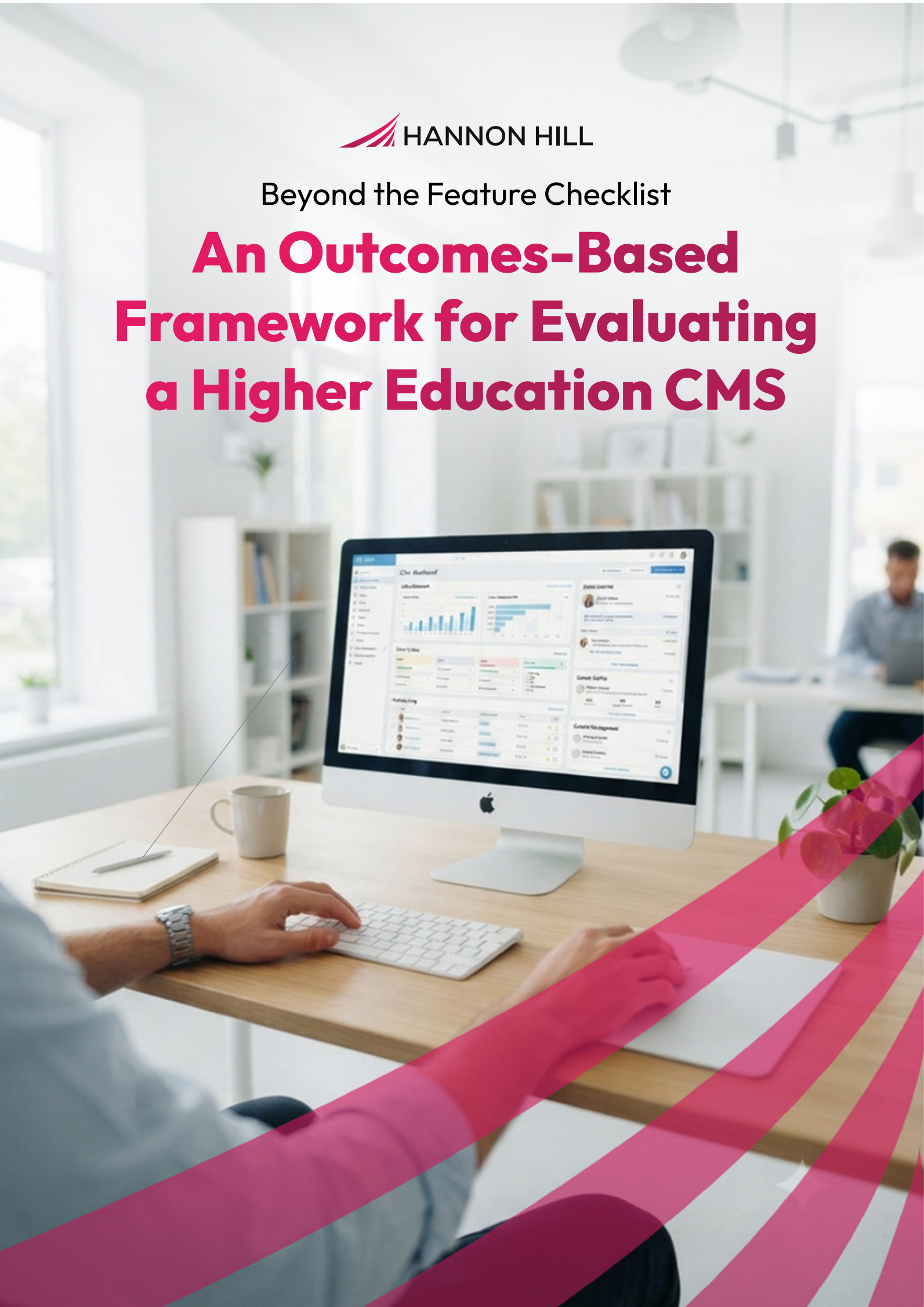




Beyond the Feature Checklist

An Outcomes-Based Framework for Evaluating a Higher Education CMS



Executive Summary

Selecting a content management system is one of the most consequential technology decisions a higher education institution makes. A CMS influences how prospective students discover your institution, how effectively distributed teams manage content, how accessibility standards are maintained, and how well your digital presence adapts to changing technology and user expectations.

Yet many CMS evaluations still begin with feature comparison spreadsheets. Institutions compare workflow builders, permissions, personalization engines, integrations, and editing experiences, assigning scores to capabilities that are relatively easy to demonstrate and verify.

A workflow builder matters because it improves governance. Structured content matters because it makes information easier to manage, easier to reuse, and increasingly easier for search engines and AI-powered discovery tools to interpret. Personalization matters because it helps prospective students find the information most relevant to their interests. Features are inputs, but outcomes are the reason institutions invest.

This paper presents an outcomes-based framework for evaluating a higher education CMS. Rather than asking which platform offers the longest list of capabilities, institutional leaders should begin with a different question: what outcomes should our next CMS enable over the next five to ten years?

There are five outcomes that deserve particular attention: recruiting more students, reducing institutional risk, improving team productivity, delivering better digital experiences, and future-proofing your website.

For each outcome, this paper examines the organizational challenges institutions face, the platform capabilities that address them, and the questions evaluation teams should ask during vendor selection.

Technology decisions should ultimately be measured not by what software can do, but by what institutions are able to achieve because of it.



The Limits of the Feature-First Evaluation

Take any higher education CMS evaluation, and you'll find a familiar process:

A cross-functional committee assembles a list of technical requirements. Vendors demonstrate workflows, permissions, integrations, reusable content blocks, accessibility tools, and editing interfaces. Evaluation teams compare capabilities, assign scores, and gradually narrow the field.

The process seems logical, because features are tangible. They can be demonstrated, documented, and compared across platforms with relative confidence. Procurement teams benefit from objective criteria, and technical stakeholders gain assurance that essential requirements have been met.

Feature comparisons answer a different question than the one institutional leaders are actually trying to solve.

A feature checklist tells you what a platform includes. It does not tell you whether your institution will recruit more students, reduce accessibility risk, publish content more efficiently, or remain adaptable as digital expectations evolve.

Those outcomes depend on a lot more than the existence of a feature. They depend on how easily that feature can be adopted by distributed teams, how consistently it supports governance, and whether it fits the realities of higher education.

Consider a platform that offers sophisticated personalization capabilities but requires significant technical expertise to configure. On paper, the feature exists. In practice, a small marketing team may never have the capacity to use it effectively.

Or consider a workflow engine capable of supporting complex approval processes. If contributors find the interface confusing or burdensome, they'll inevitably look for workarounds outside the CMS. The workflow becomes a feature that exists rather than a capability that delivers value.

Accessibility presents another example. Many platforms technically support accessible publishing. Far fewer help non-technical contributors identify and correct accessibility issues as they create content. The distinction is important because institutional compliance depends less on what a system permits than on what it encourages through everyday use.

Features describe potential. Outcomes describe performance.

The most successful CMS evaluations recognize that relationship. Rather than asking whether a platform includes a particular capability, they ask how that capability contributes to institutional goals.

That shift, from evaluating software to evaluating outcomes, changes the conversation.

Instead of asking "Does this CMS include structured content?" evaluation teams begin asking "Will this approach help us manage thousands of pages more efficiently?"

Instead of asking "Does it support personalization?" they ask "Can our marketing team realistically deliver more relevant experiences without adding staff?"

Instead of asking "Does it provide accessibility tools?" they ask "Will those tools actually help hundreds of distributed contributors publish accessible content consistently?"

The same features remain part of the discussion. The difference is that they are evaluated according to the outcomes they enable.

The Higher Education Web Environment

Every industry presents unique challenges for content management. Higher education is unusual because nearly every challenge exists simultaneously.

A university website is not a single website in the traditional sense. It is a distributed digital ecosystem supporting dozens, or even hundreds, of audiences with different goals, priorities, and information needs.

Prospective students want academic programs, financial aid, and admissions requirements. Current students need registration and academic calendars. Beyond those two groups alone, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, donors, and the broader community each bring their own expectations.

Meeting those needs requires contributions from hundreds of content owners across academic departments, administrative offices, student affairs, athletics, advancement, continuing education, and research centers. Most of those contributors are not professional web publishers. They are admissions counselors, faculty members, administrative assistants, communications staff, and subject matter experts whose primary responsibilities lie elsewhere.

This distributed publishing model creates both opportunity and complexity. It allows departments to maintain accurate, timely information close to the source. At the same time, it makes governance significantly more difficult. **Without thoughtful workflows, reusable content, clear permissions, and consistent standards, institutional websites naturally drift toward duplication, inconsistency, accessibility issues, and outdated information.**

At the same time, the environment surrounding higher education websites continues to evolve. Prospective students increasingly begin their research in AI-powered search experiences rather than traditional search engines alone. Accessibility expectations continue to expand under federal and state regulations. Marketing teams are expected to deliver increasingly personalized digital experiences while operating with limited staff and resources. Technology ecosystems have become more interconnected, requiring CMS platforms to integrate seamlessly with CRM systems, analytics platforms, marketing automation tools, and emerging AI technologies.

Combined, these trends change what institutions should expect from a CMS. A modern platform is no longer simply a publishing tool. It has become the operational infrastructure that supports enrollment, governance, accessibility, communications, marketing, and institutional reputation simultaneously.

That reality suggests a different evaluation framework. Instead of comparing software according to individual features, institutions should evaluate platforms according to the outcomes they must consistently deliver across this uniquely complex environment.

The following framework proposes five outcomes that should guide every higher education CMS evaluation.



Outcome 1:

Recruiting More Students

Enrollment remains the primary measure through which most institutions judge the success of their websites. However, the path a prospective student takes from discovery to application has changed fundamentally.

The traditional search experience, a user typing a query and clicking a list of blue links, is being augmented and, in some cases, replaced by AI-synthesized answers. Prospective students are no longer just searching for your website; they are asking questions about your institution in AI search environments.

Recent data highlights the speed of this shift. According to Carnegie Higher Education, the percentage of graduating high school seniors using AI in their college search grew from just 4% in 2023 to 23% by 2025. Manaferra's 2025 State of College Search study found that more than a third of students across all segments, undergraduate, graduate, and adult learners, considered a college less if it didn't appear in AI-synthesized search results.

This introduces a new competitive imperative for higher education marketers: Answer Engine Optimization (AEO).

The Strategic Shift to AEO

For an institution's information to be cited and surfaced by AI search tools, it must be highly legible to large language models. Maximizing visibility in AI-powered search experiences requires more than good writing. It also benefits from a content architecture that keeps information structured, consistent, and easy to interpret.

Institutions should evaluate a CMS by its ability to support four recruitment-critical capabilities.

Content structure versus free-form text matters most. While large language models can interpret unstructured text, they perform best when institutional information is presented consistently through structured content, clear semantics, and descriptive metadata. A CMS that forces content into a single long text box makes it difficult for a machine to distinguish between a degree requirement, a deadline, and a tuition figure. A platform that uses defined content types and fields, where a "tuition" field is distinct from a "description" field, signals clearly to search engines exactly what each piece of information is.

Content reuse and syndication protect authority. To maintain credibility, an institution must ensure that critical information, like program outcomes or costs, is consistent across every page. Inconsistencies across a site can reduce confidence in the accuracy and authority of institutional information, making it less likely to be surfaced consistently by search engines and AI-powered discovery tools.

Finally, once a student arrives on the site, the CMS must shift from discovery to conversion. Generic homepages are increasingly ineffective compared to experiences that dynamically surface content based on a visitor's geography, interests, or previous engagement.

What This Looks Like in Practice

Cascade CMS addresses the discovery challenge through a structured content architecture that breaks a page down into reusable blocks and specific fields, so that when an editor updates a program's cost or deadline in one place, that data stays consistent everywhere it's cited. To drive conversion on the other side of that visit, Clive integrates directly with the CMS to deliver targeted calls-to-action based on audience segment, shifting from a generic "Apply Now" to a program-specific "Apply for the Nursing Program."

The Evaluative Question: Will this CMS help our content be discovered and accurately cited by AI-driven search engines, and does it provide the tools needed to convert that visibility into applications through personalized experiences?

Outcome 2: Reducing Institutional Risk

For higher education institutions, web risk is a legal and reputational one. Accessibility mandates are tightening, privacy regulations are expanding, and in a distributed publishing environment, a single non-compliant page can create significant institutional liability.

The Reality of Digital Compliance

The most immediate pressure comes from the Department of Justice's rule under ADA Title II, which requires public colleges and universities to meet WCAG 2.1 AA standards. While deadlines for compliance vary by institution size, ranging from 2027 to 2028, the underlying obligation could not be clearer: digital accessibility is a civil right, not a nice-to-have feature.

The challenge for most institutions is the scale of the ecosystem. When hundreds of contributors are updating content, the risk of broken heading hierarchies, missing alt text, or inaccessible PDFs grows exponentially. Manual auditing is essentially impossible at this volume.



Architecture as the First Line of Defense

Strategy-led institutions are moving away from reactive auditing, fixing mistakes after they're published, toward proactive governance that prevents errors during the creation process.

Evaluation teams should look for three specific risk-reduction capabilities. **Template-level enforcement means a CMS can enforce accessibility standards, like heading order and color contrast, at the template level, making it essentially impossible for a contributor to accidentally break these rules, and that enforcement propagates instantly across thousands of pages whenever a base standard changes.** Inline checking tools should flag accessibility violations in real time, before a page can be submitted for review, the same way a word processor flags spelling errors, fixing issues in the moment rather than waiting for a monthly audit report. And granular governance with audit trails is key because risk reduction requires knowing exactly who changed what, and when.

The Evaluative Question: Does this CMS help us maintain compliance at the point of content creation, or does it rely on our team to find and fix errors after they are already live?

Outcome 3: Improving Team Productivity

In higher education, the web team is often a small central group tasked with supporting a massive, decentralized network of contributors. When a CMS is difficult to use or lacks automated governance, the central team becomes a bottleneck, spending more time troubleshooting basic edits than focusing on high-level strategy.

True productivity in a higher education environment is measured by how efficiently the entire institution can maintain a vast content ecosystem, not by how fast one person can publish a page

Moving from Bottlenecks to Empowerment

To improve institutional productivity, a CMS must move beyond simple editing and provide tools for operational intelligence. This requires four core capabilities.

Content reuse, or update once, publish everywhere, addresses the most common productivity drain. Many institutions suffer from content sprawl: the same tuition rates, program deadlines, or faculty bios copied and pasted across dozens of departmental sites. When a figure changes, the central team has to track down every instance manually. A modern CMS instead uses a create-once, syndicate-many model, where a single master block of data is updated once and automatically reflected everywhere it appears, so when the Board of Trustees approves a new tuition rate, one update reflects correctly on the admissions site, the bursar's page, and every academic program page simultaneously.

Decentralized governance with guardrails solves a different problem. Productivity stalls when every minor change requires central approval, but risk increases if contributors have total freedom. The solution is a permissions and workflow engine that lets departmental editors publish routine updates directly while automatically routing high-stakes changes, like brand-level homepage edits, to an approval queue.

Automated content lifecycles handle the rest. Thousands of pages on university sites become zombie content: outdated, unowned, and unvisited. Automated reporting that notifies content owners when a page hasn't been reviewed in six months keeps the site lean without manual auditing.

A fourth capability matters just as much as the first three, and it's easy to overlook: meeting contributors where they are. Many platforms flag every possible signal for every contributor regardless of whether that person has any path to act on it, an SEO score, a full list of accessibility violations, a preview across a dozen browsers and devices. A first-time departmental editor confronted with unfamiliar jargon and checks she has no way to resolve doesn't become more careful. She becomes intimidated, and either abandons the task or starts ignoring every warning the system shows her, including the ones that matter.

The more effective approach starts with where contributors actually are, which usually isn't logging into the CMS. A departmental editor doesn't begin her day by opening Cascade; she begins it in her inbox. A Daily Content Report delivered there surfaces exactly what needs her attention that day, workflow tasks, content assigned to her, issues that need resolving, without requiring her to remember to check a dashboard she rarely visits.

Inside the CMS itself, the same calibration applies to feedback as it does to delivery. Content Tips offer AI-powered suggestions for metadata and image alt text in plain language at the point of writing, rather than a raw SEO score and a wall of technical recommendations a first-time contributor has no way to act on. Content review dates nudge owners to revisit and refresh pages before they go stale, building the habit of maintenance into the workflow rather than relying on a contributor to remember on their own. Over time, these nudges function as ongoing, built-in training. They build skill and confidence across hundreds of distributed contributors without requiring a formal onboarding program for every new hire, and they make a contributor more likely to engage with the CMS rather than work around it.

Institutions using this structured approach often report significantly faster publishing after implementing reusable components and structured workflows.

The Evaluative Question: Will this CMS reduce the manual burden on our central team through content reuse and automated governance, or will it create more busy work as our site scales? And does it meet contributors where they already work and teach them to produce better content over time, or does it simply flag problems they don't know how to fix?



Outcome 4:

Delivering Better Digital Experiences _____

Prospective students do not compare your college website to other colleges; they compare it to the digital experiences they encounter every day on Netflix, Amazon, and Spotify. Those platforms are fast, relevant, and personalized.

A better digital experience depends on whether a visitor feels the institution understands their specific needs, not just on modern design.

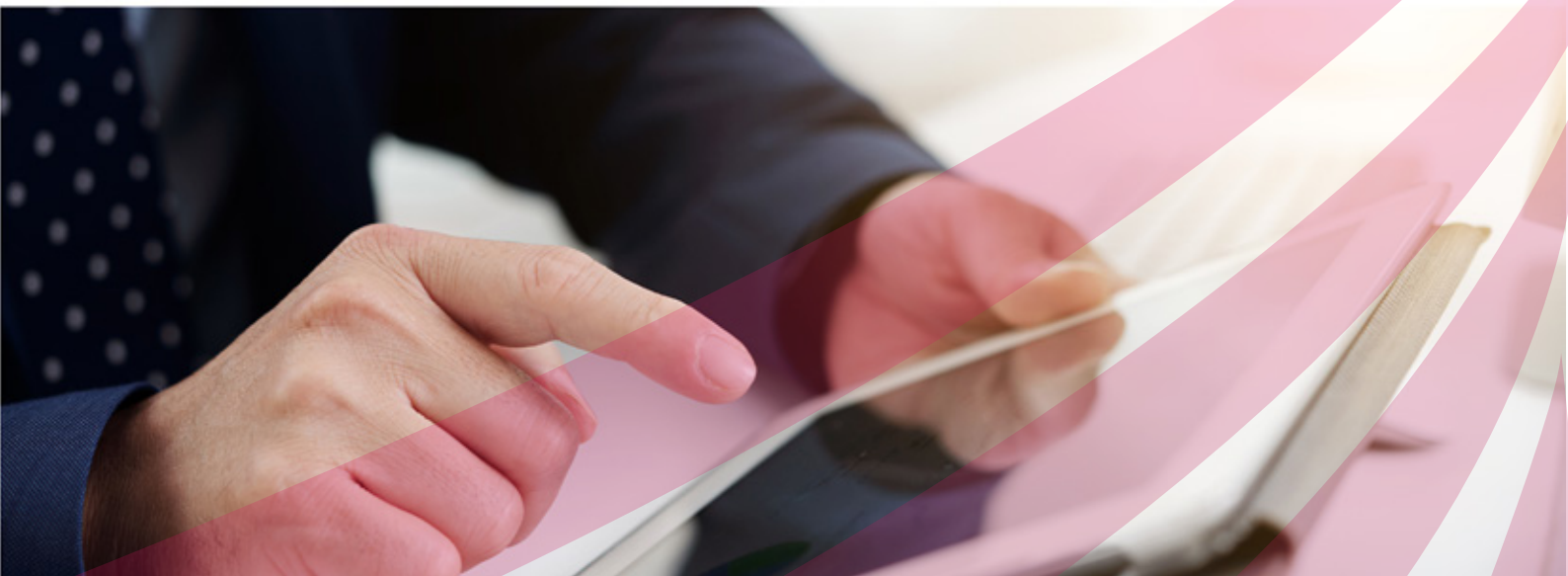
The Personalization Gap

Most higher ed websites offer a one-size-fits-all experience. A returning graduate student from a different state sees the same homepage content as a local high school junior visiting for the first time. This lack of relevance is a missed opportunity for engagement.

Institutions should evaluate a CMS by its ability to deliver sophisticated experiences that are simple for the marketing team to execute. This requires behavioral and geographic targeting, the ability to change a hero image or CTA based on where a visitor is located or which program pages they've visited previously so a website remembers a prospective student's interest and surfaces related scholarship information or campus tour dates on their next visit; and accessibility as UX, since personalization and design have to be built on accessible code so targeted content reaches users of assistive technologies as effectively as anyone on mobile or desktop.

Execution matters as much as the capability itself. Where enterprise personalization tools often require a dedicated developer to maintain, a visual rule builder lets marketers create audience segments without writing code, so a returning visitor who looked at the biology program can be greeted with a testimonial from a biology student rather than a generic "Apply Now" button, a level of relevance that has been shown to increase call-to-action performance by over 200%.

The Evaluative Question: Can our team easily deliver targeted, relevant content to different audience segments, and does the platform integrate with our existing enrollment data to make those experiences meaningful?



Outcome 5:

Future-Proofing Your Digital Presence

Selecting a content management system is a long-term investment in the infrastructure that supports recruitment, communications, accessibility, and institutional reputation.

Most institutions expect a CMS to remain in place for five to ten years, often longer. During that time, technology and your audience's expectations will continue to evolve in ways that are difficult to predict. Search behavior will change. New communication channels will emerge. Accessibility standards will mature. AI will reshape how prospective students discover and evaluate colleges.

The question is whether your CMS is designed to adapt alongside it. Future-proofing depends on three characteristics.

Flexible architecture. Today's institutional website no longer operates as a standalone publishing platform. It exchanges information with other systems. A modern CMS should function as the content hub within that ecosystem rather than an isolated application. Evaluation teams should ask whether the platform offers modern APIs, whether it can integrate with the systems they already use, and whether it will support technologies they haven't adopted yet. Architectural flexibility reduces the cost and complexity of future change, allowing new capabilities to be added as needs evolve rather than forcing a full replacement.

AI-ready content architecture. The rise of generative AI represents one of the most significant changes to digital discovery since the emergence of search engines. Increasingly, prospective students receive synthesized answers instead of lists of links, and institutions are competing not just for search rankings but to become trusted sources referenced within AI-generated responses. **No CMS can guarantee visibility in AI-powered search, but institutions should look for platforms that encourage structured content, consistent metadata, clean semantic markup, logical information architecture, reusable content, and strong governance.** These characteristics improve content quality regardless of how search technology evolves, and make institutional information easier for both humans and machines to interpret. Future-proofing is less about optimizing for today's algorithms than building content that stays useful, trustworthy, and adaptable as those algorithms change.

Sustainable partnership. Technology is only part of a long-term investment; the vendor behind the platform matters just as much. Evaluation teams should understand how product decisions are made: how frequently the platform is updated, how customer requests inform the roadmap, what customer retention looks like, whether there's an active higher education community, and what training and support resources exist. Strong customer retention, active user communities, and regular product enhancements often indicate that a platform continues delivering value well beyond the initial purchase.

What It Looks Like in Practice

A structured content architecture that separates content from presentation lets institutions redesign websites, launch microsites, or introduce new digital channels without rewriting years of existing content, while an API-first approach supports integration with other platforms and technologies as the ecosystem grows. An active customer community, sustained through annual user conferences and a roadmap shaped by institutional feedback, is what keeps that architecture evolving alongside the institutions that depend on it.

Future-proofing is ultimately about resilience. Institutions cannot predict every technological change they will face over the next decade. But they can choose a platform designed to adapt. Governance also protects one of the institution's largest digital investments: its website redesign. Without governance, content gradually becomes inconsistent, outdated, and duplicated, reducing the effectiveness of even the best design. A CMS should help preserve the integrity of the design system over time through structured content, reusable components, and editorial guardrails.

Evaluative Question: Will this CMS continue supporting our institution's strategic goals five years from now, even as technology, student expectations, and digital discovery continue to evolve?

From Features to Outcomes

Traditional CMS evaluations often resemble a simple checklist: workflow builder, role-based permissions, personalization, accessibility checker, APIs, each scored yes or no. The problem is that feature lists don't explain institutional value.

A better evaluation asks a different question: what outcome does this capability enable?

Capability	Institutional Outcome
Structured Content	Better AI visibility, easier content reuse, improved governance
Workflow Automation	Faster publishing, stronger quality control
Accessibility Tools	Reduced compliance risk, better user experience
Personalization	Higher engagement, stronger recruitment
Content Inventory	Better governance, improved content quality
APIs and Integrations	Greater flexibility and future readiness
AI-Assisted Authoring	Increased productivity, more consistent content

The same feature can support multiple institutional goals. Likewise, multiple features often work together to produce a single outcome: structured content leads to reusable components, which leads to consistent information, which builds trust and ultimately a better student experience. Understanding those relationships leads to better technology decisions than evaluating features in isolation.

An Outcomes-Based Evaluation Scorecard

Outcome	Weight	Score (1-5)	Notes
Recruiting More Students	20%		
Reducing Institutional Risk	20%		
Improving Team Productivity	20%		
Delivering Better Digital Experiences	20%		
Future-Proofing the Institution	20%		

Within each outcome area, ask vendors to demonstrate four things.

Capability: can the platform perform the required functions?

Usability: can typical contributors use those functions successfully without extensive technical expertise?

Evidence: can the vendor demonstrate measurable results from comparable institutions?

Scalability: will this approach continue working as the institution grows and digital expectations change?

These questions shift the evaluation away from software features alone and toward institutional performance.

Conclusion

Technology evaluations often begin with features because features are easy to compare. Strategic technology decisions should end with outcomes because outcomes are what institutions ultimately invest in. Two evaluation committees can sit through the same vendor demonstrations and walk away with entirely different decisions, depending on whether they're scoring checkmarks or asking which platform will actually move recruitment, risk, productivity, and experience forward.

Don't think of a content management system as just a publishing platform. It is the foundation for how prospective students discover your institution, how faculty and staff communicate, how accessibility is maintained, how governance scales across hundreds of contributors, and how your institution adapts to technology and user expectations that continue to evolve.

The most successful institutions are the institutions that choose technology aligned with their long-term goals. An outcomes-based evaluation framework helps ensure those goals remain at the center of every conversation.

Whether you're evaluating Cascade CMS or another platform, the fundamental question remains the same: The question is no longer whether a CMS has the right features. The question is whether those features help your institution achieve the outcomes that matter most.

Request a personalized demonstration to see how Cascade CMS and Clive support student recruitment, accessibility and governance, team productivity, personalized digital experiences, and long-term digital resilience.

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About Hannon Hill

Hannon Hill is dedicated exclusively to helping colleges and universities manage, govern, and optimize their digital content. For more than two decades, Hannon Hill has partnered with higher education institutions to address the unique challenges of decentralized content ownership, complex governance requirements, and high-stakes digital experiences.

Hannon Hill's flagship platform, Cascade CMS, is purpose-built for higher education. Unlike generic content management systems, Cascade CMS is designed to support structured content, role-based governance, workflow automation, accessibility, and content reuse at scale, helping institutions reduce risk, improve efficiency, and deliver consistent, trustworthy digital experiences.

Hannon Hill also offers Clive, a personalization platform that allows institutions to tailor content and messaging for different audiences while maintaining accessibility and governance standards. Together, Cascade CMS and Clive enable institutions to move beyond one-size-fits-all websites toward more relevant, student-centered digital experiences.

Today, hundreds of colleges, universities, and public-sector institutions rely on Hannon Hill to manage mission-critical content, support enrollment and marketing goals, and transform content from a hidden cost into a strategic asset. That longevity isn't incidental: Hannon Hill maintains a 97% customer retention rate, a reflection of a product roadmap built directly around what institutions tell us they need.

Learn how governed content can transform marketing performance and enrollment outcomes at www.hannonhill.com

