



**Module 4:  
Why Can't We do  
That Today?**

## Introduction

Strategy is often misunderstood and overused in organizations. Many think of it as a bold new idea or a high-level plan, but in reality, strategy is the direction of a solution—and every solution begins with a clear understanding of the problem. In the two prior modules, we identified the primary customer and their primary need. Together, these define the problem the organization must solve: meeting the primary customer's need effectively. To move forward, we need to uncover the hidden barriers preventing the organization from solving this problem today.

The heart of strategy lies in addressing the tension between the need for change and the pull of the status quo. These tensions often appear as false choices or opposing forces. When we don't understand these invisible tensions, we often layer new ideas on top of existing structures and practices, creating strategies that fail to truly break through and achieve a new level of performance. If it's such a good idea, why aren't people doing it today, or why aren't they getting the results we anticipated? Either the strategy is focused on the wrong problem, or the tensions and barriers haven't been fully addressed.

## What to Stop

Because strategy is an overused and often misunderstood concept, it's easy to fall into common traps that block us from solving the real problems the organization faces. Strategy is critical because it sets the direction for the organization, and all operations—measures, IT systems, and frontline efforts—are designed to realize that strategy. This makes it essential to ensure the direction is correct. Here are some common traps to watch out for as you determine your strategy.

## 1: Conflating New Programs and Initiatives with Removing Limitations



Conflating a collection of new programs and initiatives with a strategy occurs when organizations mistake activity for direction. Instead of addressing the limitation that prevents customers from getting what they need today, they add more programs or initiatives, hoping that more effort will lead to better results. True strategy focuses on removing the key barriers that are blocking progress, rather than layering new actions on top of existing ones. It's like trying to fix a leaking roof by adding buckets to catch the water instead of repairing the roof itself.

**Example in Higher Education:** A state university system wants to increase its completion rates for students who started college but didn't finish. It launches multiple programs, including outreach campaigns, career counseling, and mentorship initiatives. However, the real limitation is that many of these students are working adults with family responsibilities, leaving them no time to return to school. Unless the university creates ways for students to graduate, such as through competency-based or other flexible options, these efforts will continue to fall short.

## 2: False Choices Trap



False choices occur when we fall into either-or thinking, assuming we must choose between two opposing options. This mindset limits our ability to find better solutions that solve both sides of the problem rather than simply shifting it elsewhere. It's like standing at a fork in the road and believing you can only go left or right, without considering you could build a bridge to connect the two paths.

**Example in Government:** A city is deciding between cutting public transit funding to balance the budget or raising taxes, believing these are the only options.

### 3: Counteracting Trap



Counteracting occurs when we focus solely on reacting to the negative effects of what the system is producing, instead of addressing the root causes driving those effects. It's like a thermostat in a poorly insulated house: when the temperature drops, the heat kicks on to bring it back to the set point, but the underlying issue—poor insulation—remains unaddressed. This kind of reactionary approach at best leads to homeostasis, where every effort to correct a problem merely brings the system back to where it started—but often, it doesn't even achieve that. Instead, we end up getting better at accommodating the problem rather than solving it.

**Example in Government:** Housing prices rise due to systemic issues like zoning policies or market pressures. In response, the government builds more affordable housing, but the underlying factors driving high prices remain unaddressed.

### 4: Intentions Are Enough Trap



Intentions are important, but they are not sufficient. Governments often assume that declaring a vision—like reducing poverty or increasing equity—will drive meaningful results. Without addressing the structural issues and forces preventing change, these intentions remain symbolic gestures. It's like planting a seed in rocky soil: no matter how good the seed, it won't grow without removing the rocks.

**Example in Government:** A state announces a goal to reduce homelessness by half within five years, but existing funding structures and zoning restrictions make meaningful progress impossible.

### 5: Conflating Strategy with Strategic Planning Trap



Strategy is often mistaken for strategic planning—a detailed list of action steps. But strategy is not a plan; it's the solution to a problem. While a plan lays out steps for execution, strategy defines the direction and focus needed to address the root issue. It's like assembling a piece of furniture without understanding the problem it's meant to solve for the buyer. If you don't first identify why the buyer needs the furniture—whether it's for storage, comfort, or aesthetics—you risk choosing the wrong piece.

altogether, no matter how well you follow the instructions. If a solution were obvious enough to create a step-by-step plan, the problem likely wouldn't exist in the first place.

**Example in Government:** A public health agency created a detailed plan for how to respond to an outbreak or pandemic. However, the plan failed to provide a clear solution to the core problem: how to reduce the spread of disease while still allowing society to function with minimal disruption—ensuring people could work, children could stay in school, and essential services could continue. Because this tension was not resolved, the public lost trust and confidence in the agency's ability to manage the crisis, and compliance with public health measures began to wane.

## 6: Confusing Tactic and Strategy

Organizations often confuse strategy—a high-level direction for solving a problem—with tactics, which are specific actions or steps to implement the strategy. While tactics are important, they should serve the strategy, not replace it.

It's like deciding to build a bridge (strategy) to connect two cities but focusing solely on the type of bolts to use (tactics). Without a clear strategy, tactical decisions may lack coherence and fail to achieve the broader goal.

**Example in Government:** An IT agency adopts a Project Management Office (PMO) and Agile methodologies to improve project delivery. However, relying on hours and rates over tangible value limits their ROI. Without aligning IT services with meaningful outcomes, these tactics won't drive transformative change.

# What Good Looks Like

Changing the direction of an organization should not be taken lightly. If done well, strategy should endure for a substantial period of time—until there is a clear reason to change. With this in mind, you don't always need to change your strategy, but it's essential to check periodically that it is still correct.

Good strategy avoids common traps and sets the foundation for breakthrough results. It is the anchor for execution and operations, ensuring that all efforts align with solving the right problem.

Good strategy has the following elements:

## 1. Strategy Statements are Concise and Clear

A good strategy can be verbalized in just a couple of sentences because it is simply the direction of a solution. The real work happens in execution and operations. Like deciding on a vacation, you should be able to say where you're going briefly and confidently.

**Example in Government:** A state develops a massive plan to improve mental health services but lacks clarity on the problem because it hasn't clearly identified its customers. Instead of segmenting needs—for example, working adults who require after-hours support—the plan focuses broadly on increasing funding and expanding insurance coverage for therapists. Without a clear strategy tied to a specific customer segment, efforts remain fragmented and fail to address the real issue: accessible care at times that fit customers' lives.

## 2. Creates Win-Win Solutions

Good strategy doesn't start with a solution—it starts with being clear about the needs from multiple perspectives. It considers what is good about the status quo and why change is necessary, then designs a solution that addresses both. These needs become the criteria for evaluating whether the strategy is truly effective.

It's like planning a vacation, you may want something indulgent and relaxing but also need to stay within your budget. A good vacation meets both needs, creating a solution that works on all fronts.

**Example in Government:** A city wants to make housing more affordable without losing the character of its neighborhoods. Instead of choosing between building large apartment complexes or preserving green spaces, the city adopts a strategy to “create affordable housing in mixed-use areas.” By using empty lots in existing neighborhoods and combining homes with shops and parks, the city meets both the need for housing and the desire for vibrant, livable communities. To make this possible, the city changes its own zoning practices to allow for more flexible development.

### 3. Owns the Solution



Good strategy focuses on the organization's role in meeting the primary customer's primary need. Rather than shifting the burden onto the customer, it turns the mirror inward to examine how the organization contributes to the problem. A strong strategy identifies what must change within the organization to remove these barriers and deliver on the need.

**Example in Government:** A state's department of transportation adopts the strategy: “Build safety into rural highways by engineering physical features that reduce head-on collisions.” This includes measures like adding centerline barriers, rumble strips, and wider shoulders, making it harder for drivers to make critical mistakes. Instead of blaming driver error or external factors, the department focuses on changes it can directly influence to address the issue.

### 4. Avoids Blame and Digs Deeper



Good strategy focuses less on incentives and penalties and more on understanding limitations and risks. Too often, strategy assumes that people aren't acting because they lack motivation or fear of consequences. Instead, good strategy digs deeper to understand why the current model doesn't work for the customer or claimant. This requires examining measurements, programs, policies, and operations to uncover barriers the organization may be perpetuating.

While incentives and penalties can play a role, relying on them risks overlooking more significant systemic limitations and opportunities for meaningful change that the organization itself can directly influence. It's like a teacher blaming a student for not learning the material. Instead of assuming the student is lazy or uninterested, the teacher evaluates the teaching methods, classroom resources, and structure of the lessons to find ways to better support the student's success.

**Example in Government:** An economic development office historically relies on offering tax incentives to attract new businesses to the area. Realizing that this approach only creates short-term gains, the office shifts its strategy to focus on the region's unique assets to remove limitations and barriers for specific industries. For example, the area's wide-open spaces and minimal air traffic make it ideal for airplane training schools. By targeting and supporting businesses that thrive in this environment, the office fosters sustainable growth without relying on incentives.

## Tools and Techniques

### Strategy-to-Solution Guide

At its core, strategy is simply the direction of a solution. But for a solution to be effective, it must be complete. In other words, it must address not only what is necessary to solve a problem but also what is sufficient to deliver the desired outcome. This distinction, first articulated in Aristotelian philosophy, has shaped human thought for centuries, influencing everything from scientific breakthroughs to organizational design.

Throughout history, failing to bridge the gap between necessary and sufficient has led to incomplete solutions. For example, building a fire requires logs and oxygen—both necessary—but without a spark, the fire cannot ignite. Similarly, in organizational strategy, we may believe we are solving the problem by addressing some necessary elements, but without a sufficient solution, the primary problem often remains unresolved, failing to deliver value to the customer or demonstrate a clear return on investment for taxpayers.

When we don't bridge this gap, we frequently land in false choices—



meeting some needs while ignoring others. This creates incomplete solutions that fail to deliver significant results and often perpetuate the very problems they aim to solve. Short of addressing this, we spend enormous amounts of time, money, and energy on incomplete solutions that fall short of delivering meaningful outcomes.

This is where you learn what the five foundational steps are, apply them using the ROCKET visual template, and create your solution using the ROCKET checklist.

## **The Five Foundational Steps for Building a Sufficient Solution**

In strategy, we're often faced with a fundamental tension: whether to continue with the current approach or make significant changes. The challenges we face today often stem from solutions implemented in the past, which means there is pressure to continue the current model, even if it's not delivering the desired outcomes. We don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

On the other hand, if we're not achieving the desired results, changes may be necessary. The tension between "don't change" and "do change" lies at the heart of crafting effective strategies. A good solution eliminates this tension by preserving the benefits of the current model while addressing the need for change. The following five steps provide a framework for resolving these conflicts and delivering a sufficient solution.

These steps are founded in Aristotelian logic and draw on tools like Dr. Goldratt's Conflict Cloud, but they are uniquely tailored to address the specific challenges of government strategy.

### **Step 1: Define How Your Customer Would Describe Your Organization's Current Approach**



Articulate how your customer would summarize your organization's current strategy for meeting their primary need. This is a reality check to uncover what your existing strategy truly is—not just in words, but in practice. Aim to describe it in no more than two to three sentences, with one sentence being even better

## Step 2: Define the Necessary Needs Driving Your Current Strategy



Identify the key needs that drive your organization's current strategy. These are the necessary conditions for your strategy, which are often not explicitly verbalized. Take the time to articulate them clearly here.

## Step 3: Define the Strategy or Action Your Customers Would Wish



For From the customer's perspective, or based on stakeholder input and your own intuition, describe what a new approach or strategy would look like if there were no constraints—what action or strategy would best meet their primary need, even if it contradicts your current approach. This new model will likely highlight a core tension, appearing incompatible with the existing strategy.

## Step 4: Define the Necessary Needs Driving the Desired Strategy



Identify the key needs driving the desired strategy from the customer's perspective. Articulate two to five of these needs to better understand why this strategy is best suited to meet their primary problem.

## Step 5: Creating a Sufficient Solution

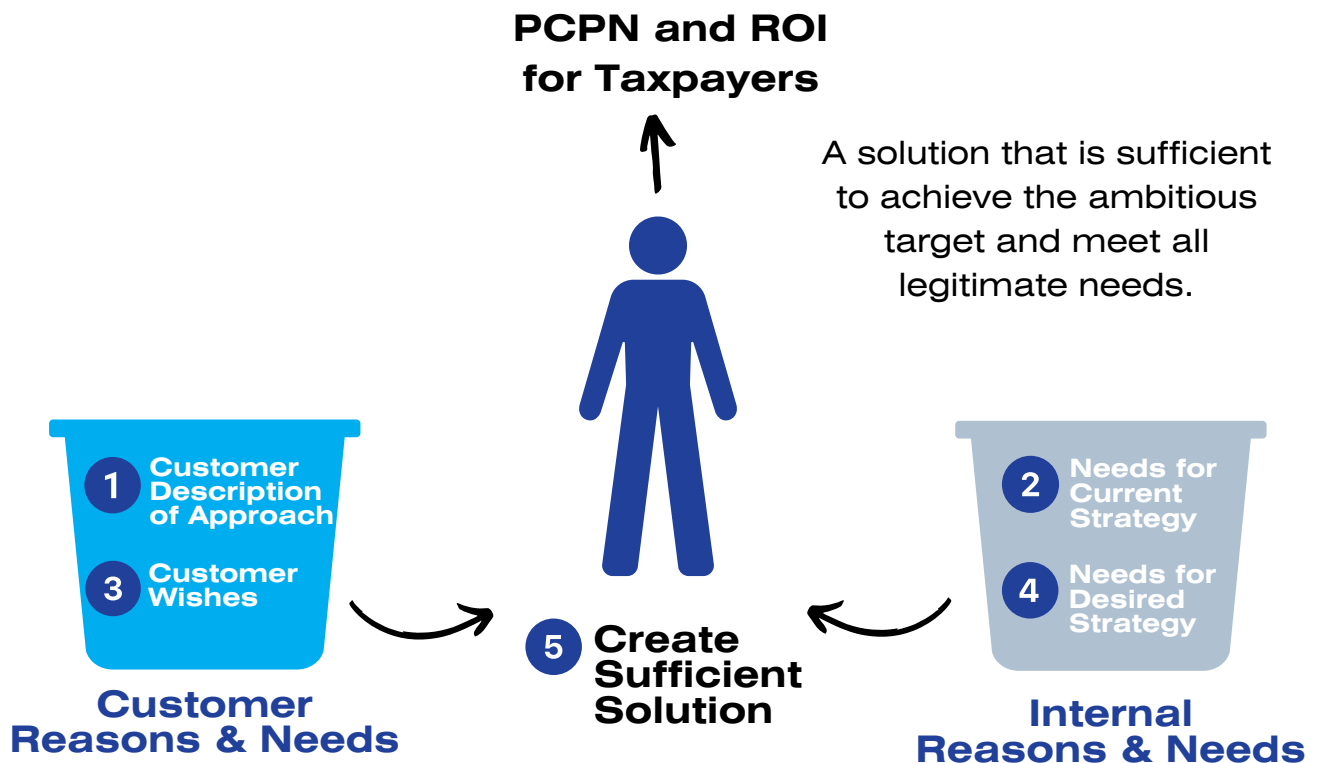
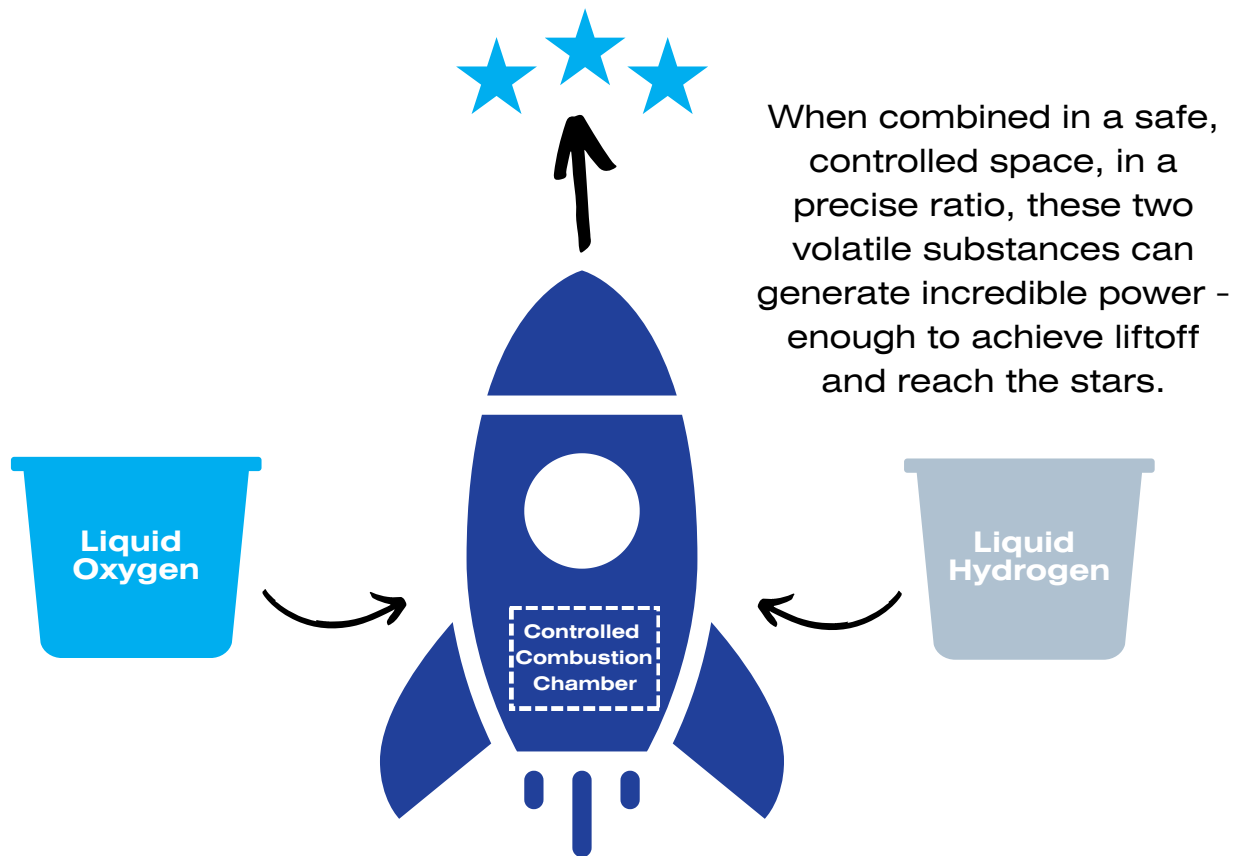


Move from necessary to sufficient by designing a strategy that resolves tensions and integrates the key needs of both strategies. This ensures your solution meets all legitimate needs and avoids false trade-offs or incomplete solutions. Refer to the ROCKET Checklist and Template to help you develop and refine your approach in this step.

## Complete the ROCKET Visual Template:

Refer to the visual template below and follow the five foundational steps as you complete it.

For example, identify your current approach and the needs driving it, then identify the ideal approach along with the needs driving it. Once the visual template is complete, you'll need to develop a new strategy. Use the ROCKET Checklist to refine and finalize the sufficient solution.





**Reinforce:** Strengthen the solution by addressing any missing, but crucial, elements. Reinforcing involves identifying gaps in the proposed solution by examining the legitimate needs from your primary customer. It focuses on what's missing from the new solution that could help bridge the gap, ensuring the strategy is complete and focused.

**Prior Strategy:** Launch an apprenticeship program to provide students with real-world experience and income.

**Sufficient Solution:** Launch an apprenticeship program that aligns student training with business needs by tailoring curriculum and mentorship, ensuring mutual benefit.



**Overhaul:** Make fundamental changes to replace what's not working. Overhauling involves completely rethinking the strategy when the current approach is fundamentally flawed or misaligned with the primary customer's needs. Overhaul is necessary when modifications or additions won't resolve the core issue.

**Prior Strategy:** Expand online course offerings and provide more flexible class schedules to help working adults complete their degrees.

**Sufficient Solution:** Implement a competency-based model that allows students to progress at their own pace and on their own schedule, addressing the core needs of busy working adults and increasing completion rates.



**Cut:** Eliminate risks, inefficiencies, or elements that aren't essential. Cutting involves identifying and removing elements of the strategy that create unnecessary complexity, introduce risk, or fail to add real value. This step ensures that all remaining components directly contribute to meeting the primary customer's primary need.

**Prior Strategy:** Launch a comprehensive, multi-year data integration platform to track student progress from K-12 through post-secondary education and into the workforce.

**Sufficient Solution:** Focus on addressing low post-secondary enrollment rates by improving the transition from high school graduation to college. Use a focused data integration effort to answer the top ten questions that would directly improve outcomes for this critical population.



**Keep Focus:** Stay centered on the primary customer's primary need. Keeping focus means starting with the action or approach that your primary customer wishes you would take. Our bias is to begin with the strategy that the customer desires, but use your judgment and start with the approach you believe is most likely to meet their primary need and achieve the ambitious target. From there, consider the needs from the other approach and build out your complete solution. This is just where to start.

**Prior Strategy:** Increase the number of officers assigned to administrative tasks to reduce workload pressures on patrol officers.

**Sufficient Solution:** Better deploy existing officers to community policing initiatives while reducing administrative burdens, addressing both internal efficiency and the community's need for safer neighborhoods.



**Execute:** Ensure the strategy is operationalized effectively. Even a sufficient strategy can fail if it isn't implemented well. Execution focuses on translating the strategy into effective operations to ensure it delivers its intended results. This checkpoint emphasizes that sometimes the best solution is refining operations rather than overhauling the strategy. A well-executed strategy can require less change over time.

**Prior Strategy:** Implement Family First funding to support child welfare initiatives by shifting resources toward prevention and family-based care.

**Sufficient Solution:** Operationalize Family First by implementing a flow management system to detect bottlenecks in prevention and ongoing cases. Use these insights to focus resources on the most critical family needs and reinvest any time or cost savings into expanding prevention efforts.



**Test:** Gather feedback to identify gaps and risks. Testing involves taking your strategy to trusted groups for their feedback before fully implementing it.

**Use this opportunity to ask the following:**

1. What risks exist in the strategy?
2. What may be missing in the strategy?

3. What's really good about the current approach that must not be lost in the proposed strategy?
4. What additional benefits could this strategy deliver?

**Prior Strategy:** Focus on recruiting as many industries as possible to expand the region's economic base, without considering the broader impacts on local resources and infrastructure.

**Sufficient Solution:** Prioritize industries with low water usage and a commitment to invest in affordable housing, addressing feedback that economic development efforts were creating downstream challenges for other agencies.

## Apply Your Learning (Case Studies)

Evaluate the following strategic plans, based on three actual approaches from different institutions. As you review each strategic plan, consider the traps discussed in class and reflect on what a good strategy looks like. Specifically, ask yourself:

### Traps to Avoid:

- Does the plan avoid false choices, where it assumes only two options are possible without seeking win-win solutions?
- Does it avoid counteracting forces, where the organization reacts to symptoms rather than addressing root causes?
- Does it avoid relying solely on incentives or penalties, instead focusing on understanding barriers and limitations?
- Does it avoid conflating strategy with strategic planning, ensuring the plan addresses the core problem rather than being a checklist of actions?
- Does it avoid intentions without execution, ensuring the strategy includes steps to overcome structural barriers?
- Does it avoid confusing strategy with the tactics used to put the strategy into place?

### What Good Strategy Looks Like:

- Is the strategy concise and clear?
- Does it create win-win solutions by addressing the needs of multiple stakeholders?

- Does it own the solution by focusing on what the organization can directly influence?
- Does it avoid blame and dig deeper to identify and address internal barriers?
- Is it crystal clear how this strategy will make a significant and measurable difference for specific customers using specific programs within the institution?
- If you were consulting with the institution, what would you change, what is missing, and how would you restate the strategy to make it stronger?

## 1) Higher Education Strategic Plan Case Study:

The institution is committed to reimagining its role in preparing students for a rapidly evolving workforce while ensuring access, affordability, and equity. This strategic plan focuses on aligning academic programs with labor market demands, enhancing student support systems, and creating partnerships that drive economic growth in the region.

### Strategic Goals:

#### 1. Workforce-Aligned Academic Programs:

- Redesign academic programs to align with high-growth industries, such as healthcare, technology, and green energy.
- Establish partnerships with employers to ensure curricula include practical, real-world applications and experiential learning opportunities.

#### 2. Enhanced Student Support Systems:

- Create comprehensive support systems that address barriers to student success, such as mental health services, financial aid navigation, and flexible course scheduling.
- Develop targeted interventions to improve retention and graduation rates for underrepresented student groups.

#### 3. Regional Economic Partnerships:

- Build partnerships with local businesses and government agencies to foster economic development through research collaborations and workforce pipelines.
- Leverage the institution's expertise to drive regional innovation and provide community-focused solutions.

### Key Initiatives:

**Career Pathway Integration:** Develop clear pathways from enrollment to employment, including stackable credentials, internships, and job placement support.

**Digital Access Equity:** Expand broadband access and provide affordable technology solutions to ensure all students can fully participate in online learning.

**Community Innovation Labs:** Establish interdisciplinary labs that bring students, faculty, and community leaders together to solve pressing regional challenges.

### Implementation Timeline:

**Phase One (Year 1):** Redesign academic programs and establish initial partnerships with high-growth industries.

**Phase Two (Years 2-3):** Roll out enhanced student support systems and launch career pathway initiatives.

**Phase Three (Year 4+):** Expand community innovation labs and scale successful programs across departments.

### Vision:

By implementing this strategic plan, the institution will position itself as a leader in higher education, ensuring students are prepared for the workforce of the future while driving regional economic growth and fostering equity in educational outcomes.

## 2) State Health and Human Services IT and Data Strategic Plan Case Study:

The state's Health and Human Services (HHS) Agency is committed to transforming its IT and data systems to better serve its residents. Our strategy focuses on integrating technology and data to enhance service delivery, ensure equity, and improve responsiveness to emerging challenges. This initiative will modernize legacy systems, promote cross-department collaboration, and create a customer-centered experience.

### Strategic Goals:

#### 1. Unified Data Integration:

- Build a secure, centralized data platform to enable real-time data sharing across departments, improving decision-making and resource allocation.
- Use the platform to identify and address gaps in service, ensuring equitable access to resources.



## 2. **Customer-Centered Digital Services:**

- Develop user-friendly digital applications to streamline access to public programs like Medicaid and SNAP.
- Ensure accessibility for all residents by offering multi-language support and mobile-friendly interfaces.

## 3. **Operational Modernization:**

- Replace outdated legacy systems with scalable, cloud-based solutions to improve efficiency and security.
- Simplify administrative processes to reduce staff workload and improve service response times.

### **Key Initiatives:**

**Data Sharing Framework:** Implement a cross-department data sharing policy to enhance collaboration while maintaining rigorous data privacy standards.

**Digital Equity Access:** Expand broadband access and digital literacy programs to underserved communities, ensuring no resident is left behind.

**Modern IT Infrastructure:** Transition critical systems, such as child welfare reporting and public health monitoring, to modern cloud platforms.

### **Success Metrics:**

- Reduce public benefits application processing times by twenty-five percent within the first two years.
- Achieve a fifty percent increase in digital service usage by residents within three years.
- Develop and maintain a real-time dashboard to monitor outcomes across all programs.

### **Implementation Timeline:**

**Phase One (Year 1):** Build the foundational data-sharing platform and prioritize system modernization for high-need programs.

**Phase Two (Years 2-3):** Roll out customer-centered applications and implement the digital equity strategy.

**Phase Three (Year 4+):** Evaluate and scale successful initiatives while refining operations based on user feedback.

### **Vision:**

By implementing this strategic plan, the state's Health and Human Services Agency will create a unified and equitable IT and data system that ensures timely, accurate, and accessible services for all residents.

### **Required Submissions**

1. Evaluate a problem-solving scenario: Analyze a provided scenario to determine whether the issue requires an operational solution or a policy/strategy adjustment, and present the correct solution.
2. What are key challenges in your system from different stakeholder perspectives? Can you identify connections between the challenges?
3. Define the core conflict in your system.
4. Define the solution for breaking the core conflict, that now becomes the strategy.