

ABSTRACT
CAPITAL PROJECTS AS CATALYSTS FOR STRATEGIC CHANGE
AND TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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University campuses and their physical environments are a visible and symbolic representation of institutions. As the higher education landscape continues to shift and faces ongoing disruption, many institutions are considering significant strategic changes or broad transformation to remain competitive and thrive. As campuses around the country contend with aging buildings and infrastructure, they also have strategic priorities related to the changing needs and expectations of students, and the nature of teaching, learning, and research. Among these complex challenges, there is an opportunity to consider how institutions can leverage investment in the physical campus as a catalyst to support the strategic changes and potential transformation that institutions must consider.

In the current higher education landscape, institutions must think in an integrated fashion to maximize the value of investments in strategic priorities. Capital projects provide such an opportunity, creating a platform for institutions to consider changes to people, processes, and programs concurrent with realizing a new facility. This study was designed to explore how institutions use the implementation of a capital project as an opportunity to achieve other strategic changes. Using a multi-dimensional organizational change framework (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988) rooted in culture and strategy, the study explored the complex effort of capital project implementation coupled with other strategic changes at three institutions. This qualitative multi-site case study used interviews, documents, and observations to obtain an in-depth understanding of how capital projects became a catalyst for change, and what strategic changes coincided with the implementation efforts.

This study sought to address a research gap by understanding the role of capital projects in supporting strategic change and transformation efforts. The findings reveal that the ability for the institutions to realize strategic change beyond a capital investment was shaped by their foundational strength, context awareness, establishment of trust and collective ownership, and the ability to sustain momentum. Taken together, the strategic changes and capital project investment demonstrate the importance of approaching organizational change in an integrated fashion. The findings advance an Integrated Multidimensional Change Framework centered on the pursuit of strategic change and illustrate an approach to achieving multiple, concurrent change initiatives.