

WHAT DID THIS YEAR REVEAL ABOUT YOUR INSTITUTION?

Executive Briefings

Key Takeaways

- **Treat recurring operational friction as evidence about where systems, processes, ownership, or visibility may need attention.**
- **Look at where people repeatedly expend unnecessary effort to uncover opportunities a traditional project list may miss.**
- **Carry the lessons of 2026 into 2027 — but reconsider whether yesterday's planned project is still the right response.**

Estimated Reading Time: 4 minutes

By the fourth quarter, most institutions know where the year became harder than expected.

A system required more manual intervention than it should have. A project moved slowly because departments were not aligned. Staff found another workaround for a process that everyone already knew needed attention. Data existed, but getting the right information to the right people remained unnecessarily difficult.

None of these problems may have stopped the institution from operating.

That does not make them unimportant.

As colleges and universities prepare for 2027, one of the most useful planning exercises may be to look beyond what was completed during 2026 and examine what the year ***revealed***.

Friction Is Information

Operational friction is easy to normalize.

People become remarkably good at compensating for systems and processes that no longer work particularly well. They build spreadsheets. They create extra approval steps. They maintain parallel records. They learn which systems do not communicate and manually carry information between them.

Eventually, the workaround becomes part of the job.

That adaptability keeps institutions functioning, but it can also conceal the real cost of outdated processes and disconnected technology.

A recurring problem deserves a different question at year-end:

Why did we have to solve this problem repeatedly?

The answer may point to a technology limitation. But it may just as easily reveal unclear ownership, fragmented processes, poor visibility, competing priorities, or a modernization effort that addressed the symptom rather than the underlying problem.

That distinction matters as another budget year begins.

Look at What Required Too Much Effort

A useful review of 2026 does not need to begin with a technology inventory.

Begin with **effort**.

Where did faculty, administrators, IT teams, finance teams, or student-facing staff spend time compensating for something that should have been easier?

Where did routine work require repeated intervention?

Where did people wait for information, approvals, access, or decisions?

Where did one department solve a problem without resolving the same problem elsewhere?

These questions can expose opportunities that a traditional project list may miss.

They can also prevent an institution from carrying yesterday's inefficiencies into tomorrow's plans simply because those inefficiencies have become familiar.

Separate the Temporary Problem from the Persistent One

Not every difficulty encountered during a year requires modernization.

Some problems are temporary. Some are caused by unusual circumstances. Some disappear when a project concludes or a staffing gap is filled.

Others keep returning.

Those persistent problems deserve attention because repetition changes their significance. A cumbersome process encountered once may be an inconvenience. A cumbersome process repeated hundreds or thousands of times becomes an operating cost.

The same is true of disconnected data, duplicated work, aging systems, manual reporting, security gaps, and processes dependent upon individual knowledge.

Before deciding what deserves investment in 2027, institutions should understand which problems were exceptions — and which were signals.

Carry the Lesson Forward, Not Necessarily the Project

Year-end planning often encourages institutions to ask which unfinished initiatives should move into the next year.

There's another question worth asking first:

Does the initiative still represent the right response to what we learned?

A project conceived months ago may no longer deserve the same priority. Circumstances change. Needs become clearer. New constraints emerge. What seemed like a technology problem may turn out to be a process problem. What looked like a departmental issue may prove to be institutional.

Learning should be allowed to change the plan.

That isn't indecision. It is one of the reasons to review the year before committing resources to the next one.

Closing Thought

Higher education institutions rarely lack things they could improve.

The harder leadership decision is determining which improvements matter most.

The experience of 2026 provides evidence for making that choice. Look closely at where work slowed, where people compensated, where visibility disappeared, and where the same problem returned.

Then ask what those experiences are telling you.

Finishing the year strong does not require solving every problem before December.

It requires understanding enough about this year to make better decisions about the next one.

Finish strong: before deciding what 2027 needs, be certain you understand what 2026 taught you.

Start the Conversation

- Every successful modernization initiative begins with a shared understanding of where you are today and where you want to go next.
- If your leadership team is evaluating modernization priorities, Anchor Bridge Innovations would welcome the opportunity to start that conversation.