

THE SOLUTION TRAP

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**A GUIDE TO BETTER
DECISION-MAKING FOR
HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS**

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Dublin D02 P593 Ireland
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A Guide to Better Decision-Making for Higher Education Leaders

ISBN 979-8-90102-123-1 *Paperback*
 979-8-90102-124-8 *Hardcover*
 979-8-90102-125-5 *Ebook*

*For Laura, Miles, and Nolan—my why. And for everyone making
important decisions about the future of higher education.*

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*Problems do not present themselves as
givens; they must be constructed...*

—DONALD SCHÖN, *The Reflective Practitioner*

Introduction

Problems do not present themselves as givens; they must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain.

—DONALD SCHÖN, *The Reflective Practitioner*.¹

Higher education faces a crisis of misdirection. Walk into any meeting on any college campus in America, and you'll see it in real time. Someone raises a problem, say, declining enrollment. Almost instantly, someone else proposes a solution. The room nods. It feels like progress. It feels decisive, maybe even innovative. But beneath the momentum lies a deceptive pattern, one I've seen higher education leaders fall into so often throughout my career that I decided to write a book about it. I call it the Solution Trap, and it's what happens when we mistake the presence of a solution for progress and rush ahead without first defining the problem we're trying to solve.

The Solution Trap isn't just deceptive. It's dangerous because our problems are becoming more complex, interconnected, and harder to solve. Over the next four years, 500,000 fewer

eighteen-year-olds will arrive on college campuses nationwide. Demographers have a clever term for this problem: the “enrollment cliff,” a dramatic drop-off in the number of high school-age students going to college each year brought on by the post-2008 recession birthrate decline.²

What makes the enrollment cliff so troubling, however, isn’t just fewer students going to college. It’s that this decline comes at a time when institutions have spent decades building and borrowing under the assumption that growth would never end.³ It will end, and the results will be devastating. And precisely when colleges are most vulnerable, operating costs have ballooned, rising at the third-highest rate since 2008.⁴ Institutions are spending more than ever, even as fewer students enroll. The math doesn’t add up.

And these are just symptoms of much deeper troubles ahead. Americans are losing faith in the value of higher education. Gallup polls now show that only about 35–40 percent of US adults express “strong confidence” in our nation’s colleges and universities, down from nearly 60 percent a decade earlier.⁵ If public trust continues to slip, and all signs suggest it will, the doubt on everyone’s minds won’t be whether colleges can attract students, but whether American higher education is worth preserving at all.

In the halls of government, that doubt has already hardened. As I write this book in 2025, once-respectful policy debates about higher education’s role in society have devolved into hostile political attacks. Government leaders at all levels aren’t just critiquing individual colleges but are undermining our entire sector through a deliberate strategy of “deinstitutionalization,”

a systematic dismantling of the very foundations that support academic life.⁶ If that trend accelerates, which, by every indication, it will, colleges will struggle to operate in a policy environment that no longer plays by the same rules.

As someone helping guide your institution through these volatile times, whether as a president, provost, dean, professor, staff leader, board member, or anyone making important decisions, what you do now isn't just about weathering today's storm. The decisions you make now will determine whether your institution finds solid ground in the years ahead or gets swept away as a casualty of misdirection.

SOLUTION, SOLUTIONS EVERYWHERE!

That's where this book begins. Even as American higher education moves through one of the most destabilizing periods in its nearly 400-year history, a reinvention is taking shape—one that, in my experience, creates more confusion than clarity. Too many solutions to the problems we're trying to solve. We're drowning in them. New learning models. Structural reforms. AI-powered everything. Everywhere we look, another solution. The one that will increase enrollment. The one that will cut costs. The one that will propel your institution into the future. A recent analysis of the global education market captures the breadth of today's reinvention efforts. From technology platforms to process redesigns, from structural reform to cultural change, nearly every part of the institution has become a site of intervention.⁷ It's overwhelming.

Chances are, you picked up this book because you're feeling overwhelmed. With so many solutions vying for your

attention, you need a way to identify which ones are worth your time and which you can safely ignore. The stakes are high, and finding a path forward has never been harder.

This book can help. In the pages ahead, I argue that higher education does not suffer from a lack of solutions to the many problems we're trying to solve, but from a narrowing of how we approach problems and solutions.

Ask anyone about the current state of higher education, and you'll find broad agreement that something is fundamentally wrong; yet the ways we respond often deepen this problem-solution divide. I find this narrowing often surfaces in a familiar set of philosophies about how change should happen. One philosophy treats disruption as a primary virtue. Tradition-bound decision-making processes are seen as liabilities, leaving institutions flat-footed amid market pressures and technological change. In this view, the future belongs to those who move faster, streamline governance, and adapt continuously. Change or die.

A second philosophy offers a counterbalance. Here, disruption is understood as a corrosive force that strips the academy of the careful analysis required for meaningful change. Scholarly debate, shared governance, and faculty buy-in serve as stabilizers, protecting institutions from volatility and the pull of faddish reforms. In this frame, deliberation carries the highest value.

Both philosophies begin with reasonable concerns, but in my experience, neither holds up under the pressures facing higher education leaders today. Whether you commit to disruption

or deliberation, you'll still have to make a decision within your specific institution, under its particular constraints, and rarely in a clear or linear way. Neither philosophy will leave you with much practical guidance on how to make that decision well.

When speed becomes your organizing principle, you'll soon find yourself stuck in cycles of constant reaction, mistaking motion for progress. Solutions will accumulate faster than understanding. Noise will replace clarity. Underlying problems will remain vaguely defined, if at all, and you'll exhaust yourself and others with endless knee-jerk responses to every new signal and solution.

The opposite impulse fares no better. When deliberation becomes your primary virtue, you'll risk admiring the problem indefinitely. Insight will harden. Movement will stall. You'll examine problems from every angle, form committees, and follow processes that block the very progress they were meant to protect. You'll become fluent in what's wrong and unable to act.

WHEN YOU HAVE A HAMMER...

What's missing from this debate is not a compromise between these two philosophies but a different philosophy altogether: not one about how fast or slow you move, but about how best to define the problem you're trying to solve.

That question may seem straightforward, but it almost never is. Our decision-making habits always get in the way. Once a problem feels familiar, our responses tend to be driven by

impulse rather than analysis, guided by the mental shortcuts psychologists call “heuristics.” We’ll explore that concept in more detail in chapter 2. Faced with uncertainty, whether you favor disruption or deliberation, we reach for the tools we know best and keep using them, even when they no longer *fit* the moment. It’s like the old saying: “When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Different tempo. Same hammer.

And once attached to a solution or a familiar way of approaching problems, nails appear everywhere. Your favorite hammer becomes the lens through which you frame the problem. Keep swinging, and before long, every problem will demand your preferred solution. Enrollment decline? That looks like a branding problem when marketing is your hammer. Budget shortfall? That must be a data problem when better dashboards are your tool of choice. A PR crisis? That must be a messaging problem when communication is where you’re most comfortable. Just like that, we treat very different problems: nails, screws, bolts, blocks as if they all require the same swing of the same hammer. But they don’t. The danger isn’t that any of these responses is bad. Better marketing, better technology, and better communication are all perfectly reasonable responses. The danger is what the hammer does to your field of vision.

When locked onto a preferred solution, you lose sight of the big picture. You stop noticing the shape of the object in front of you. Engrained decision-making habits narrow your perspective so tightly that you rarely pause to ask whether the problem you’re trying to solve needs a hammer, a screwdriver, a wrench, or no tool at all. It gets even more treacherous

when solutions enter a room full of passionate, experienced leaders who've been swinging the same hammers for decades. Describe a problem, and the room responds on instinct. Hands go up. Hammers fly.

- “We need this...”
- “Another college did that...”
- “Let’s act now!”

When that happens, we don’t just see individual or institutional mistakes. We see systemic failure on a massive scale—a crisis of misdirection.

HOW THE SOLUTION TRAP WORKS

None of this feels wrong, and that’s the trap. Remember, a trap doesn’t usually look threatening. A mouse doesn’t see the death snap waiting. It sees a piece of cheese. The best traps hide their true purpose behind something highly desirable.

The Solution Trap works the same way. It looks like progress. It lures you in with what seems to be the solution to the problem you think you’re trying to solve, a problem you’d rather solve because it feels familiar, or worse, a problem already defined for you, whether or not it’s the one that actually needs solving.

Here’s how it works. A problem surfaces on your campus. Naturally, a solution appears—promising, plausible, full of possibility. Almost immediately, it seems like the only way forward. You commit. Momentum builds. Only

later do the cracks show. The solution doesn't quite fit. The problem remains. Maybe it gets worse. What you're managing now isn't progress but consequences. Resources tighten. Fatigue sets in. Strategy stalls. You're left explaining why something that made so much sense no longer works. That's usually the moment the Solution Trap snaps shut. But it doesn't have to.

“SLOW IS SMOOTH, AND SMOOTH IS FAST”

This book's thesis is straightforward: *higher education has a problem-solving problem*. Whether we disrupt or deliberate, we rarely pause to ask whether we're moving in the right direction. When we do, our decision-making processes are often too familiar, too vague, too neat, too narrow, or just plain wrong.

The answer isn't to speed up (disrupt) or slow down (deliberate). It's to build a habit of slowing down just long enough to ask better questions, gather evidence, and understand what's really going on before deciding what to do next.

That kind of discipline reflects a broader lesson about how complex organizations change. When our environment shifts, and it is shifting constantly in higher education right now, clarity and coordination, not pace, will keep us from defaulting to the same familiar “hammers” that once guided but no longer do.

No one understood that discipline better than General Stanley McChrystal. In the dusty command centers of Iraq,

he faced a fast-moving, decentralized enemy in a volatile environment where traditional military protocols no longer worked. Rather than doubling down on those protocols, McChrystal reorganized his forces into what he later called a “team of teams,” an agile organizational structure designed to operate with greater clarity and coordination in the environment they were actually in, not the one they were most familiar with.

One of the lessons he embraced, borrowed from special operations culture, became their mantra: “Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.”⁸ Slowing down didn’t mean moving less. It meant moving with clarity about what the situation actually required.

When he later founded the McChrystal Group and began advising leaders across sectors, including higher education, he noticed the same pattern again and again. Decision-makers who rushed ahead stumbled. Decision-makers who hesitated stalled. The ones who succeeded slowed down just long enough to see the problem clearly before deciding what to do next. Slowing down, it turns out, is the fastest way to move forward. Clarity, discipline, and focus. These drive effective decisions, whether you’re leading an army, a corporation, or a college.

That’s the promise of this book: to help you avoid the Solution Trap, slow down just long enough to define the problem clearly, and make the strategic decisions that move your institution and our sector forward. Effective problem-solving at its best isn’t about slowing down or speeding up; it’s the discipline of knowing how to begin.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The ideas in this book aren't just theoretical. They're rooted in five years of real-world testing of the Solution Trap concept. I've spoken with dozens of academic leaders and administrators at institutions ranging from small private colleges to major research universities. I've engaged with scholars, thought leaders, and policymakers. I've documented case studies of successful decisions and spectacular failures, looking for patterns that explain why even the smartest, most capable leaders keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

While most of my research has focused on higher education, the Solution Trap isn't limited to colleges. I've seen it take hold in K–12 schools and districts that adopted education technology tools no one used. I've seen education technology companies build products and features learners didn't need. I've seen corporate training teams roll out platforms that looked sophisticated yet never changed practice, and community educators chase programs that drew national attention without addressing local needs.

The pattern repeats across classrooms, campuses, companies, and communities because it isn't rooted in the settings where learning occurs but in how we make decisions under pressure. The ideas in this book are meant to help you recognize that pattern in your own practice and refocus attention on the problems that matter most in the contexts and communities *you* serve.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

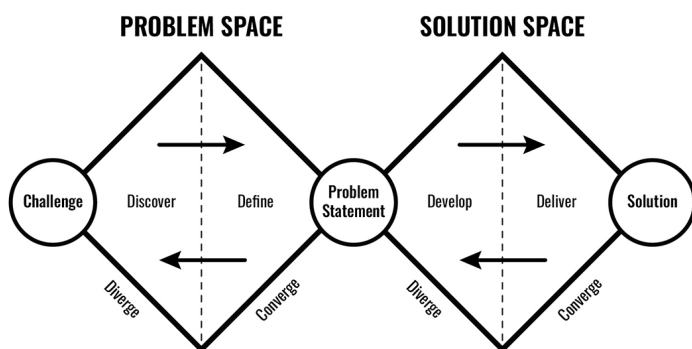
Think of this book as a guide to solving problems under pressure. Part I (Lured In) opens with three case studies of fictional leaders and institutions whose experiences mirror patterns I've observed in my research.

Three decision makers. Three problems. Three moments when the future felt uncertain and the next step seemed obvious. Think of these cases less as cautionary tales and more as invitations to see how the Solution Trap works from the inside, usually quietly, subtly, and almost always with the best of intentions. You'll meet a dean facing an academic crisis just as a promising new AI product crosses her path. A community college president navigating an opportunity that feels too big to ignore. A provost confronting the fear that her small, struggling institution may close forever. In each case, what looks like "progress" becomes a story that drifts into misdirection, pulled along by urgency, imitation, and the instinct to act when a beloved institution's survival is on the line.

Part II (The Trap) delves deeper into these cases. Here, you'll see what happens when modest experiments turn into major financial commitments, when momentum becomes performance, and when polite agreement masks the doubts no one wants to say aloud. You'll explore why it's easy to double down on the wrong solutions, mistake activity for progress, and let yesterday's decisions shape the choices we believe we have today. Once you see the Solution Trap in action, trust me, it'll be impossible to ignore.

Part III (The Escape) shifts the book’s focus from awareness to agency. Here, you’ll follow our three leaders as they move through the Double Diamond, a human-centered problem-solving framework, to slow down at the right moments, define problems clearly, and test solutions through prototyping and pilots. Its familiar rhythm—discover, define, develop, deliver—structures their decisions as pressure rises and shows how you can navigate complexity with greater clarity and intention in your own work.

FIGURE I.1: The Double Diamond Framework



The Double Diamond framework showing the distinction between the problem space and the solution space. The model emphasizes disciplined divergence and convergence, with a clearly articulated problem statement serving as the bridge between understanding the challenge and developing an effective response. Source: Adapted from the Design Council’s Double Diamond framework.

I chose the Double Diamond because it perfectly embodies that special operations principle: *slow is smooth and smooth is fast*. It forces us to read the map before beginning the journey, rather than sprinting off in the wrong direction.

At the end of each chapter, you'll also find "Pause Point" questions and Problem-Solving Practices to help you apply the many ideas, mindsets, and methods I discuss throughout this book in your own context. You'll finish this book with a straightforward decision-making framework for evaluating solutions against the problems you're trying to solve.

WHERE PROBLEM-SOLVING BEGINS

The Solution Trap is for anyone who wants to make better decisions under pressure. It begins with an unapologetic belief in the power of higher education and the value of academic institutions, and with the conviction that leading one of America's most critical sectors requires resisting the instinct to solve too quickly and choosing solutions that endure under pressure.

Consider how differently the future of your institution might unfold if you approached decision-making this way, not as a choice between disruption and deliberation but as a discipline of problem-solving you practice, refine, and return to over time.

Because beneath every problem higher education faces today lies a simple truth: progress depends far more on how clearly we see than on how fast we move. If this book nudges even a few of us toward that discipline, it will have done its job.

PART I:

LURED IN

