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Confident Modernization in Higher Education

A high-level roadmap to transformation

Confidence in higher education has dropped from <u>57% to 36%</u> in the past decade as Americans express concerns about technology disruptions, the relevance of courses to workforce needs, and political influence. To meet evolving expectations, institutions must invest in modernization—not just as a technical upgrade, but as a strategic commitment to their institution's future and student success. While higher education has traditionally been slower to embrace technological change, the world is changing too fast to continue lumbering along. From emerging technologies like AI to the growing potential of cyberattacks to the quickly evolving expectations of digital-native students, higher ed faces new challenges that demand a more proactive approach.

Designed for institutional leaders, this guide provides practical strategies to navigate change, embrace innovation, and implement technology that ensures long-term success.

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Define Success Outcomes

Before diving into system specifications, take a step back to define what transformation means for your institution. Your modernization journey should be anchored in realizing strategic outcomes, not just technological upgrades. Dive deep into the capabilities — especially the people and processes — that make those outcomes possible.

Identify your institution's strategic goals.
To guide your modernization efforts, focus on what matters most to the institution. Prioritize goals like boosting enrollment, improving retention, or advancing research.

Focus on measurable results that matter.
Create clear KPIs that leadership can rally around. For example, rather than "update our CRM," consider "reduce application abandonment by 30% through the enhanced capabilities of a cloud-based CRM solution."

Link modernization directly to student and institutional success.
How will your modernization efforts improve the student journey? Consider mapping current pain points against proposed solutions to visualize the impact.

Consider the cost of inaction to justify the budget.
Legacy systems can consume the majority of IT budgets. Outdated technology also leads to poor user experiences that may result in lost enrollment revenue.

Spartanburg Methodist College

successfully modernized to support its historic transition from a two-year to a four-year institution, effectively responding to growing student demand and fulfilling its expanded mission.

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> The adage, "What got us here won't get us there," is especially poignant in your modernization journey. Modernization presents an opportunity to reimagine effective and efficient processes and workflows rather than merely digitizing existing ones.

Adopt Best Practices, Not Legacy Processes

Embrace industry-standard solutions instead of replicating old systems.
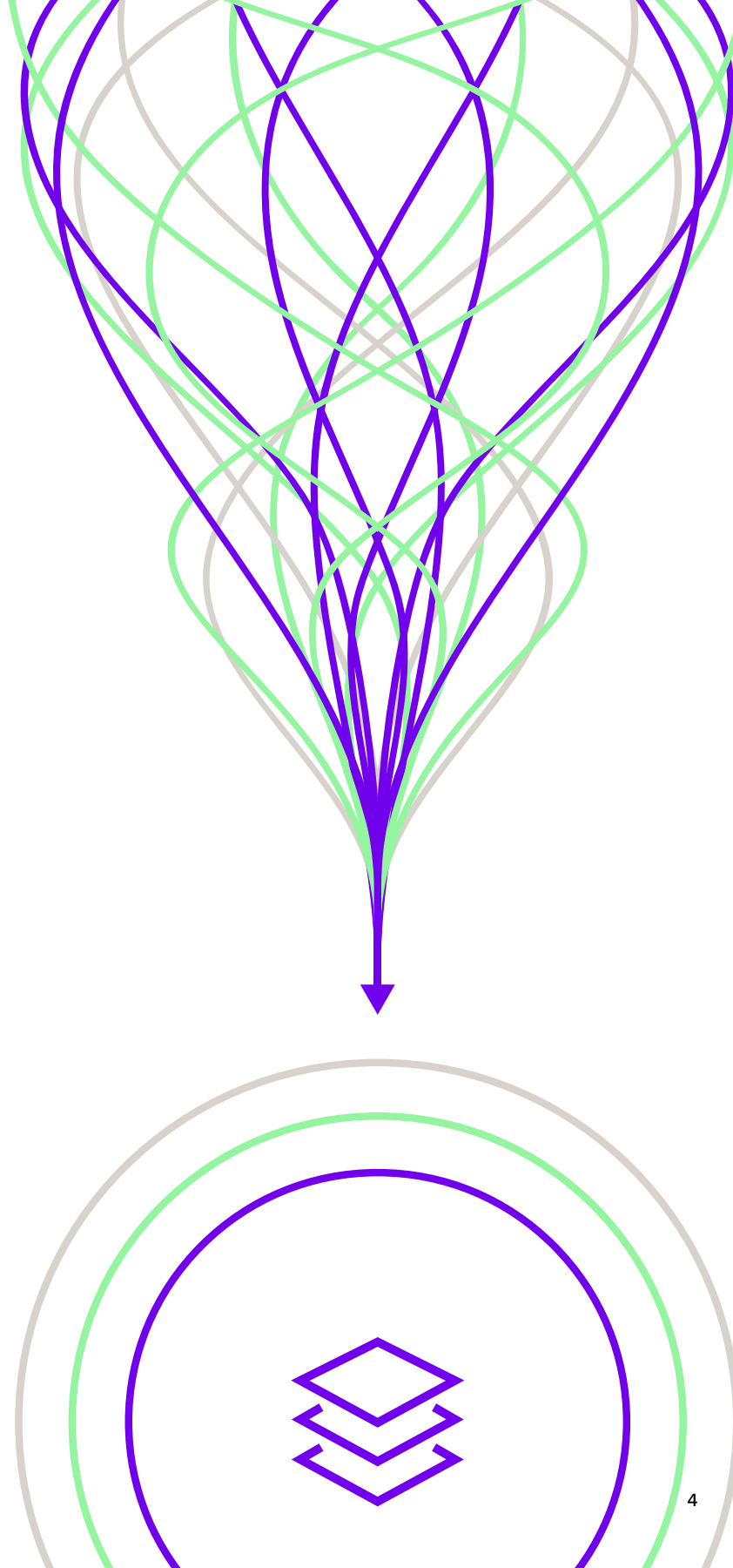
Ask yourself: Is that unique process truly essential to your institution's identity, or is it simply "how we've always done it"? Customization drives up costs and complexity.

Find technology partners who bring industry best practices.

Partner with technology providers who bring proven higher education patterns to implementation, allowing you to benefit from continuous updates and innovations.

Simplify and standardize.

Look for opportunities to consolidate redundant systems or processes. Could five different ways of handling a process be reduced to one or two? Cloud solutions typically offer standardized processes based on higher education best practices, reducing the need for custom development.

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Build One United Team

Successful modernization isn't an "IT initiative." It's an institutional transformation requiring cross-functional commitment. A team of "student-first" committed individuals within your institution — who share common goals and take collective responsibility— is fundamental for ensuring a smooth and successful transition.

Create a joint task force across IT, business units, and solution partners.

Shared responsibility enables shared success. Include skeptics alongside champions to ensure all perspectives are considered. The most resistant voices often identify critical issues that might otherwise be missed.

Establish clear governance and shared accountability.

Define who makes decisions at what level. Without clear governance, projects often stall as decisions bounce between committees.

Prioritize collaboration to solve challenges together.

Create space for problem-solving without blame. When issues arise (and they will), focus on solutions rather than finger-pointing.

> *"Everybody on our campus, whether they're a student, faculty, staff, whomever, they know the URL of Experience."*
>
> – Freddie Claypool
>   Director of Enterprise Applications at Bellarmine University

The most successful implementations allow adequate time for testing — often significantly more than initially anticipated. This testing phase ensures system reliably across real-world scenarios, uncovers issues early, and provides stakeholders with the confidence needed for full-scale rollout.

Test Thoroughly, Launch Confidently

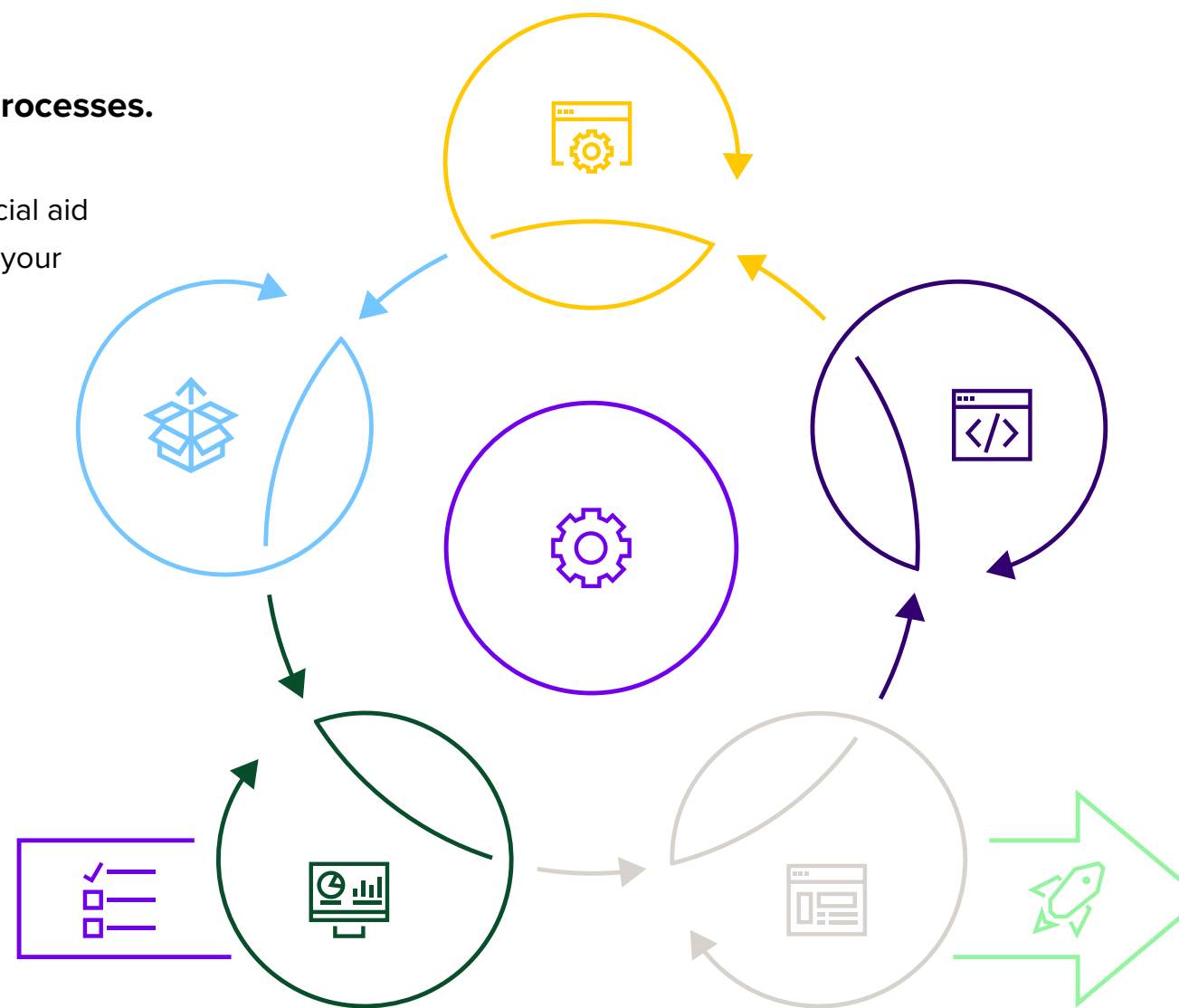### Prioritize adequate testing for critical processes.

Identify your "mission-critical" processes that absolutely cannot fail (like registration or financial aid disbursement) and test these extensively. Can your system handle peak loads during key periods?

Plan for proper support during transition.

Consider timing your launch during lower-activity periods, and ensure additional support is available. What processes might need manual backups during the transition?

Address issues before they affect your community.

Remember that fixing problems pre-launch is exponentially less expensive and disruptive than addressing them when they affect students and staff.

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Bring Everyone with You

Even the most sophisticated technology implementation can fail without effective change management. Resistance to change stems from a perceived loss that outweighs a perceived benefit. A thoughtful narrative underscoring the advantages for end users and leadership will drive cooperation and enthusiastic support.
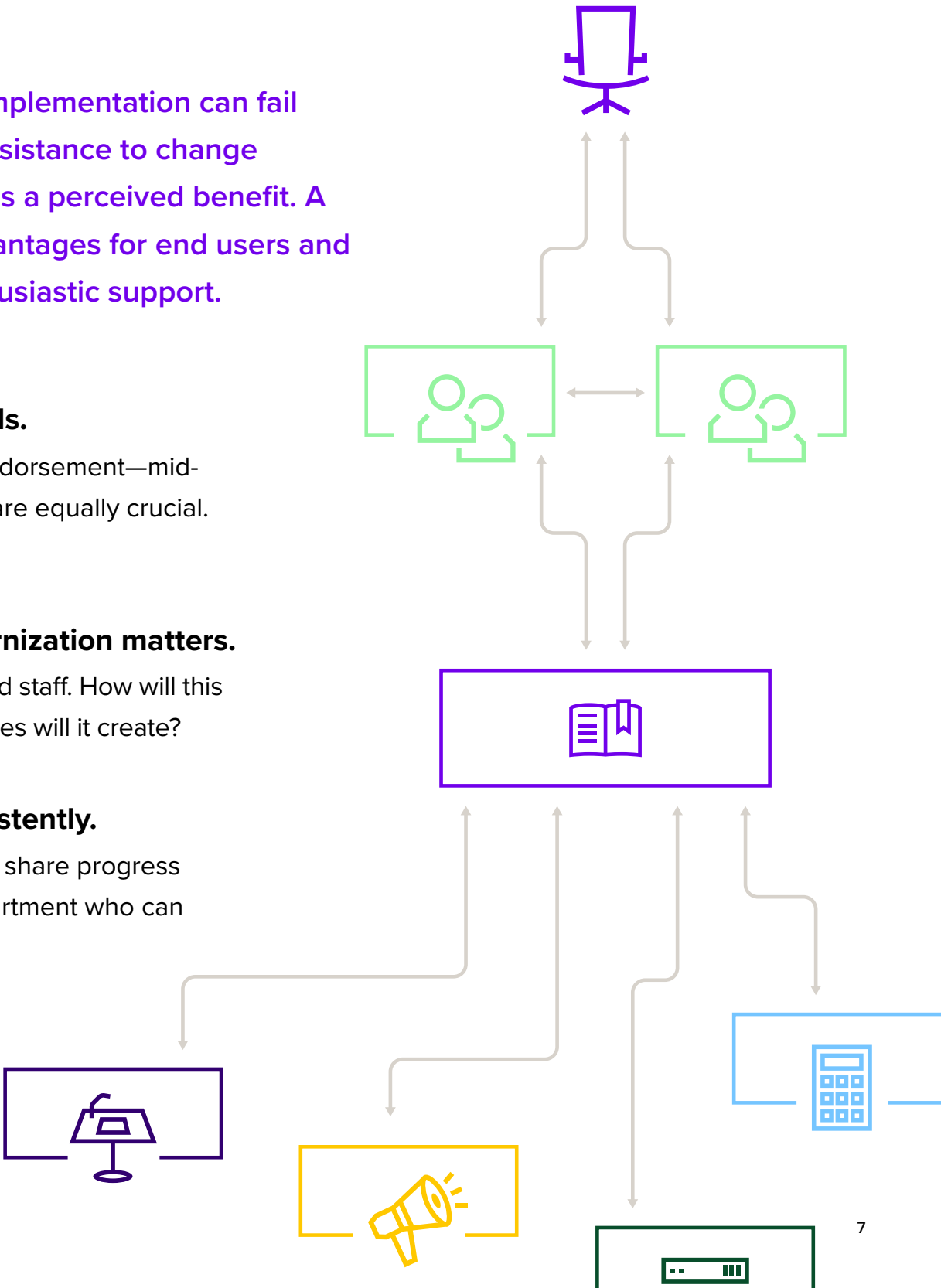
Secure visible leadership support at all levels.

Transformation requires more than just executive endorsement—mid-level managers who actively champion the change are equally crucial. Who are your potential champions across campus?

Create a compelling story about why modernization matters.

Frame the change in terms of benefits to students and staff. How will this make their lives better or easier? What new possibilities will it create?

Engage users early and communicate consistently.

Create multiple channels for feedback and regularly share progress updates. Consider appointing contacts in each department who can address concerns at the local level.

By focusing on these five key areas, institutions can navigate the complexities of modernization with greater confidence, ensuring that technological investments deliver meaningful improvements to student experiences and institutional outcomes.

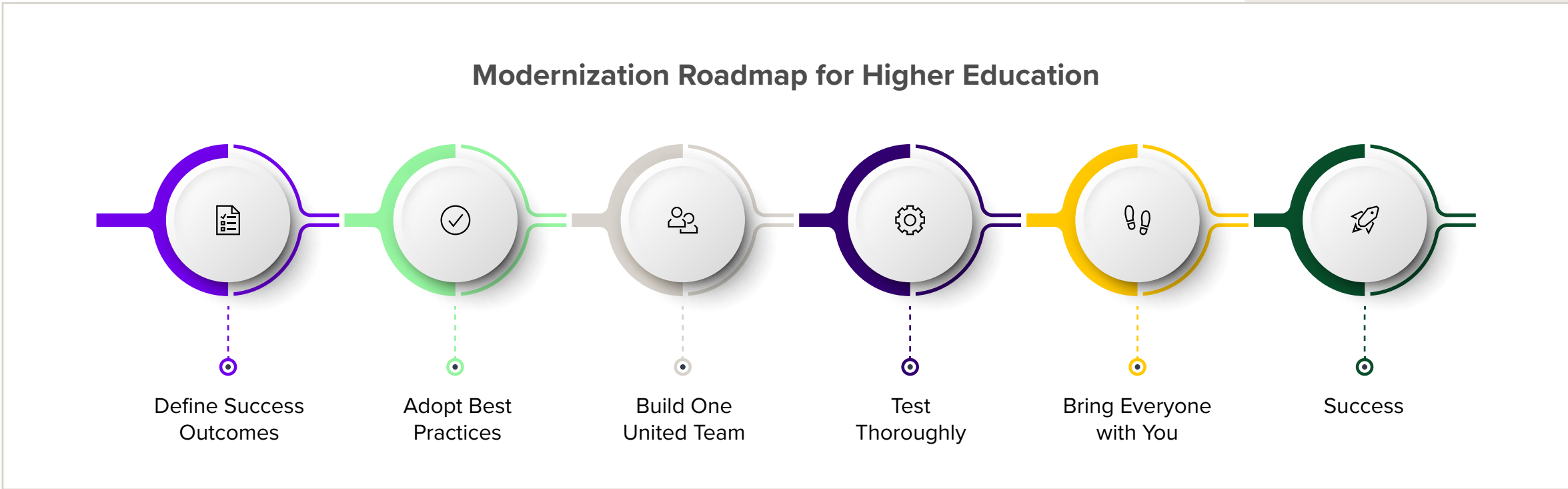Let's explore what's new in modernized solutions created by higher education leaders for higher education leaders. →

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Modernization Roadmap Diagram

A visual timeline or flowchart showing the five key phases outlined in your guide:

- Define Success Outcomes
- Adopt Best Practices
- Build One United Team
- Test Thoroughly
- Bring Everyone with You

WHY IT WORKS:

Helps CIOs quickly grasp the strategic sequence and scope of modernization.

Modernization Roadmap for Higher Education

| Define Success Outcomes | Adopt Best Practices | Build One United Team | Test Thoroughly | Bring Everyone with You | Success |

![Ellucian logo]

KPI Dashboard Mockup

A sample dashboard showing measurable outcomes like:

- Application abandonment rate
- Student retention improvements
- System uptime
- Cost savings from cloud migration

WHY IT WORKS:

CIOs are data-driven. This shows how success can be tracked and reported.

Before vs. After Process Comparison

A side-by-side comparison of a legacy process vs. a modernized one. For example:

- Manual registration vs. automated, mobile-friendly registration

- Siloed data systems vs. integrated cloud platform

WHY IT WORKS:

Makes the benefits of modernization tangible and relatable.

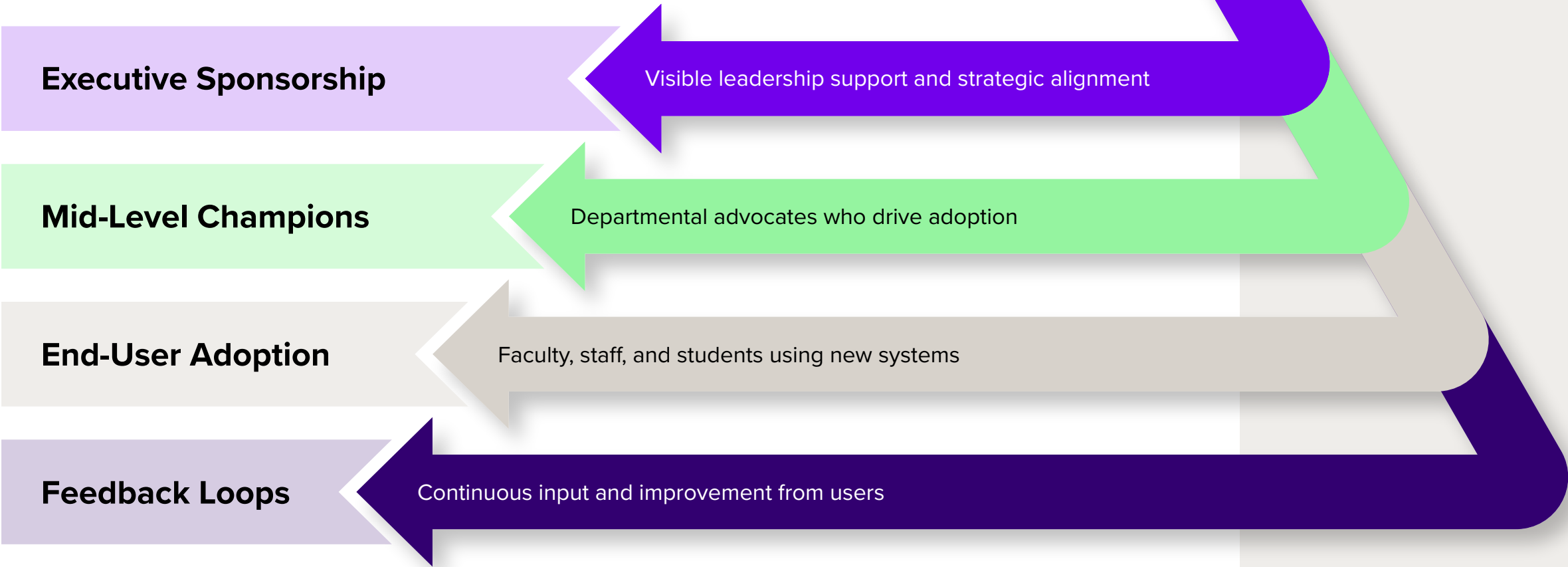| Before Modernization	After Modernization
Manual registration forms	Automated, mobile-friendly registration
Paper-based transcript requests	Online transcript requests
Siloed departmental data	Integrated cloud-based data platform
In-person advising appointments	Virtual advising with scheduling tools
Legacy on-premise systems	Modern cloud-native systems

Change Management Funnel

A funnel or pyramid showing levels of engagement:

- Executive sponsorship
- Mid-level champions
- End-user adoption
- Feedback loops

WHY IT WORKS:

Visualizes the human side of transformation, not just the tech.

Executive Sponsorship

Visible leadership support and strategic alignment

Mid-Level Champions

Departmental advocates who drive adoption

End-User Adoption

Faculty, staff, and students using new systems

Feedback Loops

Continuous input and improvement from users
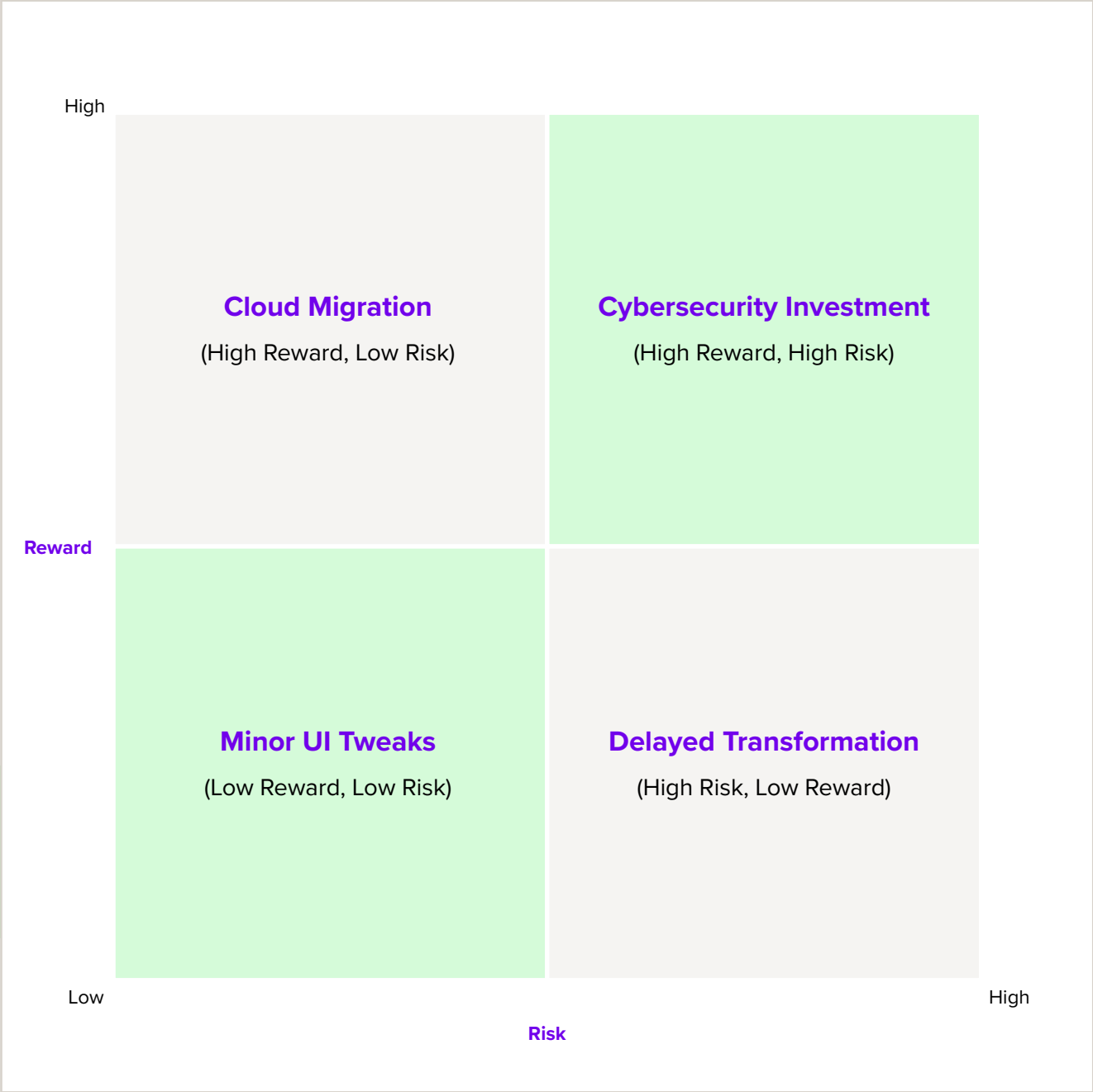
Risk vs. Reward Matrix

A 2x2 matrix showing:

- Risks of inaction (e.g., security breaches, enrollment decline)
- Rewards of modernization (e.g., agility, student satisfaction)

WHY IT WORKS:

Helps justify investment by framing modernization as risk mitigation.

Risk vs. Reward Matrix for Higher Education

High

Cloud Migration

(High Reward, Low Risk)

Cybersecurity Investment

(High Reward, High Risk)

Reward

Minor UI Tweaks

(Low Reward, Low Risk)

Delayed Transformation

(High Risk, Low Reward)

Low   High

Risk

CONCLUSION:

Step Into the Future with Confidence

Modernization in higher education isn't just about keeping pace — it's about positioning your institution to lead. By aligning your goals, embracing best practices, building cohesive teams, and leading with transparency and purpose, you can ensure your transformation delivers real results. The journey may be complex, but with the right strategy, partners, and mindset, it's entirely within reach.

Don't wait for change to happen — be the change. Explore how purpose-built solutions for higher education can help you modernize with clarity, confidence, and measurable impact. Contact us today to start your transformation journey.

Ready to See What This Could Mean for Your Institution?

Let's talk about how this roadmap can be tailored to your institution's unique goals. **Request a discussion** with a Solutions Expert today.

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