

Scaling Innovation in Higher Education: A Toolkit for Stakeholders



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Higher education has long struggled with taking effective student success innovations to scale across institutions. Although promising interventions emerge regularly, few achieve systemic, lasting impact. This toolkit offers a practical, action-oriented resource for institutional leaders, governing boards, funders, policymakers, and change agents committed to enabling scalable, sustainable change.

What this toolkit is:

A cross-sector-informed guide that integrates lessons from K-12, healthcare, and social innovation with the University Innovation Alliance's (UIA) real-world experience scaling innovation across 19 public research universities.

Who this is for:

Institutional leaders, governing boards, system heads, funders, policymakers, innovators, implementers, and anyone working to ensure more students benefit from what we already know works.

What we've learned:

Scaling is not replication – it's a strategic, context-sensitive process that depends on governance, policy alignment, and continuous learning. *Innovation doesn't scale unless systems are designed to support it.*



How to Use This Toolkit

Everyone	Review the framework for scale described in Component 1
Board Members, System Leaders, or Executive Leaders	Complete the readiness assessment in Component 2 & review the companion guidance for governing boards
Innovators, Campus Team Members	Complete the readiness assessment in Component 2
Funders, Policymakers	Complete the readiness assessment in Component 2 & review the companion guidance for governing boards

About the Overarching Project



This project was designed to answer three questions:

- 1 What proven methods for scaling innovations in other sectors (e.g., K-12 education, healthcare) can be adapted for higher education?
- 2 How can these methods be integrated with UIA's decade of implementing evidence-based student success innovations across diverse public universities?
- 3 How do governance structures impact the ability to implement and scale innovations? What policy tools can support governing boards in accelerating student success?

About this Toolkit

Purpose and Scope

This toolkit offers a practical framework and resources for scaling student success innovations in higher education. It integrates insights from K-12 education and healthcare, along with the University Innovation Alliance's (UIA) decade of experience. The initiative addresses challenges related to governance, institutional buy-in, and scalability to foster systemic change across public higher education institutions.

Audience

This toolkit is intended as an action-oriented resource for institutional leaders, governing boards, system heads, funders, policymakers, innovators, implementers, and anyone working to support scaling student success innovations within their own contexts.

Data Sources

Since 2014, UIA institutions have produced 163,000 additional graduates above baseline – often in partnership with state systems, presidents, and boards. The original continuing nine members have created 42% growth in low-income graduates and 99% growth in underserved student graduates since 2012-13. This framework draws from that real-world work, as well as the following sources:

- Literature Review: [Scaling Educational Innovation: A Cross-Sector Review of Frameworks and Practices](#)
- Expert Interviews with Healthcare, K-12 Education, and Higher Education Leaders
 - We spoke with leaders who have experience in practice, policy, research, intermediary organizations, and consulting.
- UIA Fellow Reflections
 - UIA Fellows are established higher education leaders who shepherd their member institution's involvement in the UIA. Eight UIA Fellows engaged in focused study about scaling innovation, framework testing, and recommendation development for this project.

Future Directions

In our efforts to understand scaling and put forward a practical framework for higher education, we reaffirmed our belief in the central role of change management in any innovation or scaling process. Future work would benefit from a deeper exploration of change management models, practices, and pitfalls.

SETTING THE SCENE

Scaling Up, Out, and Deep: Completion Grants as an Exemplar

Scaling typically falls into three major categories: scaling out (spreading with adaptation), scaling deep (shifting cultural norms), and scaling up (embedding within policy). In the quest to improve student success, the UIA and its collaborators have pursued all three.

The UIA has elevated completion grants, relatively small amounts of financial aid awarded to students to help them get to the finish line of their college journeys, as a powerful tool for student success. The idea started at Georgia State University as the Panther Retention Grant, which informed the University of Central Florida's Knights Success Grant. Subsequently, 11 UIA universities implemented completion grants – **scaling out**.

Implementing completion grants on campus prompted stronger relationships between offices, colleges, and even athletics at Iowa State University. Financial Aid and their campus partners strengthened their collaboration and communication to better support students experiencing financial difficulties. Additionally, Iowa State's Athletics program was so impressed with this work that they donated \$1 million to support it. Completion grants at Iowa State created opportunities for cultural shifts and improved connections across campus – **scaling deep**.

The success of Georgia State's Panther Retention Grant program and the tireless efforts of Dr. Tim Renick, among others, to share its impact ultimately contributed to the state of Georgia adopting the Georgia College Completion Grant Program – **scaling up**. Tens of thousands of students at University System of Georgia (USG), Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), and eligible private non-profit postsecondary institutions in Georgia have benefited from this program.

Scaling takes infrastructure, time, intention, and energy. And, those efforts can make a huge impact.



COMPONENT 1: A FRAMEWORK FOR SCALING INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Overview

Scaling is not linear, nor is it just about growth. It's about evolving practices, shifting norms, embedding into policy, and building lasting infrastructure.

This framework reflects what we've learned about how scale really happens – and what enables or impedes it – especially in the complex context of public higher education.

Innovation and scale happen in partnership with change management. These processes all happen within and across three contexts:

- **Local context:** The unit, campus, or institutional team driving the innovation.
- **Organizational context:** Governance structures, institutional networks, and funding mechanisms.
- **Macro context:** Federal/state policy, institutional accreditation and compliance requirements, philanthropic influence, and external forces.

Successful scaling depends on dynamic interaction across these layers. Innovations shape and are shaped by the contexts and systems around them.

Importantly, a scaled innovation is not a static, one-time achievement. Rather, innovation, scale, and change management are ongoing processes which will continue to change over time as the innovation is evaluated, people's needs evolve, and contexts shift.

What's different about this model?

- It centers scale as a system process – not just institutional.
- It builds policy and governance into design – not as an afterthought.
- It connects change management to innovation in a mutually-reinforcing relationship.
- It treats equity and adaptability as structural, not supplemental.

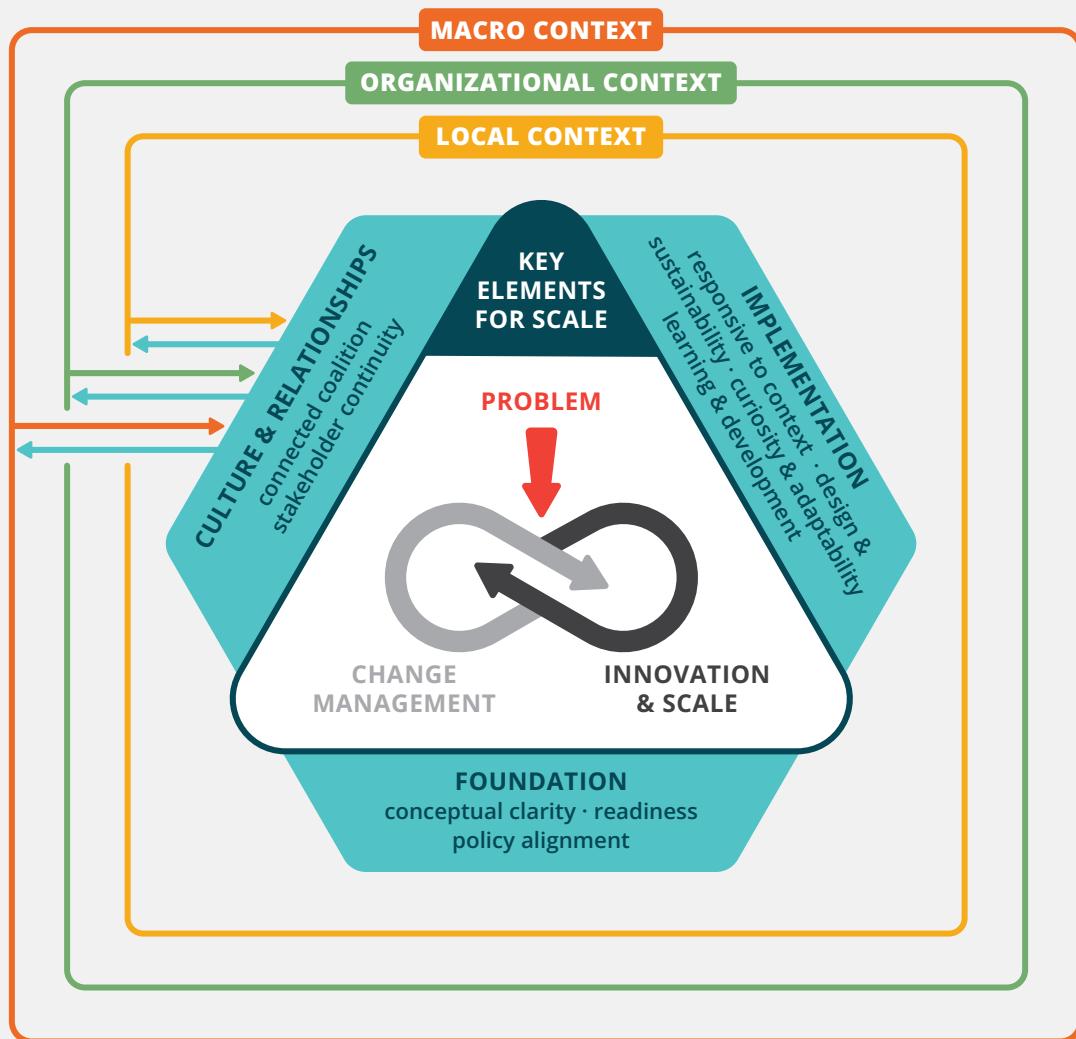


Scaling Process

Innovation and scale processes begin when people identify a problem and set out to solve it. They come up with ideas, develop a concept and plan for implementing the best ideas, and study the results so they can further refine their approach. As they engage in this innovation space, they engage in change management to implement the innovation and to engage stakeholders' efforts towards a common goal. Once an innovation has taken root and proved successful, then it may be scaled up (embedding the innovation within policy), scaled out (spreading with adaptation), or scaled deep (shifting cultural norms). **This problem → innovation → change management → scale cycle repeats as new problems arise, contexts evolve, or people's needs change.**

Innovation, scale, and change management processes all proceed within multiple contexts, beginning with their most local contexts (e.g., unit, institution, network). These local contexts are shaped by their organizational context, such as institutional type or network structure, governance, funding mechanisms, and other key characteristics of that organization. Providing the overall container for organizations and their innovation and scale work, macro contexts include federal and state policy, accreditation, philanthropic influence, and other external forces.

Across macro, organizational, and local contexts, significant shaping forces include nested layers of policy (e.g., institutional, system, state, federal, accreditation), governance and leadership characteristics, organizational priorities, and resources (e.g., financial, human, social capital). These forces exert influence on innovation, scaling, and change management processes. In response, these processes also influence their contexts.





Contexts

Nested layers of contexts – each with their own policies, governance and leadership characteristics, organizational priorities, and resources – form the ecosystem in which innovation and scaling can occur.

The **local context** is closest to the innovation and scaling efforts, and includes the unit, campus, or institutional team driving the innovation. Next, the **organizational context** attends to governance structures, institutional networks, and funding mechanisms. As the overall container, the **macro context**: focuses on policy at the state and federal levels, accreditation, philanthropic influence, and broader socio-political forces.

The forces within each contextual layer influence innovation, scaling, and change management processes. In response, these processes also influence their contexts. Although the effects are multi-directional, the nested contexts typically exert a stronger force on the innovation, scaling, and change management processes. In other words, the ecosystem has a significant role in creating the conditions in which innovation and scaling efforts will thrive or wither.



Key Elements for Scale

Scaling is a complex, contextual, and ongoing process. Across our interviews, literature review, and more than a decade of practical experience, these nine elements consistently create the conditions for successful scaling efforts. Elements are likely to overlap, manifest differently, and/or shift in their emphasis for individual scaling initiatives (and over time within each initiative). Taken together, these elements work together to create the necessary conditions for successful scaling. We have grouped these elements into three categories: foundation, implementation, and culture and relationships.

FOUNDATION

Conceptual clarity: a clear understanding of and the ability to communicate the key elements of the problem, the innovation, and the implementation approach.

Readiness: an organization's preparedness and receptivity to change; readiness is both a prerequisite for innovation and scale as well as an ongoing state that should be monitored and nurtured.

Policy alignment: alignment between nested levels of policy (e.g., institutional, system, state, federal, accreditation) create a more favorable environment for innovation and scale.

CULTURE & RELATIONSHIPS

Connected coalition: a trusting, collaborative coalition who bring different skills, perspectives, and positionalities within the organization and/or project (e.g., innovation leaders should be working closely with implementers and the people who will be most affected by the innovation).

Stakeholder continuity: maintaining a coalition with stable membership sustains momentum while also preserving organizational knowledge, capital, and relevant skills.

IMPLEMENTATION

Strategic design & sustainability: including infrastructure, internal expertise, and resources (e.g., financial, human, social capital) for the innovation's short and long term viability.

Curiosity & adaptability: willingness to learn, adapt, and evolve at individual, project, and organizational levels.

Responsive to context: consider the influence of and interactions from the most macro contexts (e.g., world events, federal policies) to the most proximal contexts (e.g., the specific unit and staff responsible for implementation).

Learning & development: thoughtful investment in building local capacity, ensuring people have the skills and knowledge needed to successfully implement and sustain the innovation – from initial planning through continued maintenance and evolution.



Approaches & Tools for Scale



The most successful scaling efforts integrate multiple frameworks rather than adhering rigidly to a single approach, allowing educational leaders to address different aspects of scaling challenges while adapting strategies to specific contexts and governance conditions."

— (*Scaling Educational Innovation*, p. 3)

This model for scaling innovation in higher education describes the high-level environments and dynamics shaping how scale happens to inform efforts to scale innovations. Here, we offer a menu of options for approaches to scaling and change management.

ADDITIONAL APPROACHES TO SCALING

- [Collective Impact](#) | approach to system-wide transformation through intentional coordination of multiple organizations and stakeholders toward a shared vision for change
- [Networked Improvement Communities \(NICs\)](#) | model for educational improvement at scale through engaging diverse practitioners from different contexts in collaborative problem solving through improvement science methods
- [Design-Based Implementation Research \(DBIR\)](#) | education-specific framework involving both researchers and practitioners in iterative, collaborative design processes
- [Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research \(CFIR\)](#) | framework from healthcare emphasizing fidelity to core components and adaptability for peripheral components
- [Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainment \(EPIS\)](#) | model describing distinct phases of implementation processes

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR SCALING

- [Scaling Readiness Assessment](#)
- [Core-Periphery Analysis](#)
- [Staged Implementation Planning](#)
- [Ecosystem Mapping](#)
- [Equity Impact Assessment](#)
- [Sustainability Planning](#)
- [Pitch & Storytelling Architecture](#)

APPROACHES TO CHANGE MANAGEMENT

- [ADKAR \(Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement\) Model for Change Success](#) | a key component of [Prosci's Methodology](#) for “managing the people side of change”
- [Water of Systems Change](#) | getting beyond simple counts to assess the effects and depth of change efforts

Each scaling initiative will need to determine which approach(es) best fits their innovation, contexts, and stakeholders.

COMPONENT 2: STAKEHOLDER READINESS FOR SCALE ASSESSMENT

Use this tool to assess your roles and readiness for scale. For each major stakeholder group (and you may fit into more than one!), you will find key tasks that will prepare your organization for successful scaling efforts.

Directions: Rate the current status for each task – it is likely that representatives from multiple (if not all) stakeholder groups will need to be consulted. Once you have filled out the assessment tool, consider your strengths and areas for improvement. To be best positioned for a successful scale project, develop a plan to make progress on any areas of improvement and to design your scaling initiative with this information in mind.

Rate Your Readiness	Not Yet	Early	Developing	Advanced
Governing Boards <i>create conditions for innovation</i>				
Select the leaders (president, chancellor) who will support innovation & scaling efforts				
Support policies and resource allocations to advance innovation & scaling				
Learn about the proposed scaling initiative, including reviewing evidence and justification for its adoption				
Maintain permanent feedback loops to hear from key stakeholders, especially faculty and students				
Establish feedback loops and overarching accountability structure for assessing progress, challenges, and potential for scaling				
Know the institution's theory of change and rationale for the proposed scaling initiative				
Executive Leaders <i>empower campus leaders to act & provide accountability structures</i>				
Create culture of innovation & improvement				
Recognize & incentivize creating solutions to campus challenges				
Support policies that allow for experimentation, innovation, & scale				
Establish overarching feedback loops and accountability structures (from you to the board and from implementers to you) for reporting progress, challenges, & outcomes				

Rate Your Readiness	Not Yet	Early	Developing	Advanced
Communicate institutional vision, needs, and priorities; gain buy-in from governing board and institutional community				
Know the institution's theory of change and rationale for the proposed scaling initiative				
Innovation Leaders <i>set a bold vision, create a movement, clarify core elements, & guide design</i>				
Articulate the problem and how this innovation (or design work towards innovation) will address the problem				
Ensure alignment of innovation with institutional vision, needs, and priorities				
Know the institution's theory of change and rationale for the proposed scaling initiative				
Determine type of desired scale – scaling up (embedding within policy), scaling out (spreading with adaptation), or scaling deep (shifting cultural norms)				
Build a coalition grounded in trust; make sure to have a wide variety of expertise and positionalities				
Establish core (unchangeable) & peripheral (open to adaptation) elements; evolve approach to respond to contexts & needs				
Assess readiness of environment & staff for innovation, implementation, & scale				
Research and design for known policy constraints (e.g., funding stipulations, mandated timelines); if feasible, partner with policy experts to understand opportunities and constraints				
Plan for evaluation from the beginning, including implementation quality, stakeholder engagement, and institutionalization				
Ensure feedback loops exist across roles and levels				

Rate Your Readiness	Not Yet	Early	Developing	Advanced
Implementers <i>design or adapt, troubleshoot, evaluate, & evolve</i>				
Assess readiness of environment & staff for innovation, implementation, & scale				
Know the institution's theory of change and rationale for the proposed scaling initiative				
Collaborate closely with innovation leaders and people most affected by the innovation to design respectful and responsive implementation strategies and programmatic components				
Establish communication flows and project management/organizational structures to facilitate sustained collaboration				
Plan for evaluation and scale from the beginning; prioritize assessing not only adoption, but also deeper systems change				
Create infrastructure for developing initial and ongoing local capacity				
Continue to evaluate and responsively evolve scaled innovation to serve shifting needs and contexts				
Policy Makers <i>create & revise policies to support innovation & student success</i>				
Involve stakeholders with varied experiences and positionalities in policy (re)design				
Evaluate intended and unintended policy outcomes as well as (mis)alignment with other policy forces (e.g., conflict between accreditation and federal requirements)				
Seek ongoing feedback from stakeholders influenced by the policy				
Consider policy incentives and flexible regulations to facilitate innovation				

Rate Your Readiness	Not Yet	Early	Developing	Advanced
Funders <i>offer funding with clear expectations & reasonable timelines</i>				
Identify and support initiatives that show promise in their local context and well beyond				
Offer sufficient funding for high quality preparation and implementation				
Set clear expectations (e.g., reporting timelines, data requirements, communication processes)				
Collaborate with initiatives to establish reasonable timelines and a plan for sustainability beyond the grant term				
Students (or those most affected by the innovation) <i>provide input & feedback</i>				
Participate in design and assessment efforts				
Offer feedback on the user experience, especially when the collective is deciding whether to and how to scale an innovation				



COMPANION GUIDE

Guidance for Governing Boards & Their Partners

As part of our Scaling Innovation in Higher Education: A Toolkit for Stakeholders, this guide offers a practical, action-oriented resource for governing boards and the change agents who support them to enable scalable, sustainable transformation.

Governing boards can – and should – play a role in successful innovation and scale efforts to improve student success. Governance can determine whether innovation takes root or fades out. In other sectors, governing bodies shape conditions for innovation by aligning leadership, policy, funding, and metrics. In higher ed, boards are often structurally disconnected from this work. Higher education can no longer afford a fragmented, institution-centered approach to advancing student outcomes and serving needs of the community, state, and the nation.

Governing boards have significant responsibilities to their institution. For those who support governing boards – presidents, chiefs of staff, board and system staff – it is also imperative to learn how best to support their efforts. The more informed board members are about culture, operations, challenges, and key data, the better able they will be to effectively serve and advance their institution.

WHAT GOVERNING BOARDS CONTROL	WHAT WE'VE LEARNED
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hiring and evaluating presidents• Budget approval and resource alignment• Institutional strategic direction• Metrics and performance expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutions with active, innovation-minded boards scale faster and sustain longer.• Boards that set expectations around student success – and back those expectations with budget and supportive policies – enable long-term transformation.• Boards that engage meaningfully in innovation discussions – including the risk, uncertainty, and long-term payoff – shape whether institutions can scale breakthrough ideas.



Real-World Examples of Governance Galvanizing Innovation

1

Completion Grants as Statewide Strategy:

Setting Strategic Priorities & Encouraging the Sharing of Good Ideas

In 2022, Georgia passed legislation formalizing completion grants statewide. The Georgia College Completion Grant Program provides up to \$2,500 for students close to graduation but facing financial barriers. This policy, supported by state leaders and system governance, has already helped thousands of students cross the finish line.

Georgia State University (GSU) first piloted completion grants in 2011. Dr. Tim Renick developed and tested the original completion grants model. Later, as the UIA scaled the concept across member campuses, he refined it into something roadly replicable.

Throughout the innovation and refinement process, Dr. Renick and his colleagues consistently shared data with leaders of the University System of Georgia, including Chancellor Steve Wrigley. They grounded the conversation in student stories and data, made the issue relatable, and demonstrated that this was a solvable, validated intervention that could work across institutions.

Because the briefings were accessible, human-centered, and grounded in real impact, Dr. Wrigley took action. Joining with other advocates for need-based aid, he advocated for the legislature to embed completion grants into state policy. Ultimately, these efforts secured funding and codified completion grants across Georgia's public universities and eligible private institutions.

TAKEAWAY

This is what happens when leaders are positioned not as regulators but as potential allies. If Dr. Renick had instead tried to position GSU as "having it all figured out," it would have shut down interest and likely resulted in oversight – not advocacy.

2

Joining a National Innovation Network:

Getting Informed & Signaling Approval

The University Innovation Alliance (UIA) has 19 current members, including 11 who have joined in the last 5 years. When Temple University was considering joining the UIA, President John Fry invited Dr. Bridget Burns, UIA's CEO, to present to campus members to inform their decision to join. Typically, Dr. Burns engages with the president or chancellor, provost, and key student success leaders during such visits, but not the governing board.

In Temple's case, the Board of Trustees also participated in Dr. Burns' visit, hearing directly from her about the opportunity to join a multi-campus laboratory for student success innovation. Ultimately, President Fry and the Board of Trustees chose to join the UIA to accelerate their efforts to increase the number and diversity of college graduates. Key campus leaders at Temple have already begun redesigning processes and procedures using UIA best practices.

TAKEAWAY

Boards and system heads don't just oversee – they can accelerate. To leverage their influence, strategically invite them to use their power to fuel the work, rather than treating them solely as accountability mechanisms. Trust and alignment between the board and the president can create especially favorable conditions for change. Governance, when engaged early and well, can be a key partner in innovation and scaling efforts.

3

Transforming Oversight into Shared Leadership:

Inviting Boards into Potentially Vulnerable Moments

When the University of Central Florida participated in the National Institute for Student Success (NISS) diagnostic, President Alex Cartwright made a bold and strategic choice: he invited his entire governing board, his executive team, and leaders across the institution to attend the final briefing – without knowing what the results would be.

That moment could have gone badly. Instead, it modeled transparency, vulnerability, and confidence. By including the board in that moment – rather than shielding them from it – he transformed their role. Instead of being passive approvers or critics, they became partners in solving the problems identified.

That shift in dynamic allowed UCF to finally implement centralized advising, a reform that had failed to move forward for more than a decade. The difference was that the board now understood the problem, saw the solution, and felt personally invested in supporting it.

TAKEAWAY

Boards and presidents can catalyze meaningful innovation and meaningful change when they work together. By selecting the right leadership and creating a culture of trust, the board has an opportunity to collaborate with and support the president's leadership. Who is in the room matters. And, the courage to bring people into a vulnerable moment can build more durable accountability and support than any polished deck ever could.

How Boards Can Catalyze Scale — Starting Now

- Add student success goals to presidential evaluations
- Implement a feedback loop to incorporate student insights and experiences into board materials
- Set innovation KPIs and track them quarterly
- Use board meetings to showcase progress on student success and scaling innovations – not just finance
- Attend conferences like Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) or host their own across systems
- Require innovation plans to include scale strategy from the start
- Take a long view – ensure innovation efforts have enough time to take hold and stay the course through short-term challenges

Promising Practices — What We've Observed in the Field

- Intentionally learning about the full student experience – using methods including student liaisons or trustees, young alumni trustees, and journey mapping student experiences
- Engaging board members and senior leadership in a shared learning and professional development experience – the [Aspen Institute's Presidents & Trustees Collaborative](#) is a model ripe for adapting for four-year institutions
- Seeking out new and timely data sources to guide data-driven decision making – for example, [social intelligence](#) is an unobtrusive and effective way to do timely market research