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PLANNING STORY

Is Higher Education Ready for Its Learners?

Impact Student Success Using the Three-Box Solution

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With sweeping shifts in recruitment and retention of students throughout higher education, Northern Kentucky University committed to a pivot. Its new student framework emphasizes student support and academic delivery driven by strategic decisions and data rather than by impulsivity. Their Success by Design framework encouraged innovations that focused the university on meeting learners where they were.

Introduction

In Kentucky, as in other states, there is an enrollment urgency in the education pipeline that moves students from high school to college degree completion. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, in 2020, estimates that for every 100 students who enter high school in Kentucky, only 75 will graduate. Of those 75 high school graduates 47 will enter college, of which only 19 will earn a degree within six years of enrolling. The sobering statistics highlight the need for swift action to address the leaky pipeline. Colleges and universities are the engines of social and economic mobility, the pillars of enlightenment and discovery, and the stewards of place. How institutions respond to the leaky pipeline will define the future for generations of students and the role of higher education within society.

3 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . To Develop a Streamlined Strategic Framework

1. **Consider having a single focus** (e.g., student success) rather than several.
2. Instead of using a long-term, static strategic plan, **spur innovation with a short, flexible process.**
3. **Accept failure, encourage risks, and learn from outcomes.**



Colleges and universities are the engines of social and economic mobility, the pillars of enlightenment and discovery, and the stewards of place.

With challenges such as rapidly changing student demographics and enrollment behaviors inundating institutions of higher education, Northern Kentucky University (NKU)—a regional, comprehensive public university just outside of Cincinnati—recognized that a significant shift in student support and academic delivery was needed. The traditional paradigm for viewing entering students had been from a deficits or deficiencies mindset (McNair, Albertine, Cooper, McDonald & Major 2017). Rather than dwelling on the usual observations made by institutions that incoming students were lacking or not prepared for college because of academic readiness, emotional maturity, or the rigors of college transition, NKU began asking: *Are we as an institution prepared for our incoming students?* The pivot focused the university on being responsive to meeting learners where they are in their pursuit of a degree or certificate, no matter their age or stage in life.

At the conclusion of the 2013–2018 Fuel the Flame strategic plan, NKU was in a prime position to become student-ready. With 15,687 students registered in fall 2019, NKU had maintained three consecutive years of enrollment growth, due in part to introducing and aggressively marketing several accelerated online programs. It had also seen success in advancing its six-year graduation rate, from 36.3 percent in 2014 to 47.7 percent in 2019. That increase occurred during

a time of stagnant retention rates and declining undergraduate enrollment at the university that mirrored national trends.

When Dr. Ashish Vaidya was installed as NKU's sixth president, in summer 2018, he challenged the campus to develop—in an expedited timeframe—a creative and responsive strategic initiative that had a singular focus on student success. Vaidya recognized that a lengthy planning time and ongoing debate about the direction of the strategic planning could delay the university's response to sweeping student demographic shifts in the higher education landscape.

In a study of 19 institutional strategic plans, Stephens (2017) found that the median lifespan for a strategic plan was six years. Vaidya wanted NKU to look beyond traditional strategic-planning methodologies to those that were ambitious and nimble. To that end NKU introduced the concept of a strategic framework. Strategic plans can be rigid and lock an institution in a linear path (Hinton 2012). NKU sought to develop a framework that could be established quickly. It needed to be responsive to unexpected internal and external forces as well as adaptable to market changes and demands. Likewise, it should foster innovation at any time.

Vaidya, a trained economist, pursued out-of-sector approaches to organizational planning, with an emphasis on leading innovation. What he found was a novel approach primarily adopted within the business sector that, when applied creatively, would advance student success aligned with regional needs: Vijay Govindarajan's Three-Box Solution.



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The Three-Box Solution

The Three-Box Solution—as detailed in *The Three-Box Solution: A Strategy for Leading Innovation* (Govindarajan 2016)—is a simplified method to determine what energy, time, and resources are needed to meet optimal organizational output and foster innovation. Govindarajan developed the strategy based on the Hindu philosophy of the continuous process of creation-preservation-destruction. The three boxes simultaneously address the present, past, and future.

Box 1: Managing the Present

According to Govindarajan (2016, 113), because it is about the “now” and highlights the organization’s current core business, most organizations focus almost entirely on Box 1. Included in the work of Box 1 is “linear innovation” (Govindarajan 2016, 17), which is scaling up or modifying current activities to improve performance.



Box 2: Forgetting the Past

Letting go of past practices, ideas, models, and attitudes that are staples of a current business model is often difficult. Box 2 is about preventing that past from hindering movement into the future.

Box 3: Creating the Future

Innovation and new ideas should propel organizations beyond the present. Experimentation and risk-taking are not often rewarded immediately, but can be encouraged with financial investments in new ideas and the allocation of resources to help make those ideas successful. Govindarajan (2016, 41) suggested that organizations should “embrace risks as learning opportunities and see variance as a window into possible new directions and unforeseen benefits.”

Applying the Three-Box Approach to Higher Education

The Three-Box Solution was designed for application within a corporate setting. As such, the decisions associated with the three boxes are often developed and executed internally and in a top-down manner. Public higher education is ruled by the principles of shared governance. Therefore, within a campus-wide strategic planning process, NKU purposefully involved the entire campus community. Just as many industries have had to re-orient and re-invent their products, processes, and services over time, public higher education institutions such as NKU, which traditionally had a comparatively stable environment, found itself in a similar situation. Like many colleges and universities, NKU competes for increasingly

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scarce resources and declining numbers of traditional-age students. Additionally, because of significant declines in state funding, NKU also needed to seek other revenue sources.

Within the current environment, public higher education institutions are pressured to balance their traditional missions with what has been termed “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004). Academic capitalism is the tendency for academic institutions to behave in a business-like way, adapting strategies such as outsourcing of services or developing alternative revenue streams to offset declining enrollments. Whether academic capitalism is compatible with the traditional higher education environment that emphasizes academic freedom and shared governance has been a longstanding debate (McNair et al. 2016, 21–23). The Three-Box Solution provided a means for NKU to develop and update strategies for student success that would create valuable synergies with changing market realities.

To that end, NKU applied the Three-Box Solution as a cyclical process—within the context of the strategic framework and as a living document. All three boxes would function simultaneously with multiple ongoing projects/initiatives.

Applying the Three-Box Solution within Strategic Planning

The Three-Box Solution inherently posed three pivotal questions for NKU: (1) How do we strategically optimize current operations to advance student success? (2) What practices, procedures, policies, programs, and/or services that inhibit student success can we trim or eliminate? and (3) What innovations around student success should we quickly introduce, deliver, and assess?

Box 1: Managing the Present

The processes attached to optimization within Box 1 should be continuous and ongoing. Govindarajan (2016) explained that Box 1 was about peak efficiency and core business. What should not be assumed is that the present is already operating at peak efficiency; there is still room for improvement within current operations. Managing the present became the core of NKU’s strategic framework, and the majority of time and effort would be devoted to leading the institution in advancing student success on a daily basis.

Furthermore, enacting Box 1 required prioritization of institutional efforts around prospective, incoming, and current students. In order for NKU to significantly impact long-term student success, then it needed to invest in enrolling and supporting new students—while also helping current students achieve degree completion and career readiness. For example, a newly developed Students 2 Scholars retention program was set up to better retain black students as they transitioned from their second to third year. It provides a support network of faculty and staff



led by the NKU Black Faculty & Staff Association and regional career professionals. Activities are directed at setting goals, career planning, networking, building a résumé, financial literacy, and providing engagement opportunities in high-impact practices such as internships and student research.

To develop challenging goals that would remove obstacles to student success, NKU needed to create a culture of delivering student services or performing institutional operations that were faster, smarter, cheaper, and in collaboration with regional partners. The Norse Skolars program, in partnership with Americorps and Kentucky Campus Compact, was developed to prevent “summer melt,” the loss of students between summer registration and fall enrollment. The program provided accepted and confirmed students a wrap-around support network both prior to and after their confirmation of enrollment and transition into the first year of study.

Box 2: Selectively Forgetting the Past

While change is not easy for any organization, higher education institutions have a reputation for being change resistant (Kirschner 2012). Govindarajan (2016, 99, 105, 106) emphasized repeatedly that identifying Box 2 items was uncomfortable because it required questioning the status quo. Within NKU’s process, the word “selectively” was added to the idea of forgetting the past to emphasize that change would be guided by strategic decisions and data rather than by impulsivity. Furthermore, because resources were going to be aligned with student success, measuring the return on investment (ROI) would be critical. In other words, would the investment significantly affect

students’ progression toward a degree? That mindset necessitated identifying efficiencies in processing, technology, and logistics that indirectly impacted student success, such as eliminating tasks that pulled staff time away from working with students.

Auer (2016, 3) observed that it was common for higher education institutions to avoid direct “termination talk” in strategic plans. And, indeed, early in NKU’s strategic framework development process, it was decided to de-emphasize words like “forget,” “eliminate,” and “stop.” Instead, Box 2 was reframed to highlight the alignment of the past institutional practices and service offerings with what would be necessary for future student success. For example, as the strategic framework was implemented, Box 2 items would address then current practices (e.g., policies, procedures, fees) that either no longer aligned with NKU’s mission, vision, and values, or impeded student success. The strategic framework would be characterized not as an exercise focused on “forgetting the past,” but one focused on strategically aligning NKU in ways that would best support student success. Box 2 would be about preventing the past from hindering movement into the future. As Govindarajan (2016, 96) stated, “Future weaknesses are embedded in current strengths.”

Implementing Box 2 involved moving beyond just examining programs, services, and curriculum. NKU also needed to manage and realign culture, ideas, and attitudes, which could not happen without leaders willing to support and model change. NKU had grown quickly in its 50-year history. Like many other higher education institutions, it had become a complex organization. As institutions craft their delivery



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mode for the next generation, traditions and past ideals are often comforts and luxuries that compete against the needs of current and future students. One such longstanding tradition was the ACT exam as an admissions requirement. NKU began exploring whether the test should be optional and whether to strengthen the weight of high school GPA within admission decisions and merit awards. That is one example of changing old practices in order to facilitate student success and innovation.

Box 3: Creating the Future through Innovation

Activating Box 3 involved design thinking, experimentation, innovation, and assessment—all core tenets of higher education. It needed to allow for a forum for ideas, failure without punishment, the opportunity to demonstrate proof of concept aligned with ROI, investment in experimentation, and challenging of traditional delivery modes. Initiatives that worked would eventually become the present, or the current situation, and be moved into Box 1.

Applying Box 3 also required prioritization of what to do in order to build capacity for future innovations. One of the first steps in addressing Box 3 items was to identify institutional barriers to innovation success and include those items in Box 2. Govindarajan (2016, 210) distinguished between “roots” that connected an organization to its core and “chains” that prevented

it from moving in new directions. Higher education institutions have traditionally been siloed into colleges and departments (Keeling, R. P., R. Underhile & A. F. Wall 2007, 22), and administrative functions have been oriented into tasks (e.g., accounting, admissions). While NKU has always had connections with the community, further collaborations and alliances with existing and new external partners would be a critical part of building the future. Box 3 thinking—in tandem with Box 2—encouraged looking beyond traditional structures and ways of thinking to identify alternatives that could better support student success.

Trial-and-error was expected. The reward structure (i.e., resource allocation) that NKU needed to utilize for the strategic cycle was not such that only successes would be incentivized. Box 3 required a willingness to fail and to continue to try new approaches. Govindarajan (2016) recommended starting to implement Box 3 ideas on a smaller scale. If a strategy worked, then determining how quickly it could be scaled up to ensure a measurable impact on the desired outcomes would be necessary. Nimbleness and agility were essential to maximizing results in a short timeframe. For example, NKU now offers scholarships to support high school teachers taking the coursework needed to qualify to teach dual-credit courses. That program was quickly developed to address the significantly increasing number of dual-credit students and the stagnant enrollments in teacher education programs.



Next Steps: Delivering a Singular Focus

To develop the strategic framework, the president assembled a 12-member Core Team of administrators, faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and community members. The resulting three-year framework focused on five deliverables:

1. Clearly communicating specific, bold student success goals for NKU around three areas: Access, Completion, and Career & Community Engagement.
2. Developing milestones and metrics for accountability.
3. Identifying a focused set of three to five projects, each with actionable steps to execute strategies in every one of the three boxes.
4. Keeping students at the center of thinking while campus stakeholders generate ideas, prioritize and launch pilots, assess effectiveness, and scale up strategies that work.
5. Discarding activities that do not advance the goals in the areas of Access, Completion, and Career & Community Engagement.

Throughout the delivery of the three-year strategic framework, NKU committed to the following principles:

- Be highly collaborative and transparent; engage faculty, staff, students, and the community in the conversations
- Foster an environment that encourages prudent risk-taking and acceptance of failure

- Regularly communicate and celebrate successes together
- Align resources, structures, and incentives to execute the strategy

During the strategic framework development process, the Core Team did not work in isolation. Approximately 70 additional stakeholders, including NKU faculty, staff, students, and community leaders, served on six resource teams: Best Practices, Consulting and Strategic Planning Expertise, Data and Metrics, Institutional Alignment, Market Forces, and Scholarly Work. Each resource team was charged to be data-driven and student-focused. The research, data, and analyses gathered by the teams were accumulated into reports and provided to the Core Team. Additionally, Vaidya and the Core Team led internal and external engagement activities that included more than 2,000 face-to-face contacts, 85 forums and workshops, and 504 online survey responses.

All of that collaborative work ultimately led to NKU's new strategic framework, Success by Design. Purposefully streamlined, the strategic framework had a singular focus on advancing student success aligned with regional needs. The student success focus sits atop three key areas that surround the lifecycle of the student: Access, Completion, and Career & Community Engagement. There are five objectives under each area. NKU's mission, vision, core values, and the goals and objectives of Success by Design are delineated at: www.nku.edu/successbydesign.html.



As institutions craft their delivery mode for the next generation, traditions and past ideals are often comforts and luxuries that compete against the needs of current and future students.

From start (the president's convocation address) to finish (approval by the university's Board of Regents) the development of the Success by Design strategic framework was accomplished in eight months.

To transition from development to implementation, a number of key organizational changes were made. To oversee implementation and rollout of the framework, Vaidya hired a vice president-level chief strategy officer (CSO). In addition, he reorganized Institutional Research under the CSO's portfolio to better align institutional data to strategic decision-making. To help fund the advancement of student success, NKU initiated a public \$75 million capital campaign, called Further, Faster. Vaidya, recognizing that Success by Design was highly dependent on student enrollments and successful matriculation throughout NKU's degree programs, commissioned the development of a strategic management plan. That plan would identify aspirational goals for the institution that were aligned to Success by Design and regional need. Continuing the mantra of being streamlined and targeted, the Core Team and the President's Cabinet identified the First-Five Initiatives, supported by \$1.5 million in one-time funding to ensure successful implementation. Those first five initiatives can be viewed at: www.nku.edu/successbydesign.html.

Widespread participation of stakeholder groups continued, and a campus-wide survey was issued concurrently to solicit input and volunteers to work on the initiatives. Five cross-divisional implementation teams were assembled, and each was charged with preparing recommendations for delivering its assigned initiative. Additionally, the president held an Innovation Challenge, inviting campus and community members to apply for \$5,000 to \$100,000 funding for project ideas related to any component of Success by Design. The call for proposals yielded 133 submissions. Finalists pitched the proposals at the newly developed Student Success Summit, and 15 were funded for a total of \$500,000.

Conclusion

Guided by the Three-Box Solution, Success by Design became a living strategic framework that abandoned what could have been a lengthy planning development for a process that was nimble and responsive to change. With a singular focus on student success, the framework was purposefully designed to align resources, decisions, and processes around prospective, incoming, and current learners.



WHAT WORKED

- The singular focus on student success **guided decision-making and kept resources from being spread too thin.**
- **Moving from launch to a completed framework in only eight months** made the strategic framework relevant to the feedback received from campus.
- Reframing Box 2 (Forget the Past) to focus on **aligning institutional resources with the framework** helped counter the natural resistance to change.
- The Innovation Challenge provided fiscal resources to **innovative ideas in a fun, pitch-based competition.**

WHAT DIDN'T

- **Some of the methods for gathering data from stakeholder groups were too complex to explain and implement** in the time allotted.
- **Expediting the timeframe** caused some campus members to have to acclimate quickly. That was an easier transition for some rather than others.

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