Today’s higher education leaders must balance the need for innovation against budget constraints. This is a significant challenge as, in the eyes of many, higher education represents the world’s best and brightest. Many view our institutions as innovation incubators, bastions of original research, sources of creativity and cradles of thought leadership. They look to us first as guiding lights; beacons that illuminate the way in the innovation space.

Just across the aisle, however, sits the reality of budget constraints that force higher education institutions to make the tough choice: struggle to survive today or try to thrive tomorrow. Some opt for the “spend or die” mantra with regard to being innovative. Diminishing budget realities, however, quell that voice these days and force them, and the rest of us, to seek other approaches.

Uncertain as to why this happens, there are many who need to turn inward rather than outward (read: repurpose vs. acquire).

Innovation can come from leveraging what we already own in our institutions, no new investment or budget begging required. From my experience over 14 years in higher ed, we purchase broad-based applications and systems to accommodate narrow needs, desires and use cases. We seldom (if ever) use the myriad features and functions of the robust packages we already own. Niche usage needs to give way to cavernous implementations.

Industry-leading learning management systems (LMSs) are so feature-laden that faculty and students could spend entire academic journeys using them and never get to the bottom of their extensive capabilities and affordances. We use Learn for SIS-based classes; but, years ago, we started using them for all of our entrance exams and have expanded that by using the LMS for employee training and other administrative functions. Turnitin is used for plagiarism detection while the majority of users have no idea it has electronic markup features as well as peer review capability. Practitioners could actually turn the plagiarism detection aspect on its head and check that research papers have a high percentage of content sourced from peer-reviewed journals. We use

Article originally posted on The EvoLLLution at http://www.evolllution.com/ecosystems_networks/todays-high-wire-act-higher-education-balancing-innovation-budget-constraints/
Collaborate for synchronous classes and meetings while we can also use it for static and high-quality lecture capture, student-led group work sans instructor, creating Web tours, crafting detailed tutorials, providing breakout rooms for group study and review or small group discussion before reconvening the larger group in discussion. These are but three examples; there are dozens of others.

If you have ideas and use cases, share them here using the response feature in The EvoLLLution. I know you have them — and the rest of us need those insights.

Once you have exhausted this approach — leveraging existing resources — you can move to the sandbox approach. Here, instead of buying site licenses in the hopes that adoption will follow (recall my prior EvoLLLution article where I stressed that acquisition does not mean adoption), you buy just a few, place them in an incubator-like atmosphere and see if they gain any traction. These are test accounts; we guarantee no service levels, back-ups or product viability. It’s a test bed, but one that’s open to interested practitioners who are not central IT (the normal “testers” of these sorts of things). Our experience has been that the few ask for a great deal, and usage turns out to be anything but a big deal. In most cases, adoption wanes, we sunset the incubator licenses (no one notices) and we await the next must-have thing that comes along (read: something someone discovers or hears about elsewhere).

On some occasions, however, traction does result and the actual adoption compels us to acquire more or site-wide licensing. Acrobat Adobe Connect and Qualtrics are two examples of the latter. There are many examples of the former, however, including Moodle, Sakai, Canvas, ConnectYard, Second Life and MERLOT.

An inclusive and transparent conversation can aid us in prioritizing when deciding whether or not to invest or change. A broad-based group can go a long way in learning how one of the two above approaches can lead us to next steps and real, valuable action plans. Using existing resources will require information and training sessions coupled with practitioner showcases where their deeper-level use cases can be celebrated, shared and discussed. Expanding or reconciling the existing sandbox configuration would be a natural outcropping from this initial discussion. The group could advocate the redirection of existing sandbox funds to address interests that arose.

Real and meaningful innovation can surface in our institutions, right now. We need not allow budget constraints to stop us in our quest; the high wire, in this case, is not necessarily that far off the ground.

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Today’s High-Wire Act in Higher Education: Balancing Innovation and Budget Constraints

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