

# A Framework for Democratizing Innovation

*Progress doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful, it just needs to begin*

## Quick Start Guide

This quick-start guide is designed for higher education leaders ready to move from reflection to action and strategy to shared innovation. It outlines a practical, inclusive, and executable framework for short-term institutional transformation.

Whether you're rethinking planning cycles, surfacing new ideas, or creating momentum across your campus, this guide provides a clear starting point.

## Step 1: Start with Strategic Self-Awareness

### Ask:

- Where are we most vulnerable? (e.g., funding, trust, enrollment)
- Where are we most capable? (e.g., partnerships, research, alumni loyalty)
- Where are we stuck in old assumptions?



### Action:

Hold a focused 60-minute leadership huddle to identify one high-risk area and one high-leverage strength to build from.

## Step 2: Launch a Future-Focused Innovation Group

Create a small, cross-functional “New Futures Group” that includes faculty, staff, admin—and ideally a student or alum. Empower them to manage progress, track submissions, and assess lessons learned.

### Purpose:

- “How do we reimagine and reinforce our value over the next 12–24 months?”

📌 **Action:**

- Hold a 90-minute workshop to surface quick wins and testable ideas
- Introduce agile principles—work in sprints, reflect, iterate
- Empower the group to track progress, evaluate submissions, and report on learnings

### Step 3: Democratize Innovation and Pilot One New Funding Strategy

Innovation can't live in the margins—it needs structure, voice, and opportunity. Start by inviting ideas from across the institution, then pick one to test.

📌 **Action:**

- Define 4–5 strategic focus areas (e.g., Student Experience, Revenue Innovation, Digital Agility, Workforce Readiness, Community Partnerships)
- Open a simple submission process where anyone can contribute
- Hold quarterly reviews and **prioritize ideas** based on alignment, feasibility, and impact
- Select 1–2 ideas per cycle to **prototype within 90 days**

💡 *Looking to begin with revenue innovation? Try one of these low-risk pilots:*

- Partner with an employer to co-design a short course or credential
- Launch a targeted, mission-aligned fundraising campaign
- Offer an alumni subscription for lifelong learning access
- Develop a public-private partnership proposal in a strategic area

📌 **Track outcomes and share learnings transparently.**

## Step 4: Pilot and Learn Fast

Not every idea has to be perfect—just testable. Create space to experiment, learn, and grow from smart failures.

### Action:

- The New Futures Group meets quarterly to:
  - Review submitted ideas
  - Prioritize based on feasibility, impact, and alignment with institutional goals.
  - Select 1–2 ideas per category to prototype in 90-day cycles
- Apply agile or Scrum principles: short sprints, test quickly, adapt, and learn fast.

## Step 5: Communicate, Celebrate, and Evolve

People must see that progress is happening—and that their ideas matter.

### Action:

- Share updates regularly: what’s being tested, what’s working, and what’s being learned
- Highlight contributors across roles
- Reinforce a culture of openness and shared ownership

### Suggested Timeline

- **Weeks 1–4:** Form your innovation group + launch idea intake
- **Weeks 5–8:** Hold your first idea review + prioritize pilots
- **Weeks 9–16:** Run 90-day pilots + share learnings

## How Higher Digital Can Help

At Higher Digital, we work alongside institutions to accelerate transformation by combining proven change management practices with inclusive innovation models. Our experience across campuses has shown that the most powerful ideas often come from unexpected places—and the institutions that thrive are the ones that know how to listen, test, and adapt. We offer:

- Support to stand up your New Futures Group
- Customized innovation frameworks aligned with your strategic priorities
- Tools for idea intake, prioritization, prototyping, and communication
- Coaching to guide cultural change and stakeholder alignment

**Let us help you bring your strategy to life—one step at a time.**

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