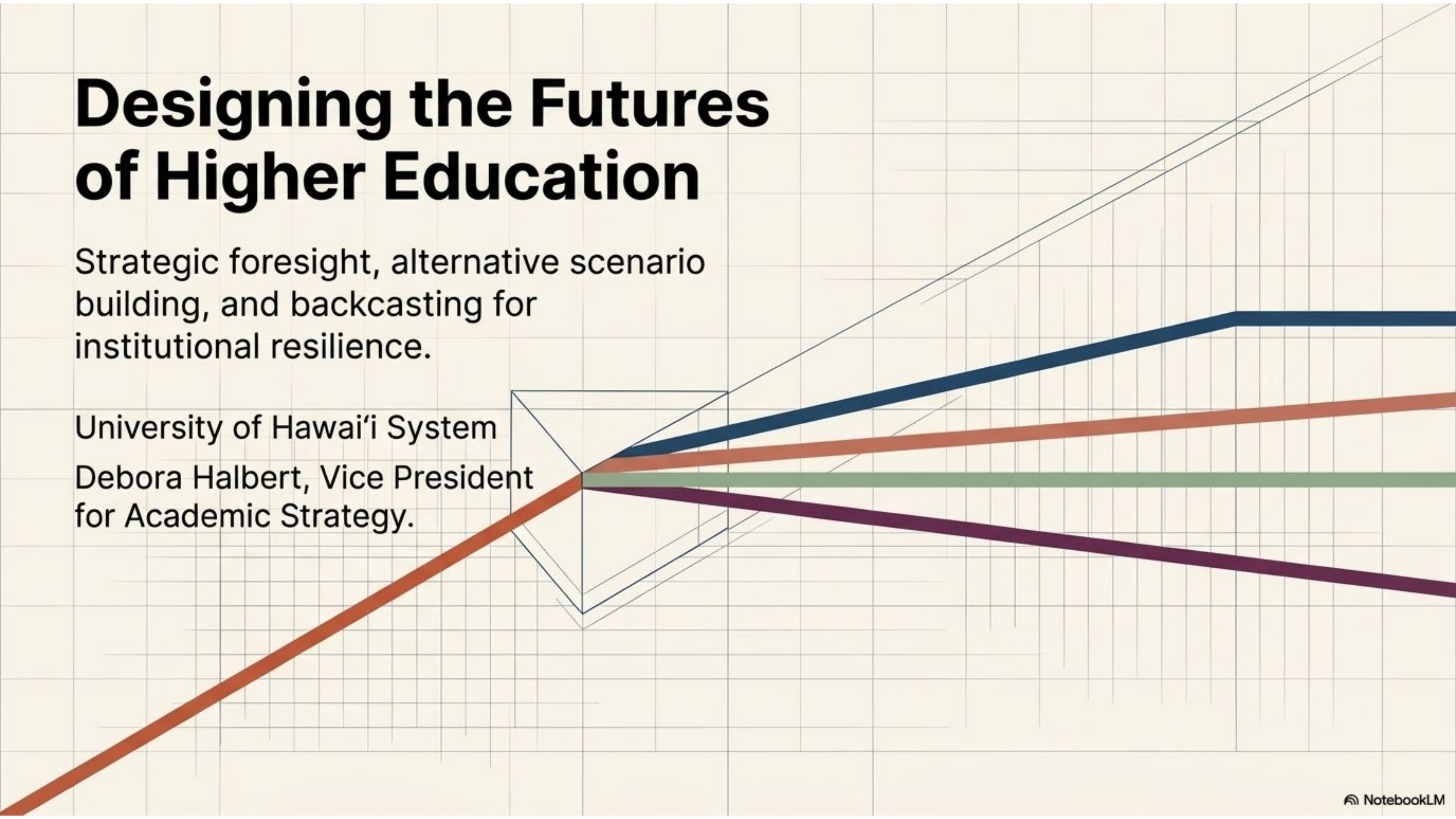


# Designing the Futures of Higher Education

Strategic foresight, alternative scenario building, and backcasting for institutional resilience.

University of Hawai'i System  
Debora Halbert, Vice President  
for Academic Strategy.



**Any useful statement  
about the future should  
seem ridiculous.**

**— J. Dator**

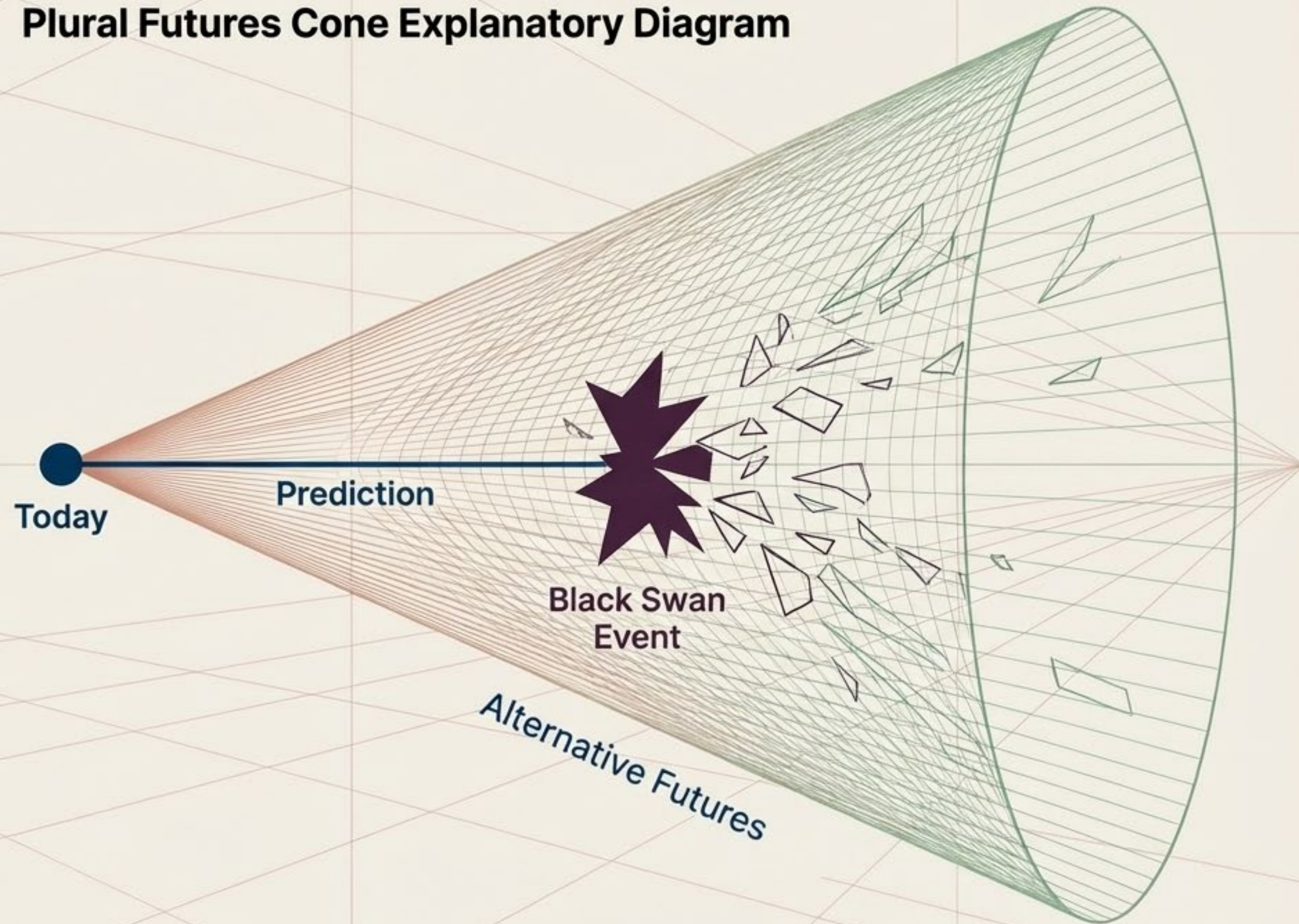
Surviving uncertain times requires moving beyond present-day constraints. If a future scenario feels entirely comfortable and familiar, it is already obsolete.

# Strategizing for the Unexpected

Predictions are rarely right. They set institutions up to prepare for a single possible outcome—leaving us highly vulnerable to Black Swans (e.g., selling all belongings to live off the grid in the face of Y2K).

The Mānoa futures method is premised on a critical shift: we cannot predict a specific future, but we can map a range of possible futures to build true institutional resilience.

## Plural Futures Cone Explanatory Diagram



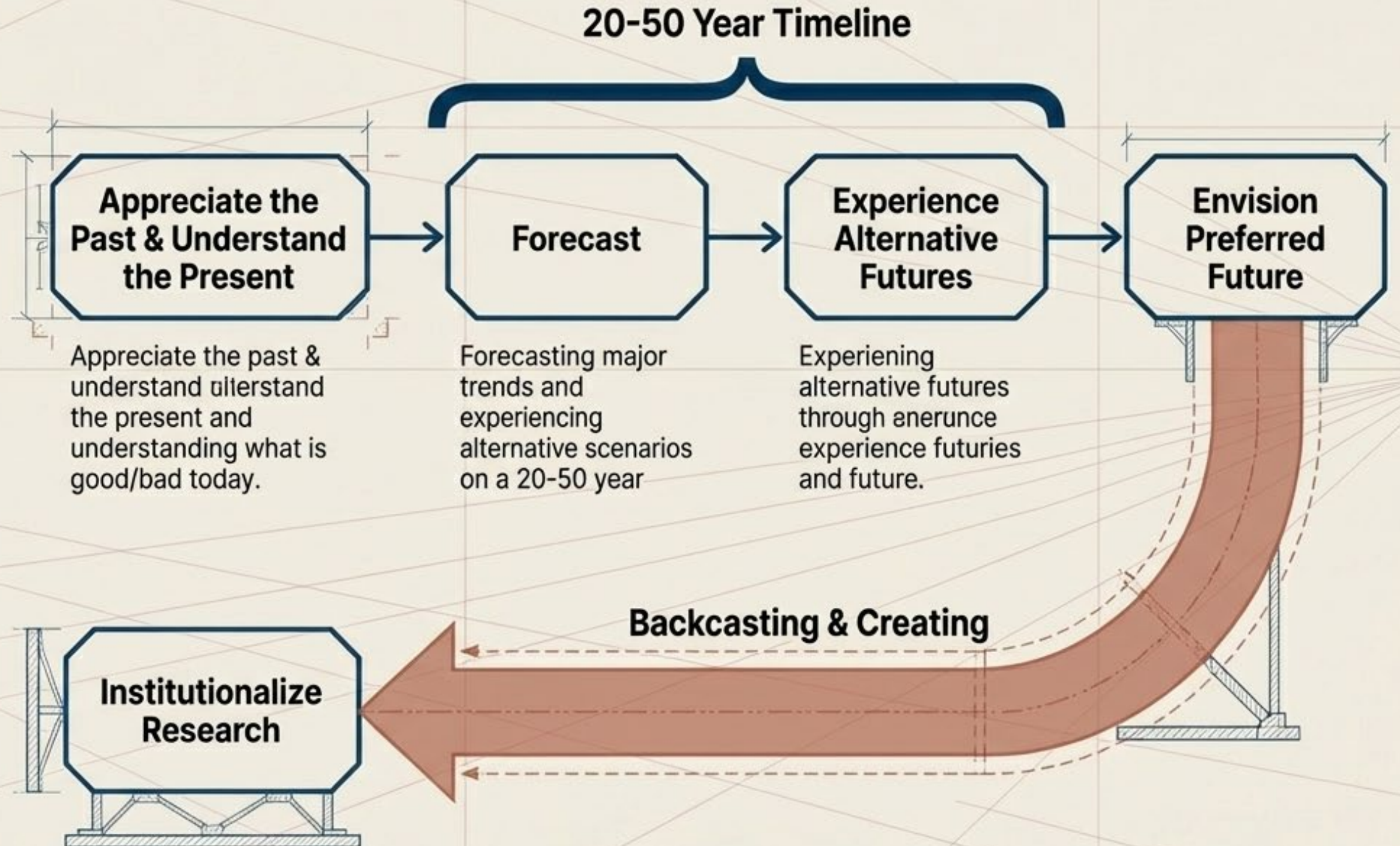
# The Strategic Paradigm Shift

<b>The Predictive Mindset (Fragile)</b>	<b>The Plural Futures Mindset (Resilient)</b>
<b>Core Assumption:</b> The future is simply the present extended and amplified.	<b>Core Assumption:</b> The future is a plural landscape of divergent possibilities.
<b>Goal:</b> Guess the single correct outcome.	<b>Goal:</b> Get out of the mindset of one possible future; explore radical alternatives.
<b>Risk Profile:</b> Total failure if the primary forecast is wrong (Future Shock).	<b>Risk Profile:</b> Highly adaptable; strategies are tested against multiple extremes.
<b>Action:</b> Preparing for specific events.	<b>Action:</b> Designing robust, back-casted strategies.

# The Alternative Futures Process Architecture

## Chrono-Flowchart

<b>Anchor:</b> Appreciating how the past influences our trajectory and understanding what is good/bad today.
<b>Expand:</b> Forecasting major trends and experiencing alternative scenarios on a 20-50 year timeline.
<b>Synthesize:</b> Envisioning a collectively-preferred future.
<b>Act:</b> Backcasting from that distant future to determine the precise ways of getting from here to there. Continuing to look ahead so institutions do not remain static.



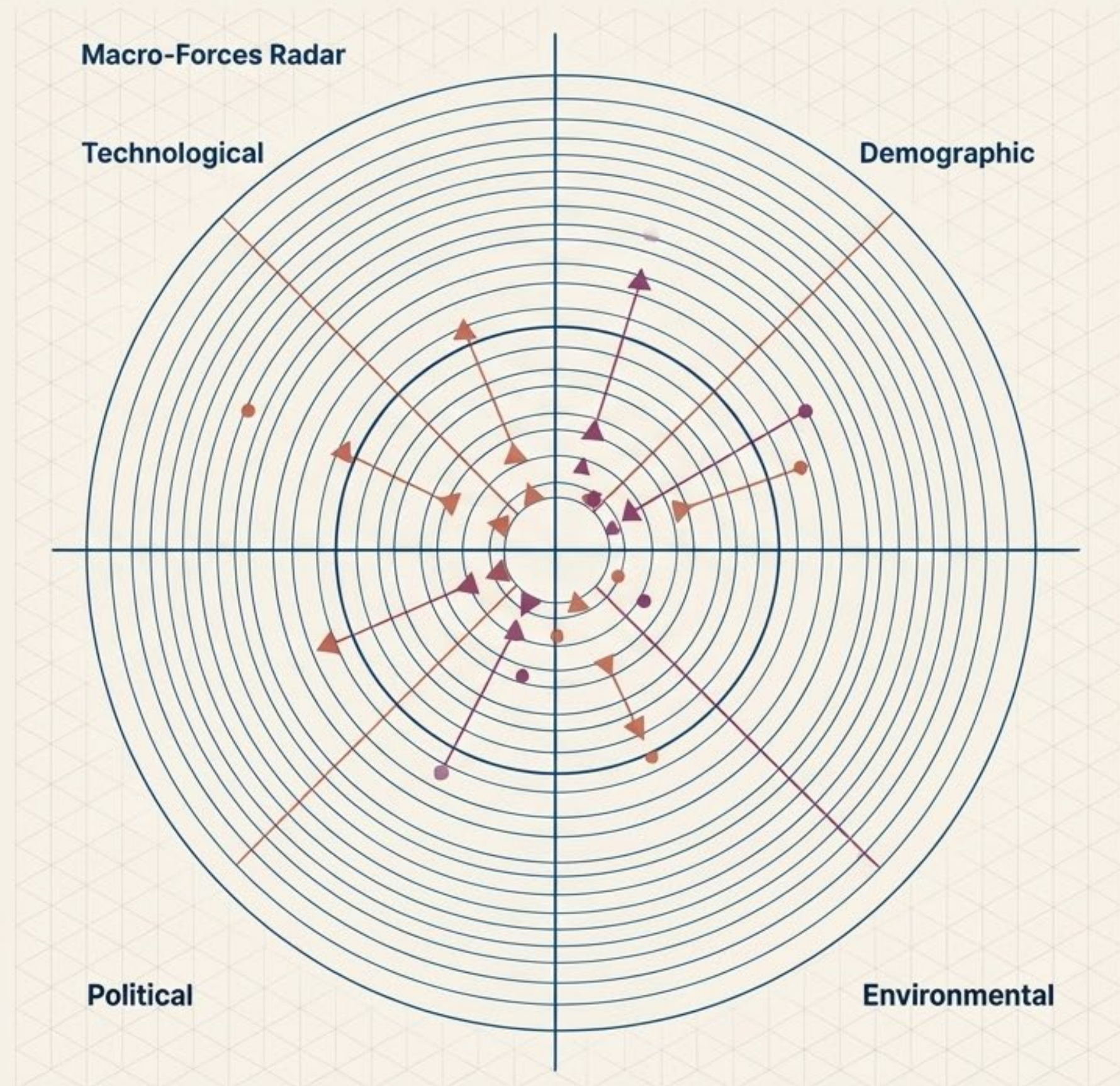
# Tracking Emerging Issues & Macro-Forces

In a full futures process, institutions brainstorm specific emerging issues. Today, we map active signals across four primary domains.

## Active Signals

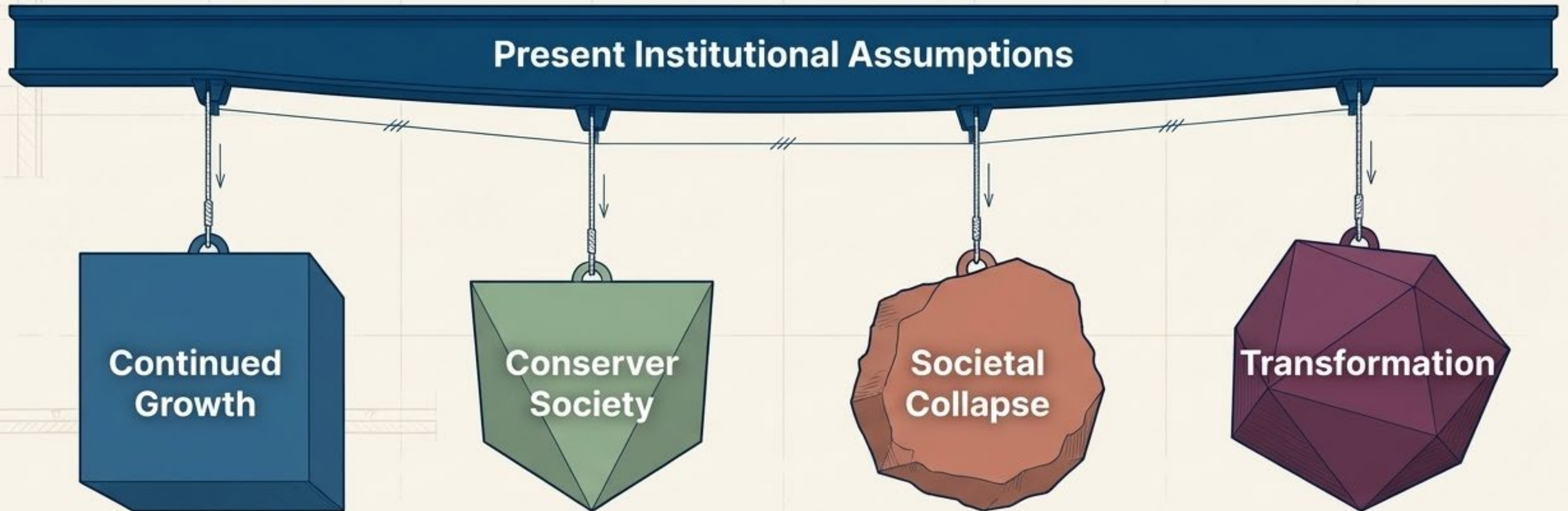
- **Political & Economic Blips:** Increasing tuition costs and growing pressure to align educational goals to jobs have led to public outcry that higher education is too expensive and irrelevant.
- **Policy Blips:** Rising state intervention into public institutional curriculum to align with conservative values.

Prompt for the room: What emerging issue will most disrupt our current trajectory?



# Pressure-Testing Institutional Strategy

To **break the default assumption of a linear future**, the Mānoa School method utilizes **Four Generic Scenarios**. These scenarios act as a structural stress test. By forcing our strategies into these four extreme future environments, we test our present assumptions against the boundaries of what is possible. The goal is to experience images of the future actually desired by some people today, and determine how we might successfully thrive within them.





# Workshop Exercise: The 2056 Sandbox

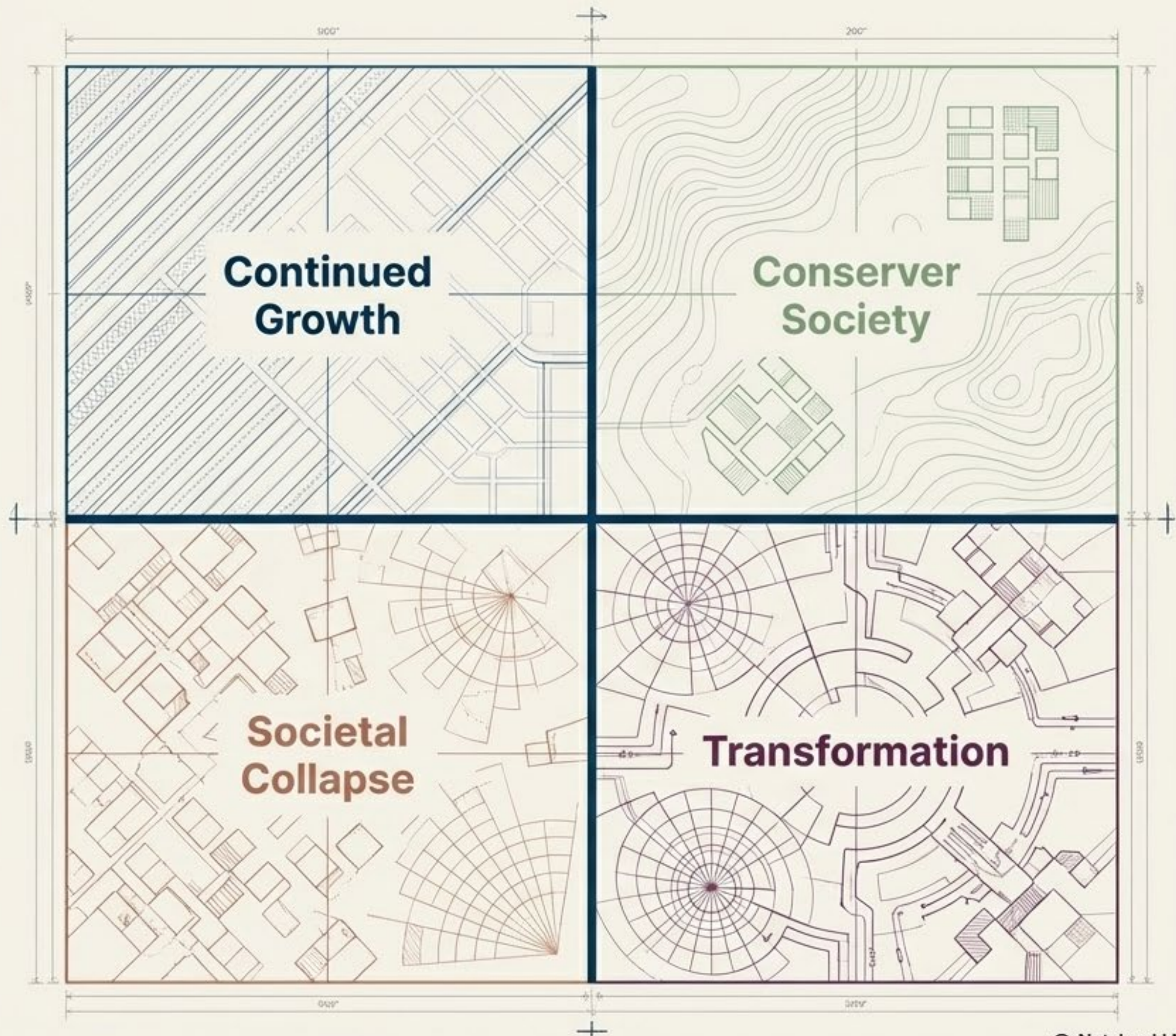
## Parameters (30 Minutes):

- Form groups of 4 to 10 people.
- Each group is assigned one specific scenario to optimize time.

**The Mission:** Grapple with what higher education looks like within your assigned 2056 reality.

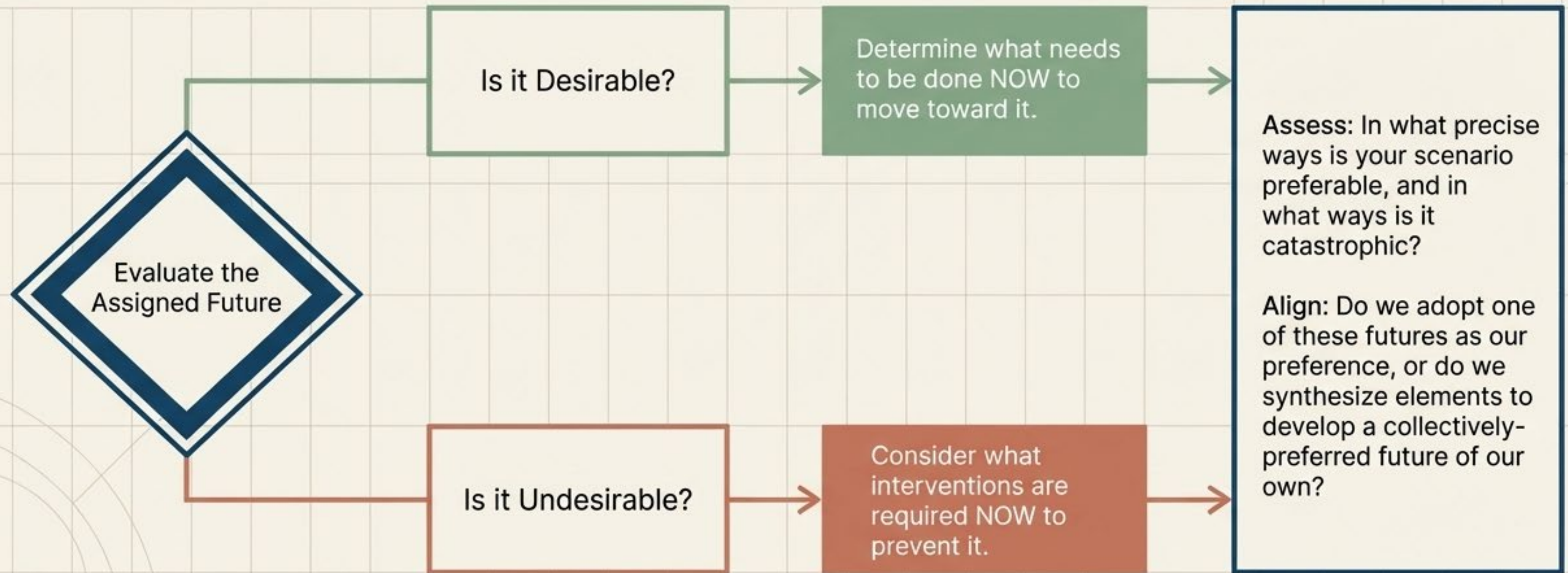
## Required Outputs:

- What exactly is being taught in this reality?
- How must we structure the administration of the campus to survive/thrive here?
- Who holds the responsibilities?



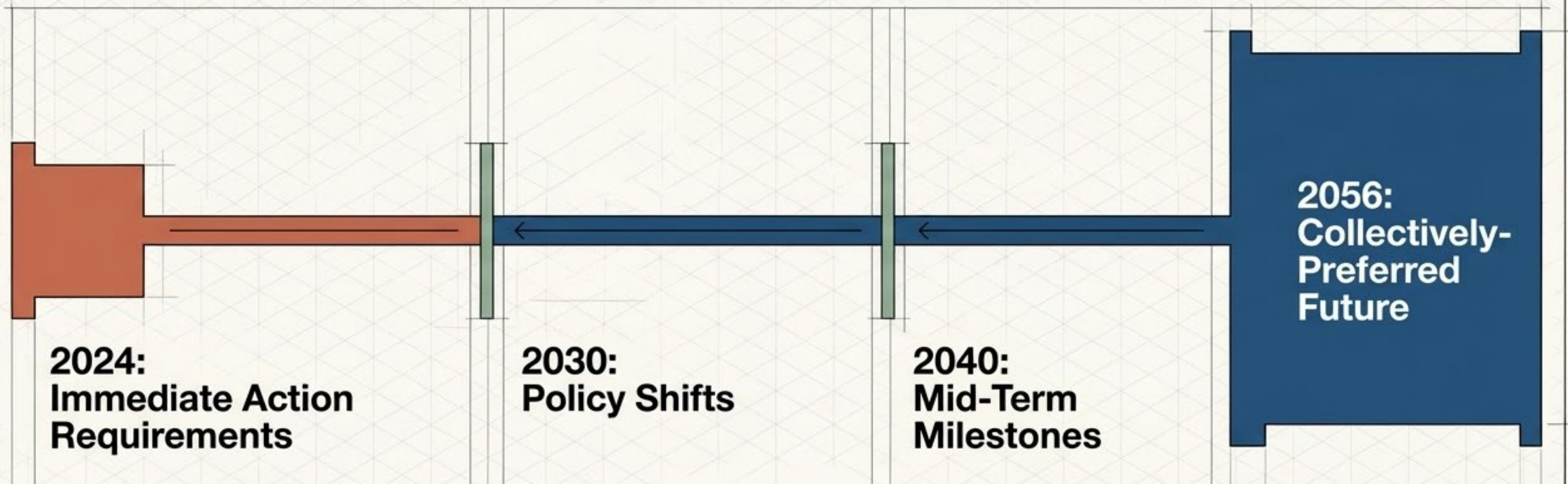
# Debriefing the Horizon (20 Minutes)

Now that you have experienced a fundamentally different future, we must evaluate it against our institutional values.



# The Backcasting Blueprint

We do not envision a 20-50 year timeframe to predict the future. We envision it so we can backcast to the present. By anchoring our destination in 2056, we can trace a direct line backward to today. This reveals the precise structural changes, policy interventions, and resource allocations required right now to bridge the gap from here to there.



# Institutionalizing Futures Research

The goal of this process is not a single workshop output.

Resilience requires embedding strategic foresight into our ongoing administrative DNA—continuing to look ahead, remaining radically adaptable, and ensuring the institution never remains static in the face of uncertainty.