

Taking a Strategic Approach to Building Resilient Higher Education Institutions



Introduction

The past year has put strains on higher education institutions of all types and sizes, including decreased enrollment, increased financial pressures, and heightened levels of student and faculty stress. Through it all, colleges and universities have had to find ways to maintain educational and business continuity. But will survival be enough when the next crisis comes knocking at our door? Now more than ever, we need to act to build resilient institutions that enable long-term sustainability and growth.

Building resilience isn't something that happens overnight. **It takes dedicated and intentional action to develop a plan, execute on it, and regularly return to it to make sure it's continuing to enable resilience across the institution.**

In this guide, we'll explore **four key elements that make up an effective strategy and can help make resilience part of the fabric of an institution:**

- Vision
- Plan
- Execution
- Evaluation



Why Resilience Matters for Higher Education

Although the challenges higher education is facing aren't new, the pandemic has certainly accelerated and compounded several worrying trends that were already in play—from increasing financial pressures to fluctuating learner and workforce needs.

When we consider what resilience means for individuals, we think about being able to adapt or recover from disruptions. But for institutions, it means more than simply responding to change. **It's about anticipating for and mitigating against future challenges.**



Undergraduate enrollment declined in 2020 and 2021, with community colleges alone seeing a **more than 11% reduction** in the spring of 2021.



The number of high school graduates in the U.S. is expected to peak at 3.6 million in 2026 and **decrease to 3.3 million by 2030.**



A review of budget and revenue data from institutions across the U.S. revealed **losses in revenue from 2020 to 2021 of \$183 billion.**



49% of adults D2L surveyed said their recent online ongoing education and career training services **didn't provide them with the skills needed to advance in their career.**

Learn more about why resilience is important and what goes into defining and building it. [Get the guide.](#)

How to Build Resilient Higher Education Institutions

Though challenges ahead may seem great, the opportunities for institutions ready to build proactive practices, models, and systems may be greater. And just as no good road trip should start without a map, no successful transformation should start without a strategy.

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Vision

First, institutions need to define what resilience means in their situation and context:

- What does the future of learning look like?
- What is the institution's mission? What are its values?
How can learning contribute to advancing and embodying them?
- What are the challenges and opportunities?
- Who are the stakeholders—whether students, faculty, workforces, and governments—and what do they expect?
- How does the vision for where the institution would like to be compare with where it is right now?

Ultimately, the aim is to be able to articulate guiding principles, priorities, challenges, needs, and wants—all of which inform a holistic, long-term vision.

Complementing the vision is the purpose. Where the vision tells people what an institution does or aspires to do, the purpose tells them why and can help keep stakeholders working together toward a single goal.

VISION	PURPOSE
Inspire generations of lifelong learners.	To inspire people by providing continuous, relevant learning programs and opportunities that meet learners at every stage of life.

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Plan

This stage is all about developing a plan that will enable the institution to achieve its vision. The first step is to understand what is wanted, needs to be done, or can be done:

- What practices will be focused on?
- How challenging are they?
- Which are more important versus less important?
- Is the institution ready to implement its goals? If not, what's needed?
- What are the priorities? Which changes are high urgency but low challenge? Which are high challenge and low urgency? Which ones will require additional information or resourcing?

Institutions also need to consider how they'll track and measure progress by turning broad objectives into focused goals.

- How will technology help measure progress?
- What are the metrics that will be evaluated?
- What are the organizational benchmarks?

And finally, institutions need to grapple with what the road ahead will look like by articulating key milestones and the actions needed to realize the goals, purpose, and vision.



VISION	PURPOSE	GOALS	KPIs	MILESTONES	ACTIONS
Inspire generations of lifelong learners.	To inspire people by providing continuous, relevant learning programs, and opportunities that meet learners at every stage of life.	Drive engagement with continuing education among alumni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollment • Course completion • Learner satisfaction 	5% increase in the first year in the number of alumni returning to take courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct outreach through alumni networks • Survey alumni to assess relevancy of existing course catalog



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Execution

This is all about bringing plans to life. Depending on the nature and type of the initiatives at hand, this stage could be further broken down into pilot and scale.

PILOT

Piloting proposed changes can provide opportunities to test and refine changes on smaller, lower-stakes scales and give institutions the information they need to effectively implement practices across the institution. During a pilot process, the following questions should be answered:

- What challenges did the institution encounter? What was their nature?
- What helped in achieving success?
- What adjustments had to be made? What had to be sacrificed?
- What resources were used? What additional resources or supports could have been beneficial?

Be ready to document lessons, make necessary alterations to the process, and pilot again to assess the impact.

SCALE

Once there's an understanding of what works and what can be expected, it's time to scale the practice to the intended audience or across the institution. Practices may be sustained, implemented as part of routine operations, or reactive, ready to be used if a disturbance arises.



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Evaluation: Regularly Assess Practices to Drive Long-Term Resilience

Building resilience isn't a one-and-done activity. Institutions need to be prepared to reassess institutional resilience on a routine basis by determining the following:

- Have the challenges changed? Over time, new ones may emerge on the scene, while existing or previously threatening ones may have disappeared or become less important.
- Are the practices put in place still enabling resilience? As the institution evolves, so too will its understanding of and approach to resilience.

Ultimately, it is this ongoing commitment to building and maintaining resilient practices—baking resilience into institutional DNA and driving long-term, sustainable transformation and success for the school, its faculty, its staff, its learners, and its workforce and government partners—that will help colleges and universities thrive.

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Discover how D2L can help institutions build resilience and digitize, optimize, and transform their learning experiences. **Get the guide.**



About D2L

D2L is transforming the way the world learns—helping learners of all ages achieve more than they dreamed possible. Working closely with clients all over the world, D2L is supporting millions of people learning online and in person. Our more than 900 global employees are dedicated to making the best learning products to leave the world better than where they found it.

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