

Tap Dancing on Marbles: Key Concepts, Indicators & Strategies to Move from Viability to Financial & Organizational Sustainability



February 11, 2026 | 11:00 am - 12:15 pm MDT



Ari Betof
Co-Founder and Partner

Sadie Albertyn
Senior Organizational Effectiveness Strategist



Ari Betof
Co-Founder and Partner



Sadie Albertyn
Senior Organizational Effectiveness Strategist

AGENDA



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Framing Our Time Together



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6 Key Concepts in Financial & Organizational Sustainability



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Lessons from Higher Education:
Indicators of Financial & Organizational Fragility



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The Path to Progress & Long-Range Financial Modeling



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Discussion & Questions
with Alan Smiley



Mission & DATA

Mission-driven, Data-informed Leadership and Governance

**Mission
Driven**

+

**Community
Centered**

+

**Data
Informed**



We are the trusted partner across our industry

268

Independent School
Clients

27

Membership
Associations

Strategic Data Partners



Other National/International Partnerships



10+ State & Regional Associations

Independent Schools on the Brink



A collaborative effort of
33 independent school
member organizations

1,900+ trustees and
school leaders

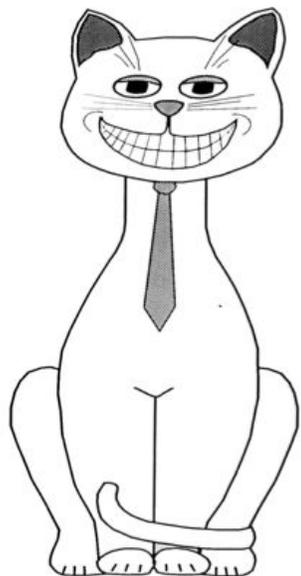
April 21, 2020

Moderator:

- Debra Wilson, President, SAIS

Panelists:

- Ari Betof, Co-Founder and Partner, Mission & Data
- John Gulla, Executive Director, E.E. Ford Foundation
- Jane Hulbert, Partner, The Jane Group
- Kristen Power, Director of Membership, EMA



What we tell ourselves life was like for school leaders and boards before the pandemic



The lived experience of many school leaders and trustees over the past several years



The challenge of cultivating a financially and organizationally healthy school (on top of everything else)

Organizational Stewardship

Leadership



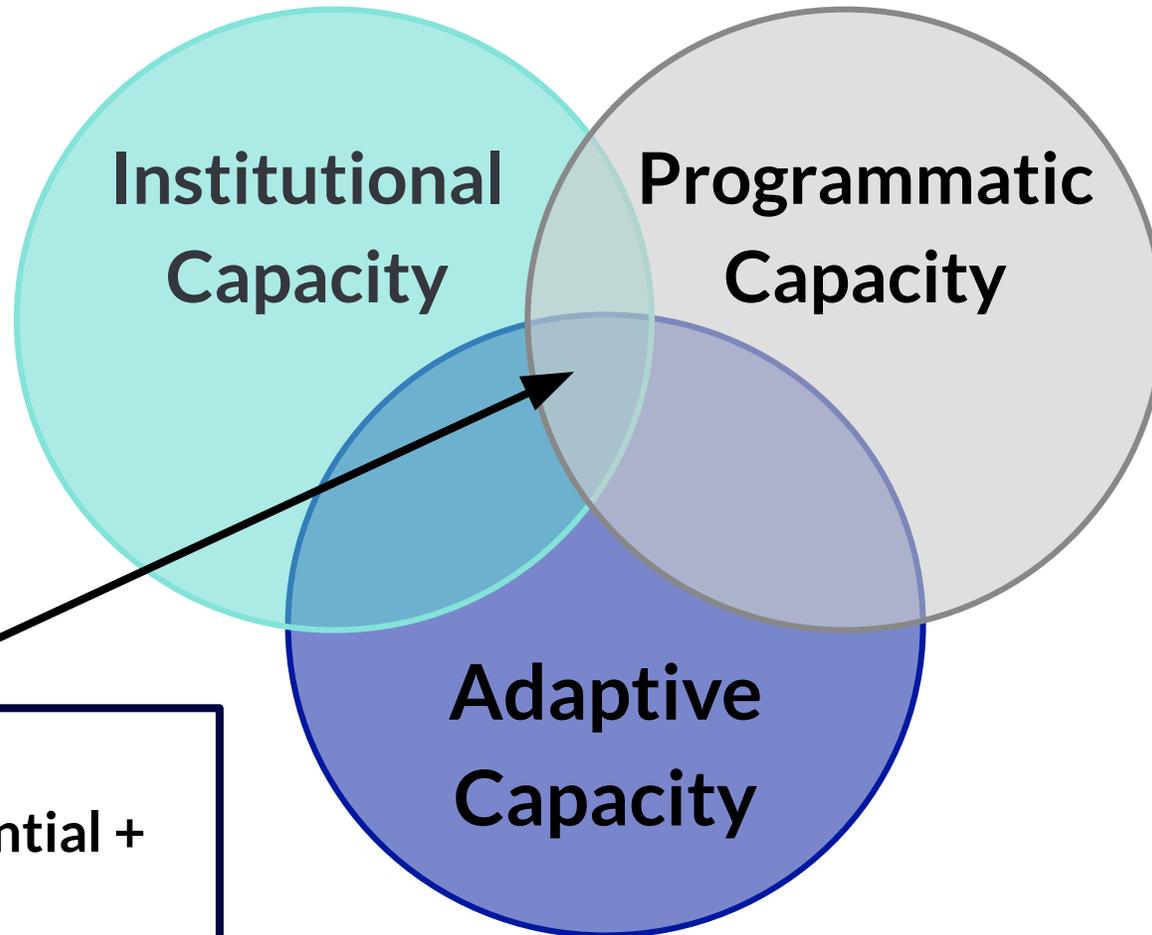
Governance

Financial Sustainability

Living the Mission
&
Cultivating Financial
Sustainability
&
Organizational
Stewardship



Stewardship of What Is Core & Leveraging Organizational Capacity



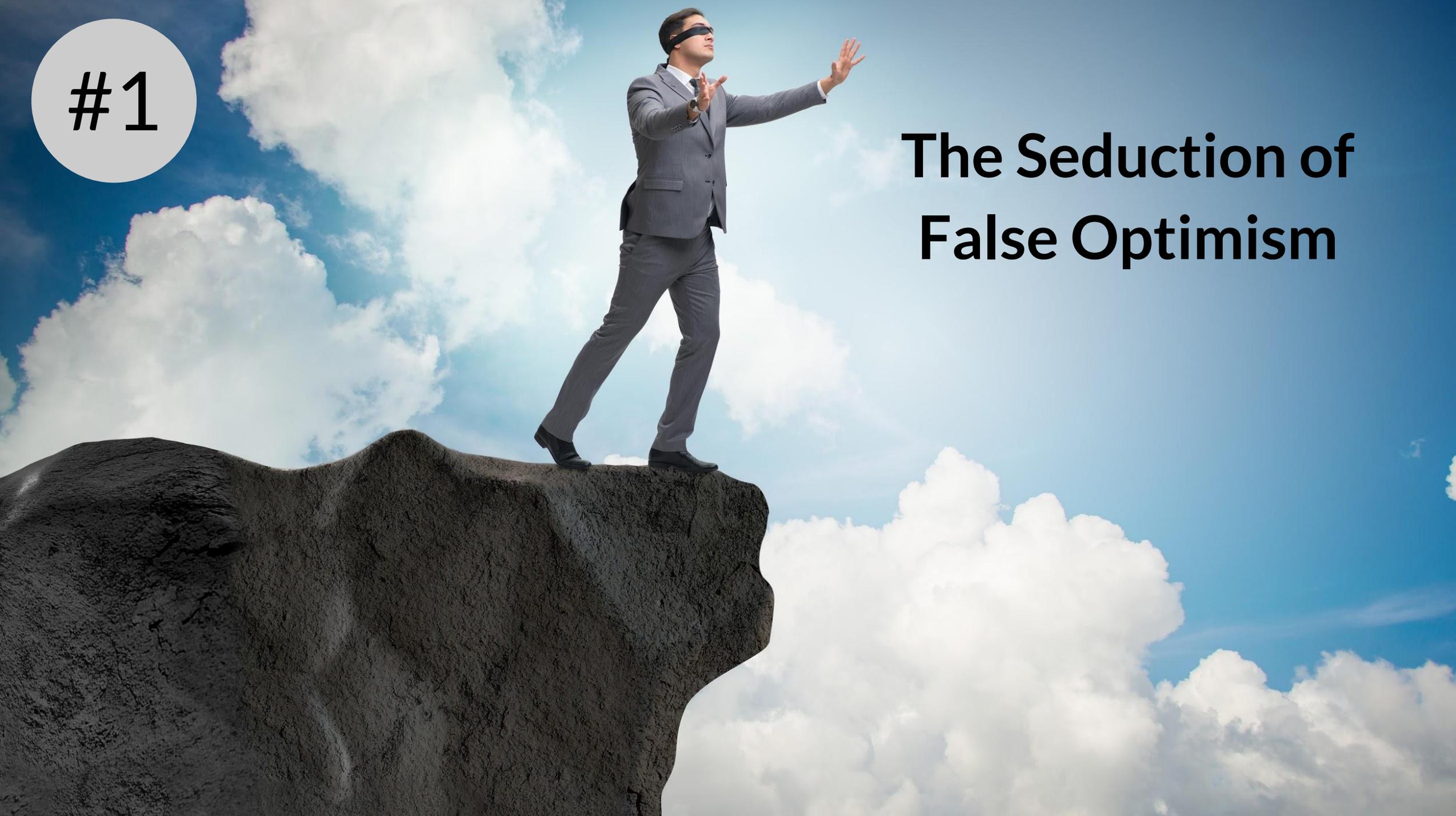
Core =
Immovable + Essential +
Exceptional

A golden piggy bank is the central focus, sitting on a wooden surface. It is surrounded by several stacks of coins of varying heights. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of an indoor setting with blue and green tones. The lighting is warm, highlighting the metallic texture of the piggy bank and the coins.

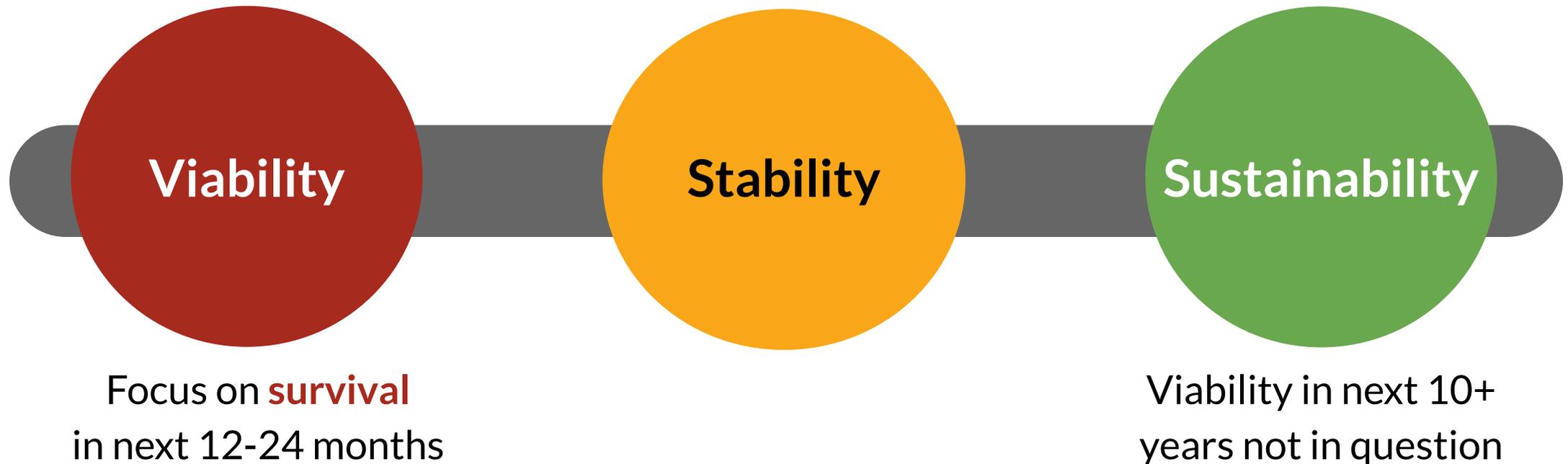
6 Key Concepts In Financial & Organizational Sustainability

#1

The Seduction of False Optimism



Spectrum of Financial & Organizational Health



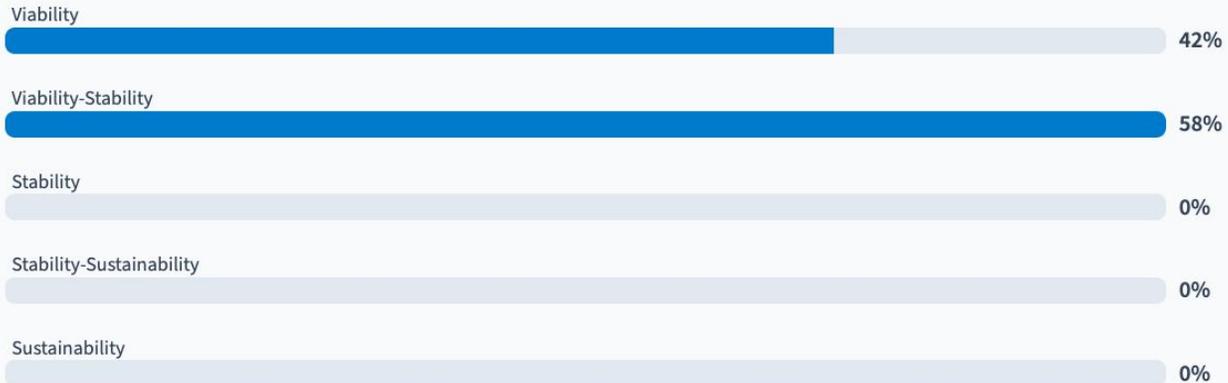
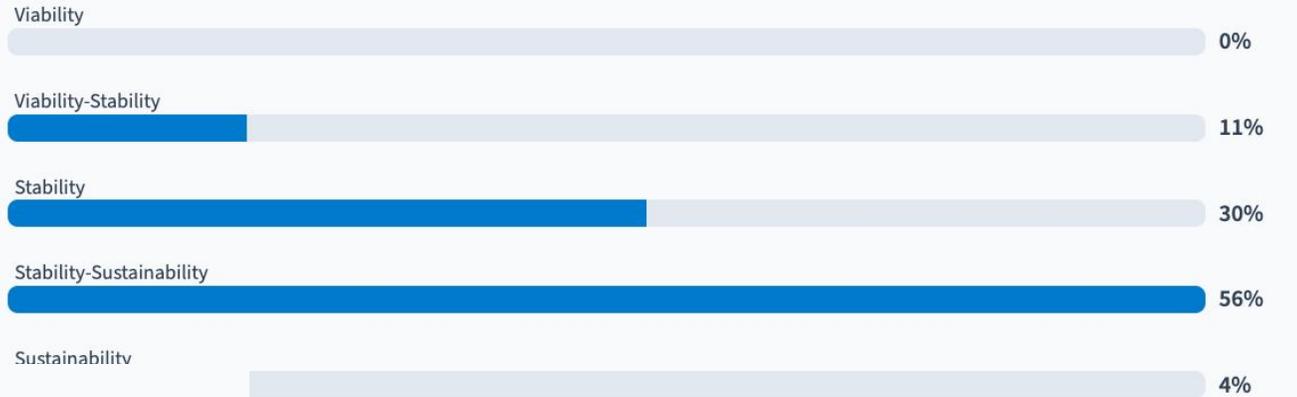
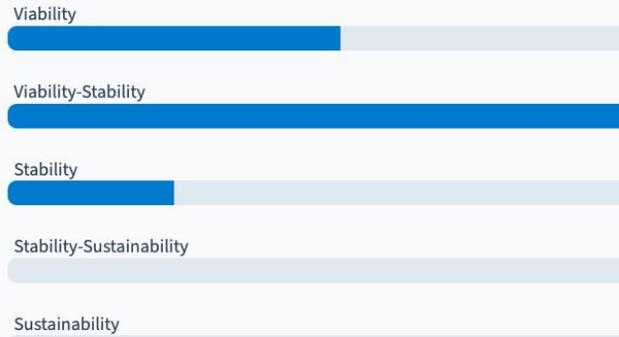
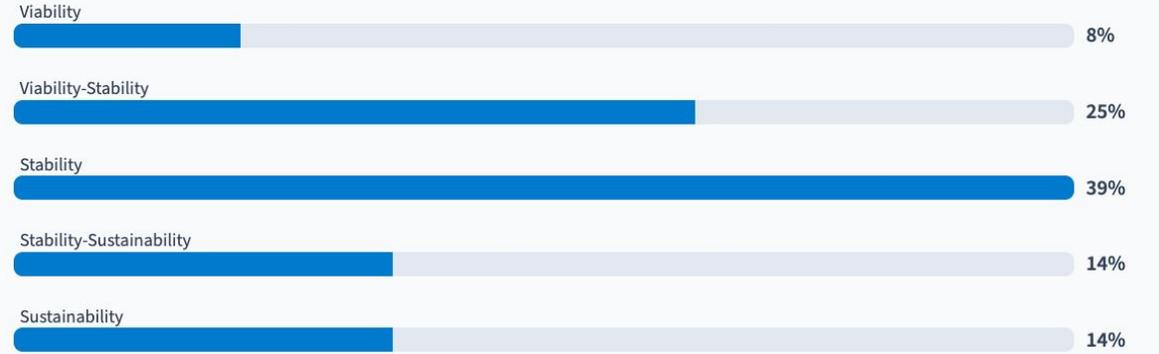
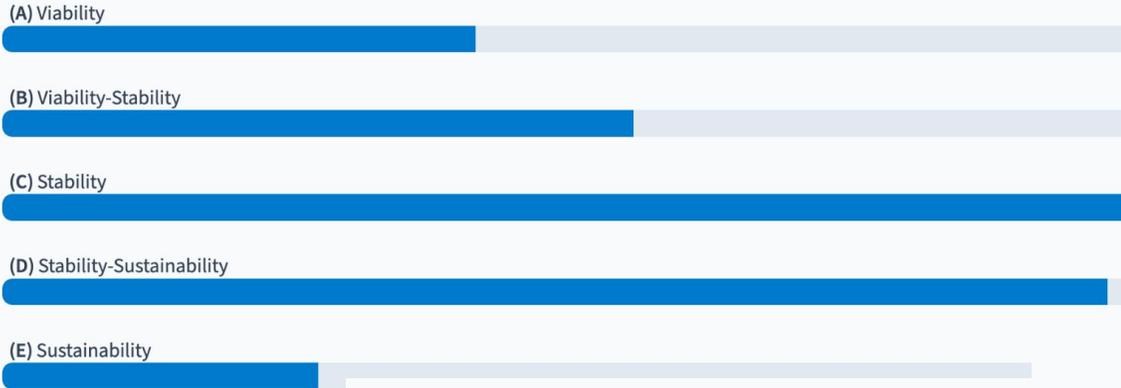
Situate your school on the viability-stability-sustainability spectrum:



Focus on **survival**
in next 12-24 months

Viability in next 10+ years
not in question

Situate your school on the viability-stability-sustainability spectrum:



#2

Independent Schools are a Premium (not a luxury)



These Boots Have Lasted Me 12 Years. Unfortunately, They're \$600.

Published October 9, 2025

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“[O]n the night before my 23rd birthday, a shoebox arrived by express mail, all the way from Australia...

I am 35 now, and those same boots are still the first shoes I reach for whether I'm wearing black jeans and a T-shirt or a dark navy suit...

The only real issue with these boots is their cost: \$619. That is still a lot of money to spend on a single item of clothing, but given that my old pair has lasted 12 years so far, I believe that even their price is worth it.”

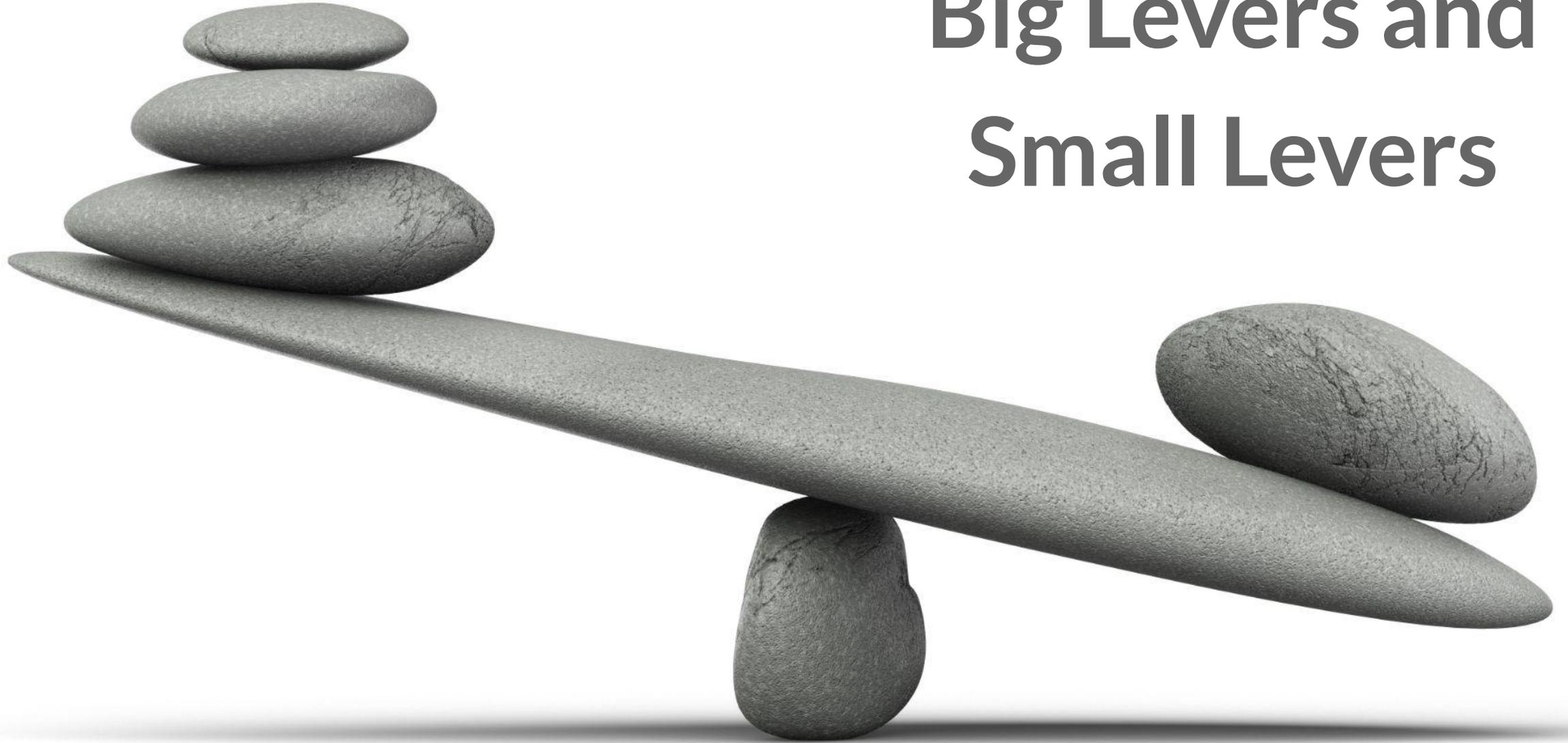
The New York Times

#3

Shared Understanding of Revenue & Expense Drivers



Big Levers and Small Levers



A chain of white dominoes is arranged in a loose, curved line across the frame. The dominoes are set against a solid, bright orange background. The focus is sharp on the dominoes in the foreground, showing their black pips and the central groove. The dominoes in the background are blurred, creating a sense of depth. The overall composition is clean and minimalist.

2nd & 3rd Order Implications

#4



DANGER

**Be Wary of
Preferred Solutions**

#5

Managing Reality & Perception



#6

Adequately Fueling the Resource Engine...



The 2022 Independent School Cost-Per-Enrollment Study

Strengthen Your Enrollment Management Strategy with New Industry Research

A joint report from the Enrollment Management Association, the National Association of Independent Schools, and the National Business Officers Association



every
\$1

spent on enrollment
management

yields
\$7

in return*

*EMA-NAIS-NBOA's 2022 Independent School Cost-Per-Enrollment Study

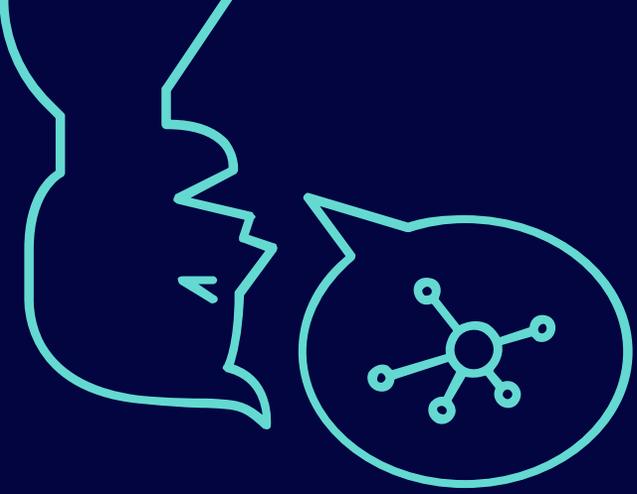
High-Water Mark Budgeting



vs

Low-Water Mark Budgeting

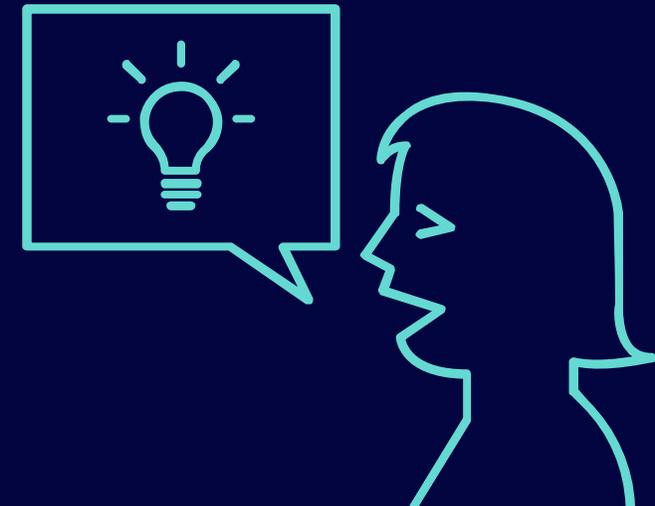




Lessons from Higher Education:

Indicators of Financial & Organizational Fragility

Mission
& DATA



Predicting College Closures and Financial Distress

~ By Kelchen, Ritter, Webber December 2024



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Predicting College Closures and Financial Distress

Robert Kelchen

University of Tennessee – Knoxville and
Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia
Consumer Finance Institute Visiting Scholar

Dubravka Ritter

Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia
Consumer Finance Institute

Douglas Webber

Board of Governors of the Federal
Reserve and Federal Reserve Bank
of Philadelphia Consumer Finance
Institute Visiting Scholar

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21799/frbp.wp.2024.20>

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Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A.

Decades of big spending, new federal funding cuts and a changing view of higher education created a perfect storm: 'Spending Your Tuition On Its Mistakes'



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1187



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By [Sara Randozza](#) [Follow](#) and [Heather Gillers](#) [Follow](#) | *Photography by Jamie Kelter Davis for WSJ*

Oct. 30, 2025 9:00 pm ET

The school that produced Milton Friedman and 34 other Nobel Prize-winning economists is struggling to manage its pocketbook.

The University of Chicago helped build prestige with heavy investment in its programs and campus.



THE
TONIGHT
SHOW
with
JIMMY
FALLON

HANNAH BERNER
AND PAIGE DESORBO

Factors That Most Contributed to Non-Profit 4-Year College Closures

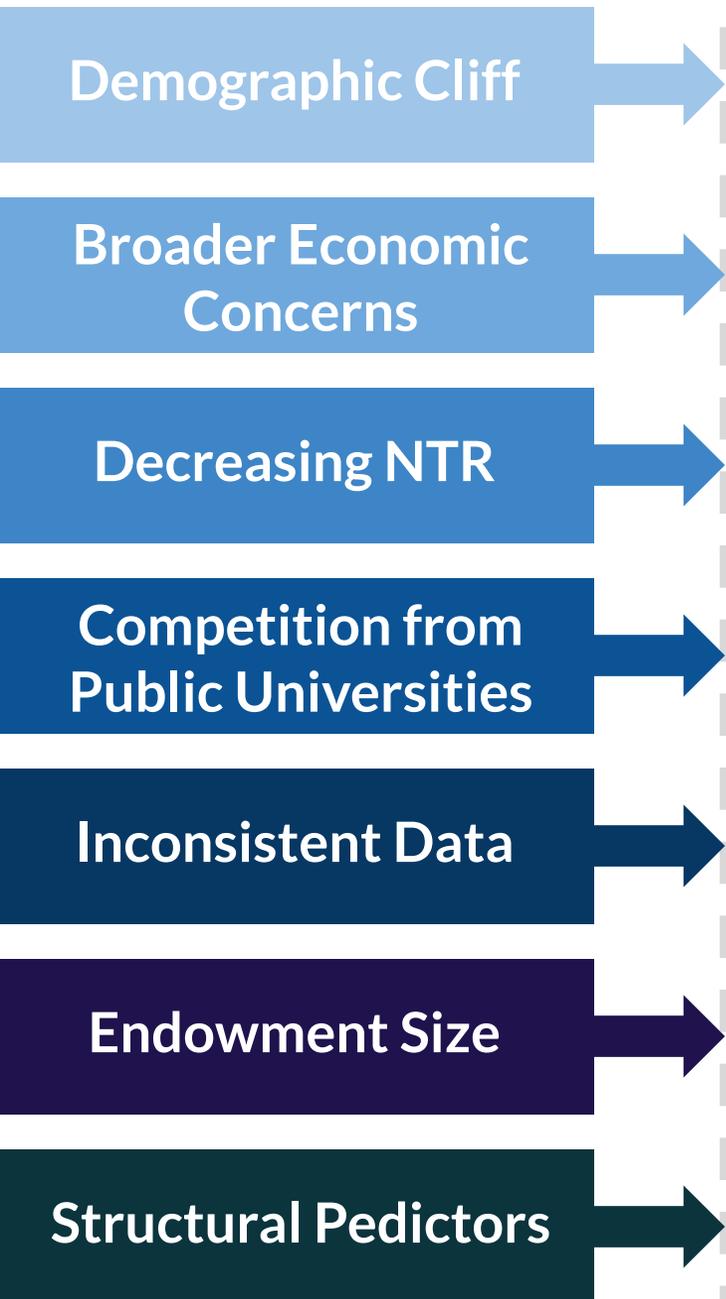
Undergraduate Enrollment was
Down 15% from 2010 to 2021

Increase in Discount Rates
To Over 50%

Lack of Data –
Quantity and Quality

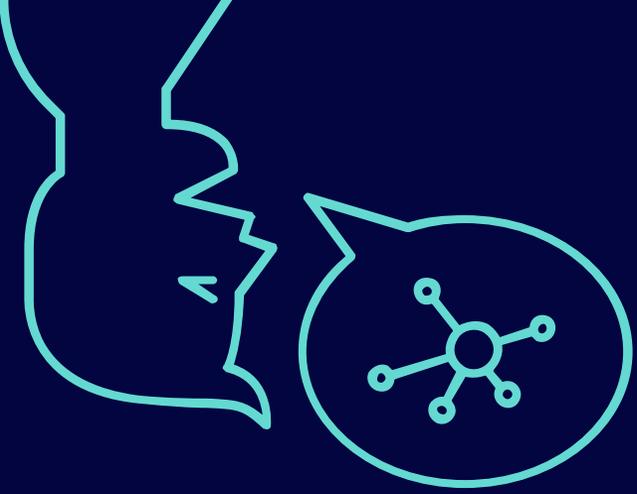
Structural Predictors

Pressures in Higher Ed



Pressures in Independent Schools



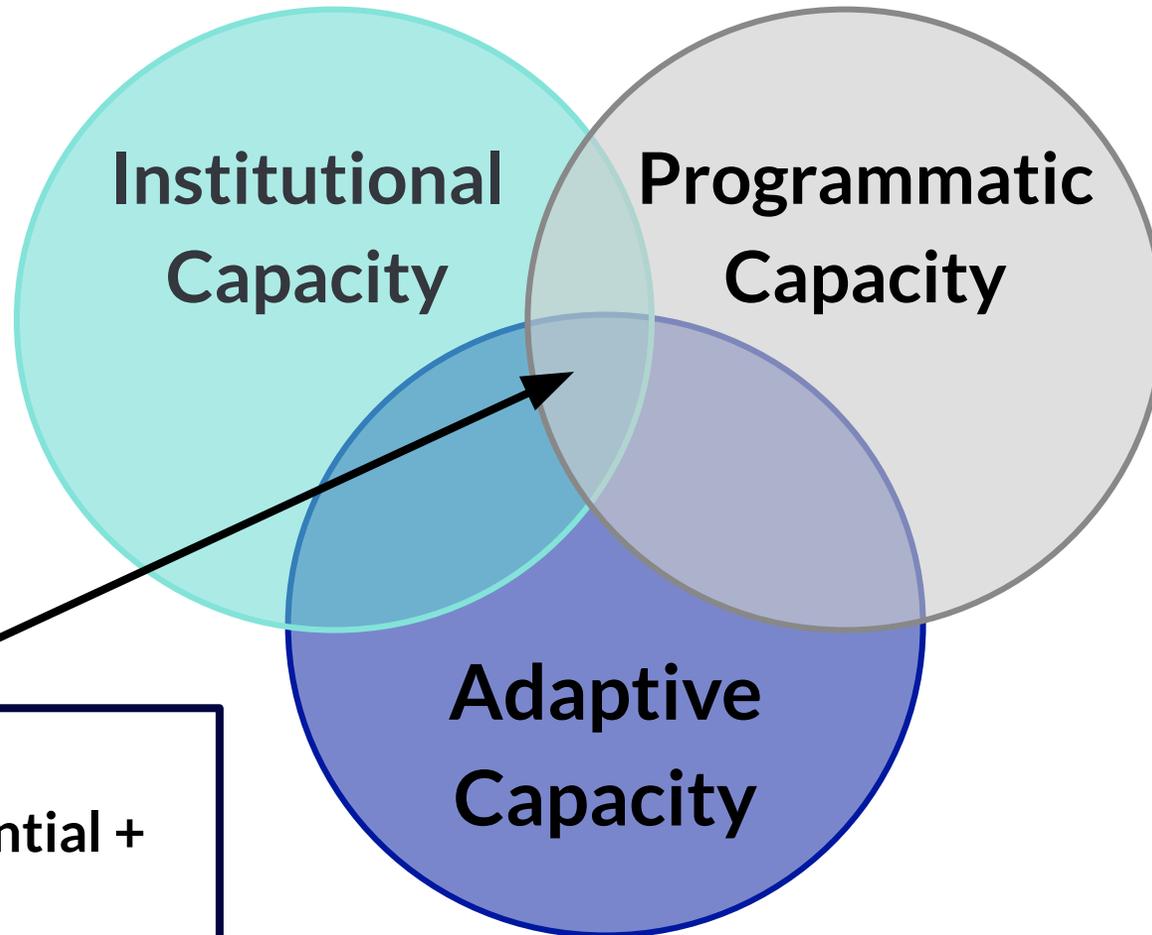


The Path to Progress & Long-Range Finance Modeling

Mission
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Stewardship of What Is Core & Leveraging Organizational Capacity



Core =
Immovable + Essential +
Exceptional

Make sure you're solving the right problem

Structural
Budget Deficit

VS

Episodic Budget
Deficit

Burying one's head in the sand....



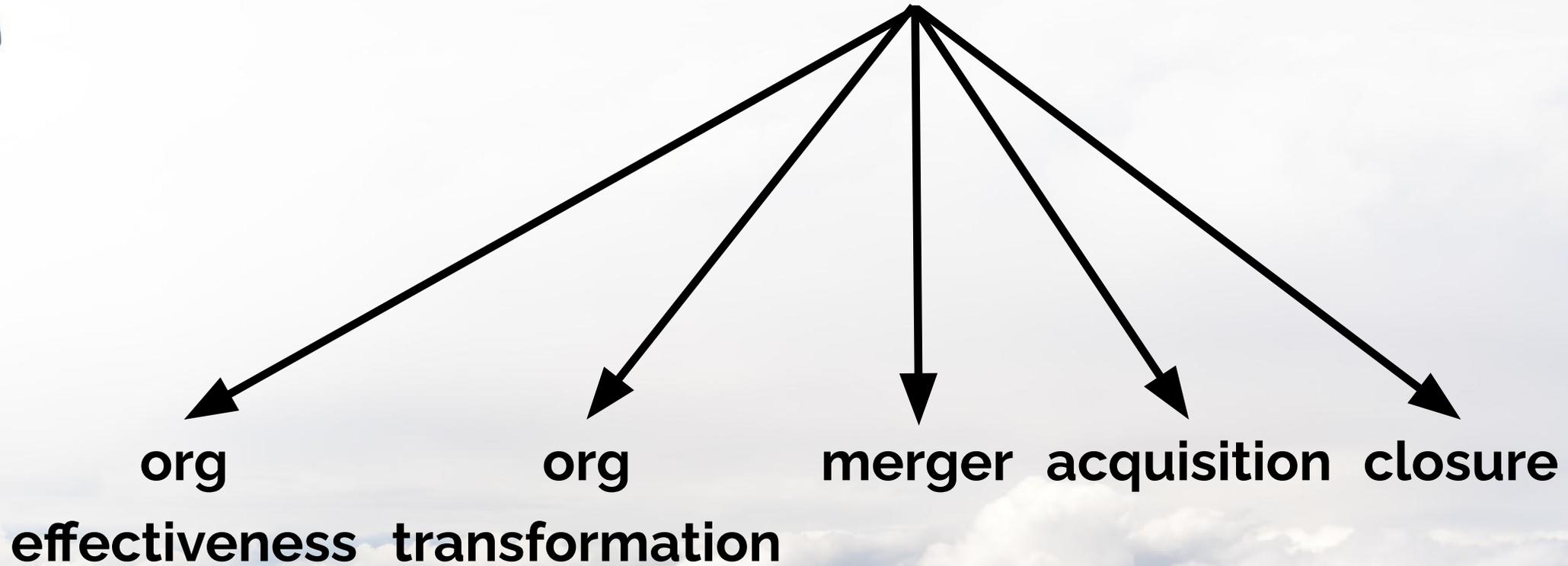
.....is not the solution

A zombie teacher with a skull-like face is sitting at a desk in a classroom, writing in a notebook. Other zombie students are visible in the background, sitting at their desks. The scene is dimly lit with a blue-green tint.

Zombie Schools



When facing a structural budget deficit*



* Without a money tree

If your school is going to have a deficit

Productive
Loss

VS

Unproductive
Loss

Addressing Root Causes Instead of Symptoms

When leadership teams and/or boards **address problem symptoms instead of root causes**, there can be unintended consequences, which can make the problem worse.



A dramatic scene of an airplane on a runway built on a narrow strip of land in the ocean at sunset. The runway is illuminated with lights, and the plane is positioned at the end of it, facing the viewer. The background features a sunset sky and a rocky cliffside.

MOVING TOO
SLOWLY RISKS
RUNNING OUT OF
RUNWAY

**MOVING QUICKLY
REQUIRES YOU
TAKE MORE RISKS**





Board of Trustees Dashboard Financial Detail



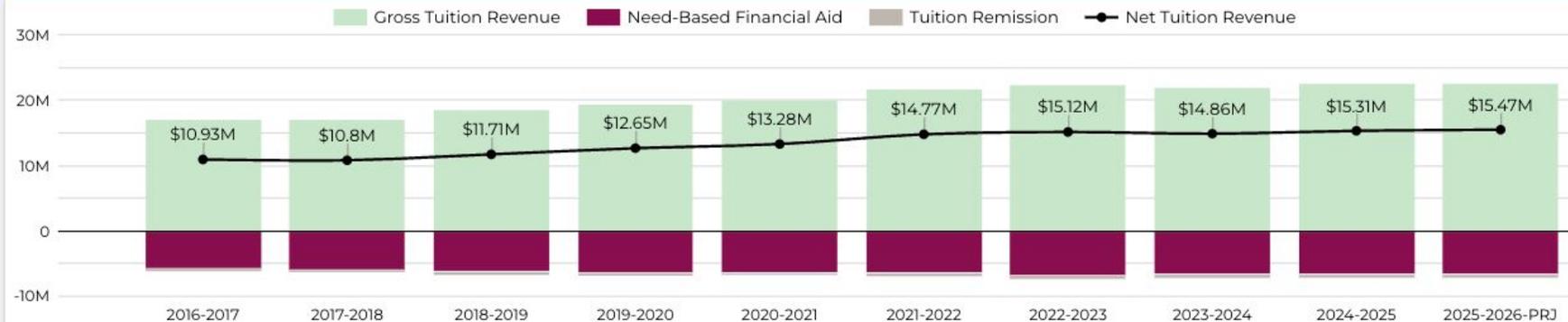
Last Updated Jan 2026

Filter data by:

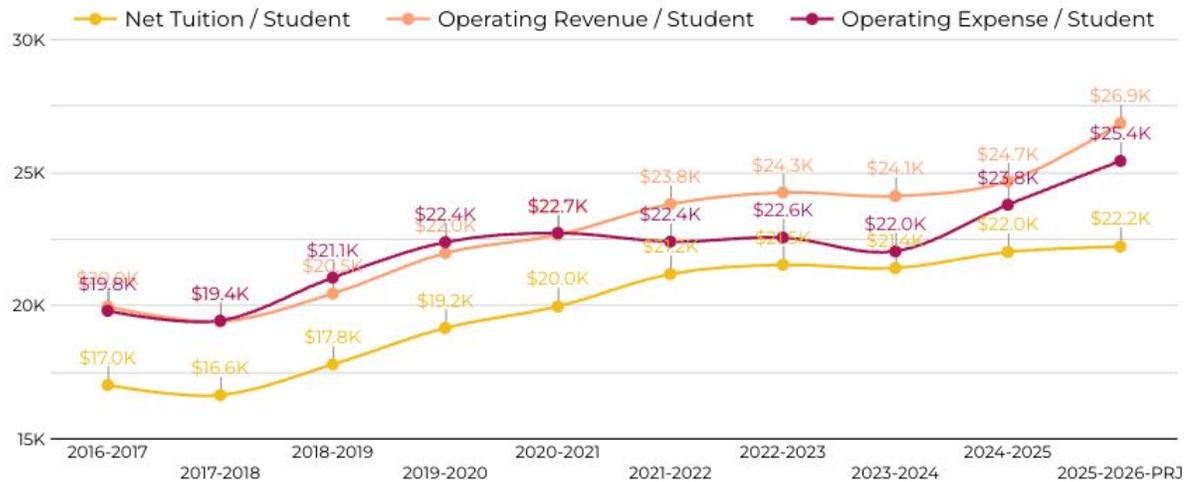
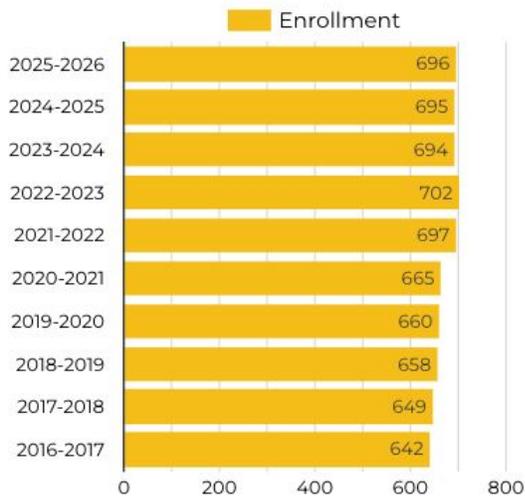
Year

Year-PRJ : Projected; Year-BDG : Budget, PRJ- Projected

Year-Over-Year Trends in Net Tuition Revenue



Year-Over-Year Per Student Metrics



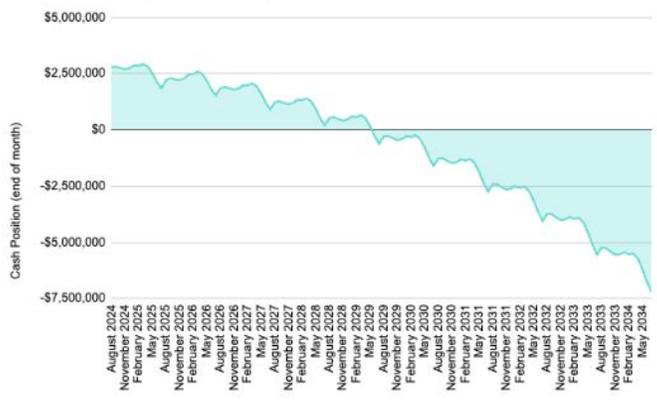
DEMO

| | 2025-2026 | 2026-2027 | 2027-2028 | 2028-2029 | 2029-2030 | 2030-2031 | 2031-2032 | 2032-2033 | 2033-2034 | 2033-2034 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| % change gross tuition | 4.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% | 3.00% |
| Enrollment | 174 | 172 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 | 165 |
| Discount rate | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% | 27.0% |
| Salary Pool Increase | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% |
| Health Insurance | 10.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% | 8.0% |

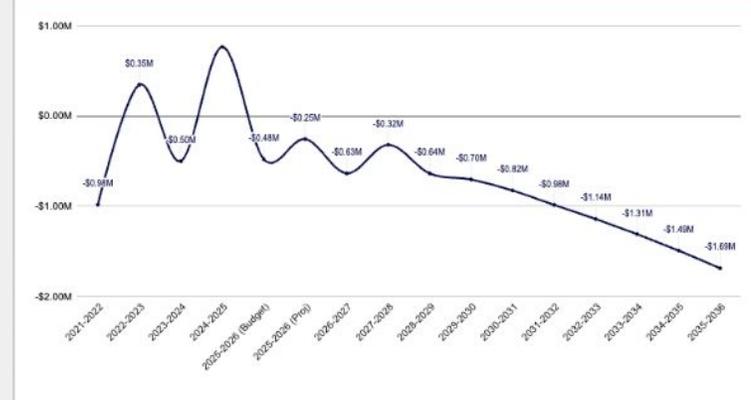
- 5% Standard Growth Rate for Fundraising
- 3% Standard Growth Rate for Other Non-Tuition Revenue
- 3% Standard Expense Growth Rate
- 8% Non-Medical Insurance Expense Growth Rate



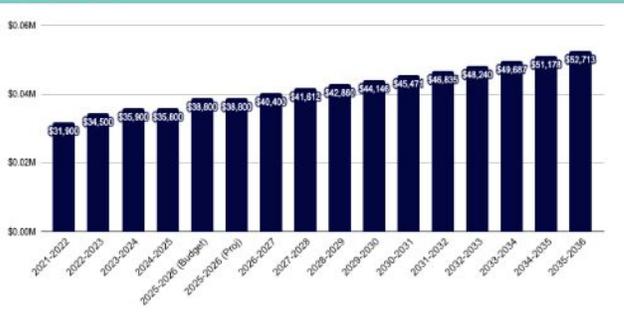
Cash Position (end of month)



Operating Surplus / Deficit



Tuition Rates



Discount Rate



Revenue per Student (Covid Neutral)



Expense Per Student





Questions & Connections

Mission & DATA

Mission-driven, Data-informed
Leadership and Governance

Ari Betof, EdD, MBA

abetof@missionanddata.com

Sadie Albertyn

salbertyn@missionanddata.com

Mission & Data is a firm dedicated to the effectiveness, health, and vitality of educational institutions and other organizations that make the world a better place. We are committed to enhancing mission-driven, data-informed leadership and governance by:

Integrated strategy consulting to promote financial sustainability, improve organizational effectiveness, and facilitate organizational transformation.

Developing custom data products, visualizations, and dashboards to highlight progress, identify trends, and leverage actionable insights.

Auditing current practice and analyzing organizational data to recommend process efficiencies and strategic improvements.

Coaching leaders and boards of trustees to enact institutional vision and build a culture of inquiry-based decision making practices.

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