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EdTech Vetting through the Sandbox

Our Approach to Vendor Engagement

Summary

Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) conducts hundreds of educational technology (edtech) product demos each year. Sandbox ColLABorative, SNHU's lab of strategy and innovation, facilitates an EdTech Vetting Committee that provides leadership for the university for the sourcing and strategic exploration of new products. Sandbox is pleased to present this report as a resource for the SNHU community and our current and potential vendor partners. Our intent is to provide transparency into the workings of this committee and to communicate findings from our research into best practices for vendor engagement.

In This Report

Vendors, Vendors Everywhere!

The edtech market is exploding: It is estimated that by 2020, approximately $252 billion will be spent on education technology, as more institutions turn to technology to sustain and scale their programs. Nonetheless, as new products flood the market:

- Institutional stakeholders are often left feeling ill-equipped or under-equipped to make informed decisions about adopting new products.
- What was once the dedicated work of CIOs/CTOs now falls on academic leaders, faculty, staff, and other networks of decision-makers tasked with the product selection process but who themselves may have little experience dealing with vendors and may lack optics into their institution's product needs and capacity for innovation.

SNHU is not immune to these challenges. Almost daily, our leadership encounters a dizzying array of new edtech products—many of which upend conventional pedagogical practices and traverse product verticals with a complex number of applications and potential use cases. We also face the enduring challenge of

embracing innovation as a way to sustain our existing business models while also looking ahead to more disruptive models for the future. These realities require new ways of thinking about how discrete products fit not only within our current delivery models but also our institutional strategy, which includes continued focus on access, equity, and student success.

A critical strategy for SNHU to improve this process is to facilitate vendor activity through Sandbox's EdTech Vetting Committee. This committee:

- Is composed of Sandbox staff and representatives from each of SNHU's academic business units—University College (UC), College for Online and Continuing Education (COCE), and College for America (CfA)—which are the "end users" of the technological products and services. Sandbox serves as an internal consultancy to these three business units.
- Applies a methodology for vetting new products (see Figure 2) in order to make informed recommendations to our business units as well as build out our pipeline of future partners.

How to Make Demos More Productive

In forming this committee, Sandbox conducted research into the current state of vendor engagement and strategic sourcing in higher education. Not surprisingly, we found that higher education has a notoriously complicated relationship with vendors, which is only growing more complex as the edtech market evolves.

On the one hand, institutions need vendors to provide innovative tools to extend equity and access to new populations, strengthen learning outcomes, and scale programs. On the other hand, institutions are confused about the products that are available today, how they work, and their evidence of impact. At the same time, decision-makers rarely appreciate feeling "sold to"—at least with products for which they have little awareness or engagement. Where this tension manifests itself most acutely is in product demos—scheduled meetings usually at the beginning stages of product selection in which institutional stakeholders gather to engage with vendor representatives and learn about new products. Institutions have many goals going into these engagements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Goals of Vendor Demos

Overall, we hope to gain...	Throughout the demo, we expect to...	For SNHU, demos may result in...
• Ideas and insights about new products and how they work • Evidence of adoption and impact • Market intelligence • A growing pipeline of products and partners	• Encounter something new, promising, and useful • Convene with colleagues, collaborate, and plan • See a product in action, envision possible use cases • Ask questions • Gain insight into how a product is similar or differentiated	• Clarity about our needs and objectives • Requests for further information • Purchase and adoption of new products • New strategic partnerships

Source: Sandbox ColLABorative

Nonetheless, institutions (and vendors) underestimate the planning needed to optimize this process. As a result, demos are often:

- **Poorly planned** with decision-makers lacking training and transparency into the selection process. Stakeholders also lack sufficient research conducted in advance to inform the product exploration process.
- **Improvised**—essentially resembling a "come as you are" process in which decision-makers have little understanding of the problem(s) a product promises to solve, let alone vision as to why an institution is even considering a product in the first place.
- **Misaligned** with decision-makers bringing competing "agendas" to bear on the strategy for the product, which rarely coalesce and only exacerbate the imbalances created by poor planning and improvisation.
- **Unclear in their intended outcomes**—often resulting in an ambiguous or ill-defined use case or set of next steps to drive the process forward.

How Our Vetting Committee Works

Improving the quality and outcomes of product demos requires building awareness of not just how products work or how they may apply, but how vendors themselves work, including their sales strategies, tactics, and tools. This leads to an effective way of managing institution-vendor relationships, thereby increasing our productivity throughout the product selection process. To this end, Sandbox follows a discrete set of priorities and practices with each demo we facilitate:

- **Building awareness of where a product sits within the market ecosystem.** A successful demo starts with a clear delineation of the product under review. What is the product? How does it work? What is its value proposition, and how does the proposition fare against other products? Sandbox also sources information about other vendors with similar or comparable products in a particular product vertical, and when needed will collect information on the state of the company/product itself. Is it gaining or declining in market share? Has it experienced recent leadership changes? Is its product vertical increasingly more or less consolidated? Is the product threatened by competing products or external market forces we should be aware of?
- **Identifying competitors.** A successful demo takes into account a vendor's competitive set. Where is the product situated within a class or category of products? What are other major offerings within that category? How is the product under review similar and differentiated?
- **Aligning products to potential use cases.** A successful demo is planned based on a pre-determined set of priorities and potential solutions we need to explore. Sandbox, for instance, regularly collects thesis statements from our business units, which seek to articulate both their priorities and discrete research and product needs (see below). Doing so enables us to better position our research agenda and source products based on an articulated set of needs.
- **A collaborative mindset within and across units and with our peers and other partners in the field.** Demos are highly engaging and are as much about product selection as they are about ideation and future planning for the university. In cases where we engage with knowledgeable vendors, we may even treat demos as strategic engagements from which to engage in conversation about not just products but also future trends in higher education. Vendors may appreciate this approach as a way of understanding our needs and building relationships with our community, and we find value in the chance to solicit outside perspectives. By asking targeted questions, we also gain competitive intelligence that can inform our strategy.

The outcomes of a demo should also be clear and actionable. At the conclusion of each demo, if not beforehand, Sandbox/SNHU should:

- **Ensure that we have sufficiently learned enough about a product's application in a specific use case.** Any demo that does not provide insight into how a product may be used in an actual scenario is unsuccessful. To this end, we commit to engaging vendors with a clear sense of need but also expect vendors either to name and elaborate on use cases or be prepared to field questions from our perspective. Our initial screening process, conducted by Sandbox staff (see Figure 2), includes sharing insight with vendors into particular use cases by aligning products with a unit's or multiple units' thesis statement(s).
- **Gain awareness of a product's features, functions, and future roadmap.** A demo should be sufficiently focused on the present and future evolution of the product. It should provide insight into a vendor's business model and market strategy, and where appropriate provide transparency into future product changes or partnerships.
- **Consider operational and implementation perspectives.** A demo should clarify the level of effort required to implement or migrate to the vendor's system or service and maintain it going forward.
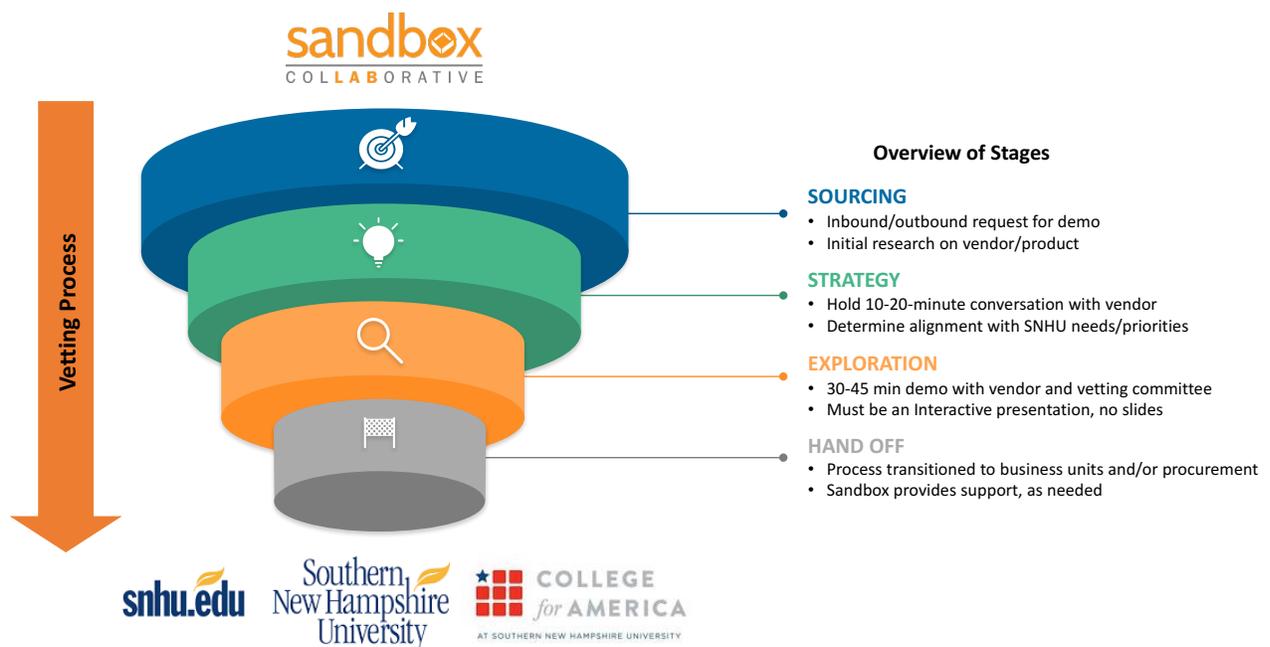
Information should include implementation and maintenance costs, and what support staff or training is necessary to support the system after implementation. Also, support services are provided through the vendor? Is the product self-hosted, cloud-hosted, or fully SaaS? What degree of integration with university systems and infrastructure is necessary to fully utilize the product? Does the vendor rely on any third-parties to deliver the product?

- **Gain a sense of evidence of the product's impact with *actual clients*.** As a first order for doing business, we expect vendors to provide evidence of who their clients are and how they use the vendor's products. We also prefer to learn about products through live case examples—appropriately anonymized—to provide further context for application and end user outcomes. To this end, if we are interested in learning more or potentially working with a vendor, we may request a list of references, including clients, investors in the company, and any other analytical data that might provide further perspectives on our potential use of the product.

Sandbox's EdTech Vetting Process

SNHU is always in pursuit of new products to support our mission. We are also deeply committed to optimizing the performance of our business units by providing the time, space, and resources needed to engage vendors and make recommendations to the leadership as to whether we wish to pursue or pass on a product or seek more information. Our process occurs across four stages (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Sandbox's edtech vetting process

Overview of Stages

SOURCING
- Inbound/outbound request for demo
- Initial research on vendor/product

STRATEGY
- Hold 10-20-minute conversation with vendor
- Determine alignment with SNHU needs/priorities

EXPLORATION
- 30-45 min demo with vendor and vetting committee
- Must be an Interactive presentation, no slides

HAND OFF
- Process transitioned to business units and/or procurement
- Sandbox provides support, as needed

Source: Sandbox ColLABorative

Sourcing

At this stage, inbound requests for a demo are made to Sandbox via email or our website, or Sandbox makes an outbound request to a vendor. The goal of this phase is to establish a point of contact with a company—preferably with leaders operating at a strategic level within the company/organization—and to set up an initial screening of the product. Sandbox also conducts preliminary research at this stage in advance of the initial screening.

Strategy

If a product appears viable, Sandbox schedules and conducts a brief 10- to 20-minute conversation with the vendor to determine alignment with SNHU's needs/priorities. The goal of this conversation is to gain a general perspective on the company and its product(s), as well as to imagine potential use case(s). Topics may include: company history, leadership, and vision; a product's value proposition and performance in the market; a list of clients or of potential changes to a company's vision or product roadmap. Sandbox may also pass on the product at this stage or schedule a demo with our vetting committee.

Demos are all scheduled and facilitated by Sandbox with all communication handled through our office.

Exploration

Demos are scheduled on a two-week rotation and may be virtual or in-person. They are to be no longer than 30 to 45 minutes, in most cases, and are facilitated by Sandbox or other members of the vetting committee. Demos at this phase should interactive and per our requirements:

- **Use no slides.** No one buys a car through PowerPoint. Slides, especially excessively long decks made up mostly of company information, are unacceptable. Sandbox reserves the right to stop the presentation if slides are used. Rather, demos should be conducted through use of live product or with an engaging product shell that affords ample opportunity for demonstration of its capabilities, applications, and use cases.
- **Be conducted in a no "BS" manner.** In each demo, we control the conversation and have little interest in information covered in the initial screening. Typically, vendors are allotted 5 minutes for introduction. The live demo is followed by questions posed by our committee. Discussions are also entirely unscripted and designed to follow our line of inquiry and reasoning—not the vendor's. Sandbox prepares vendors for this approach in advance.

In cases when we wish to further engage with a vendor, or if our committee has expressed interest in learning more, we will schedule a follow-up session—often a forum or "lunch-and-learn"—with a broader network of decision-makers who may be interested in the product. In many cases, vendors choose to be present for these meetings, though it is not at all required at this stage. A virtual presentation is perfectly acceptable. This demo should also be highly interactive and still make minimal, if any, use of slides. These demos are also to be no longer than 30 to 45 minutes.

Hand Off

For products with potential for adoption, Sandbox hands off this process to interested business units. Our procurement division of finance may also begin its own due diligence process for the vendor. Sandbox may continue to support business units in the exploration and adoption of a product.

Business Units' Areas of Need

The following describe each unit's current interest in edtech and discrete research and product needs. This information is directional—not definitive—and is intended solely as a basis for providing research and facilitation support, and for vetting new products.

University-wide
- Business intelligence solutions, namely those that support activity-based costing (ABC)
- Alternative credentialing mechanisms—particularly that leverage blockchain technology

COCE
- Retention and student success solutions
- Content curation engines
- Adaptive learning and corresponding categories such as personalized learning, machine learning, and augmented reality; the goal is to consider products against research on efficacy studies and value considerations, and to consider application of adaptive learning at the graduate-level

UC
- Solutions to support retention, persistence, and graduation, including early-alerts and predictive analytics
- Solutions to teach financial literacy
- Student success collaboration tools for use among faculty, administrative, and advisors to share notes, provide triggers for outreach, manage early warnings, manage event/support attendance tracking, and facilitate communication

CfA
- Curriculum and assessment development, including tools for content development, curation, and maintenance
- Coaching/advising tools
- Evaluation tools, including peer-to-peer and artificial intelligence scoring

Engage with Us

Sandbox is pleased to support the university through this committee through a set of recommendations and practices to follow in this effort. If you are interested in learning more about our EdTech Vetting Committee and its processes or to engage with Sandbox, please contact our deputy director of research, Brian Fleming at b.fleming@snhu.edu.

Sandbox ColLABorative is the research and development lab of strategy and innovation at Southern New Hampshire University.

Our team provides evidence-based research and strategic advisory support for university leadership as well as our academic community and partners. We apply mixed research methods to produce pragmatic insights aligned to our core strategic initiatives. Each deliverable serves as a platform for collaboration with our partners as we strive towards greater depth of understanding and building data-driven solutions.

For more information, or to learn more about our services, please visit us online at www.sandboxcollaborative.org or email us at sandbox@snhu.edu. You can also follow us on Twitter @sandboxSNHU

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