarded, and external partners finding higher education institutions too difficult to navigate despite obvious desirable opportunities for deep engagement.

The resulting challenge facing higher education is not a failure of institutional design or opportunity generation, but a 'coordination gap.'

While our specialized, decentralized structures are what create institutional strength, they have outpaced our ability to manage the complexity of multi-touchpoint engagement. The result is a paradox: we have abundant activity that feels fragmented, and strong local relationships that remain invisible at the enterprise level. We argue that institutions don't need to centralize authority or replace local expertise; they need a missing enterprise capability to coordinate it.



A question we started asking ourselves is whether institutions may possess more collective value than they are currently positioned to intentionally leverage. Because universities are essentially self-contained ecosystems with highly-specialized functions, distributed expertise, and diverse external relationships, we needed a way to talk about this

holistically. We started calling these Institutional Engagement Ecosystems in our discussions and research.

One perspective we have been exploring is to view universities as individual ecosystems, which we call Institutional Engagement Ecosystems (IEE), composed of specialized functions, distributed expertise, and interconnected relationships. Within a university's IEE, coordination of engagement efforts becomes an important institutional capability. We don't believe that this means centralization of all efforts or the replacement of local expertise. Rather, specialization remains one of higher education's greatest strengths. However, it raises questions about how institutions create greater visibility, alignment, stewardship, strategic coherence, and intentionality with corporate engagement.



To address this, we developed the Coordination Capability Framework (CCF). Rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' model, CCF is a normative framework composed of three interdependent capabilities:

1. **An Enterprise Coordination Function** to maintain visibility.
2. **Strategic Partnership Alignment** to establish relationship architecture.
3. **Mission-Aligned Measurement** via tools such as the Mutual Value Alignment Matrix (MVAM).

While we remain very early in our development of this work and our thinking continues to evolve, we want to share these ideas to spur additional conversation and evolution.

The CCF explores how institutions might better approach coordination of corporate engagement activities that increasingly intersect across organizational boundaries while also preserving local ownership and expertise. The framework revolves around developing and implementing enterprise-wide coordination capabilities and establishing strategic partnerships alignment that includes defined relationship architecture.

Within the CCF the MVAM is a tool designed to improve transparency and ensure institutional value creation is more visible. We don't envision this as simply a scoring model or formula. Rather, it attempts to visualize how corporate engagement matches institutional missions and goals. In other words, it helps answer a question we've often heard asked: What is the true value of this partnership to our university?

This work represents a starting point and an invitation.

We do not view our current work as final or comprehensive. And we recognize how much of it is built upon the years of interactions and conversations with our peers in higher education. If anything, we view our current thinking as early observations and questions that warrant broader discussion. Several years ago, higher education entered a period in which relationships, partnerships, and engagement activities are increasingly interconnected and important to institutional success. This truth requires institutions to adopt new ways of thinking about coordination, stewardship, and enterprise visibility.

Ultimately, we keep returning to a simple premise: Universities already possess extraordinary value. The challenge is helping people, assets, and opportunities work together in ways that strengthen institutional mission and realize that value.

This paper is intended less as an answer and more as an invitation. If these observations resonate with your institution, we welcome the opportunity to learn from your experiences and invite you to challenge our assumptions and continue exploring these ideas together.

