

WHEN EVERYTHING MATTERS, WHAT MOVES FIRST?

Executive Briefings

Key Takeaways

- Importance and priority are different; prioritization requires leadership to compare legitimate needs and choose among them.
- Give particular attention to initiatives that unlock other work and make subsequent improvements easier.
- Include real organizational capacity in the priority decision so constraints do not simply reappear later as delays.

Estimated Reading Time: 4 minutes

Higher education rarely suffers from a shortage of important work.

Student experience matters. Cybersecurity matters. Infrastructure matters. Data matters. Compliance matters. Faculty and staff productivity matters. Cost control matters. Modernization matters.

The problem begins when everything matters at the same time.

Once an institution has decided which initiatives deserve continued attention, leadership faces a harder question:

What moves first?

Importance and Priority Are Not the Same Thing

Calling something important is relatively easy.

Assigning priority requires comparison.

Two initiatives can both be valuable while one deserves resources before the other. Three departments can have legitimate needs without all three receiving simultaneous attention. A technology improvement can make sense while still being less urgent than an operational vulnerability elsewhere.

That is why a list of important projects is not yet a strategy.

Priority emerges only when leadership is willing to distinguish among them.

Look Beyond the Loudest Need

The initiative receiving the most attention isn't necessarily the one that should move first.

Some needs are highly visible because they affect a vocal group of stakeholders. Others have strong departmental advocates. Some have been discussed for so long that their familiarity gives them momentum.

Meanwhile, a less visible problem may be creating greater institutional risk, consuming more staff time, limiting several departments at once, or blocking progress elsewhere.

A useful prioritization discussion therefore asks more than, ***“Who needs this?”***

It asks:

What happens if we solve it?

And just as importantly:

What happens if we don't?

Those two answers can look very different.

Find the Work That Unlocks Other Work

Some initiatives create value primarily through their own results.

Others make additional progress possible.

Improving access to reliable data may help several departments make better decisions. Resolving an integration problem may eliminate multiple manual processes. Strengthening an aging piece of infrastructure may reduce risk while also creating a foundation for later modernization.

These initiatives have leverage.

They deserve particular attention because completing one can change the conditions surrounding several others.

Instead of asking only which project offers the greatest immediate benefit, ask which project makes the next set of improvements easier.

Sometimes the best first move is the one that creates better second and third moves.

Capacity Belongs in the Decision

There is another reality that belongs in every priority discussion:

Can the institution actually do the work?

Funding alone does not create capacity.

An initiative may also require IT resources, departmental participation, executive sponsorship, procurement, implementation support, training, data preparation, vendor coordination, or time from people who already have full workloads.

Ignoring those constraints doesn't make them disappear.

It simply moves them downstream, where they become delays.

A realistic priority is therefore not merely something worth doing. It is something the institution can support well enough to do successfully.

Closing Thought

Prioritization doesn't mean that everything below the first item is unimportant.

It means recognizing that progress has an order.

The right first initiative can resolve an immediate need, build confidence, free capacity, reduce risk, or establish the foundation for what follows.

The wrong first initiative can consume resources without making the next decision any easier.

Higher education leaders do not need perfect certainty before moving forward. They need enough clarity to distinguish between what matters, what matters most, and what needs to happen before something else can.

That is the work of prioritization.

Finish strong by remembering that you don't have to solve everything first. You have to solve the right thing first.

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.