Refining a Stakeholder Saliency Model for Higher Education Information Technology Management

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[Abstract] This qualitative grounded theory study examined how decision-makers in a higher education IT department responded to different types of stakeholder demands through their management practices. Utilizing the theory of Stakeholder Saliency (Mitchell et al., 1997), interviews were conducted with 12 middle and senior-level decision makers in the IT department of a publicly funded university in the NW United States. Participants were asked questions related to their prioritization of stakeholder groups internal and external to the IT department based on the level of power, legitimacy, and urgency included in the group's demands. IT managers consistently prioritized specific stakeholders based on the specific characteristics of their demands in terms of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Strategic and Situational categorizations of stakeholders were found with dimensional filters that distinguish between high/low priority on each managerial dimension.

[Keywords] management, information technology, stakeholder theory, grounded theory, decision-making

Introduction

In the realm of higher education management, one of the most challenging roles on campus is held by Chief Information Officers and IT managers reporting to them. These are the leaders with a seemingly impossible responsibility: to ensure their universities keep pace with the tech race in conducting research, teaching, and service that addresses the needs of their students' future careers and society at large. And the pace is grueling, designed to stay abreast of corporate shifts their students anticipate, yet the 2025 Future of Work Report found in their survey of over 1,000 global employers that 65% of respondents experienced their industries' tech changes faster than their firms could adapt, and that only 13% of companies declared they could keep up with the pace of technological change (Talen Alpha & Proservartner, 2025). Julita Iks, CEO of Talent Alpha, a platform that connects and manages IT specialists across 55 countries and co-generator of the report, observed, "This widening gap highlights the urgent need for companies to build resilience, agility, and a future-oriented approach to digital transformation."

As a result, university CIOs, too, are attempting to better understand how their and their teams' decision-making skills can be more agile, resilient, and future-oriented. Fostering a research-based refinement of relevant stakeholder theory in actual practice is one way to understand these crucial dynamics between managers and their most-fluid teams.

The IT departments of higher education institutions are subject to a variety of demands made by stakeholders on their campuses. IT operational functions include the support of essential technological services on campus, the security and storage of key data, and the maintenance and upgrade schedule of technology in the classroom. IT managers are mindful that groups such as the executive level leadership team, senior vice presidents, faculty, students, and research laboratories all require differing responses from the IT department itself; given the finite budgetary and human resources of IT departments, it therefore becomes the responsibility of decision-makers in IT to

understand and prioritize stakeholder groups when creating action plan items. This qualitative study examined how IT decision-makers navigate the demands of stakeholder groups when responding to the diverse demands imposed upon them. Focused on a single university to more deeply examine the cross-functional work among managers via in-depth interviews, this research yielded new findings that refine the application of stakeholder theory, even as the single site concurrently constitutes a case study. Therefore, this research is categorized as grounded theory in its service as a contextual extension of earlier studies.

Review of Relevant Literature

Stakeholder theory provides normative ethical guidelines that require the activities of the firm or organization be governed by the "Stakeholder Enabling Principle": "Corporations shall be managed in the interests of its stakeholders, defined as employees, financiers, customers… and communities" (Freeman, 2010, p. 417). While there is disagreement about a specific definition, generally speaking, stakeholders are individuals or groups internal and external to an organization who can affect or are affected by that organization's decisions (Freeman & Reed, 1983; Phillips, 2001). This definition of stakeholders is meant to be inclusive; by communicating the interests of all parties associated with the dealings of a firm, the business evaluates the ethics of its own decisions through a process based on reciprocity and inclusion (Brummette & Zoch, 2016; Trif et al., 2020).

However, the interests of individuals and groups that meet the prior definition are not necessarily equal, and the specificities of interactions between stakeholder groups and the firms considering their interests thus creates ambiguity within stakeholder theory, especially given circumstances where the decision-maker does not have firsthand knowledge of how the decision will impact fair treatment of stakeholder groups (Phillips, 2001; Evans & Evans, 2014). With disagreement in the definitions that can guide governance decisions, the organization must make rational and deliberate choices about the priority given to each stakeholder group in a pro-relationship and pro-organizational manner (Phillips, 1997; Bosse & Coughlin, 2016). In more recent research, effective management of groups was seen as a moral obligation to stakeholders that are marginalized or forced to abide by trade-offs when managers enact their priorities (Taylor & Rosca, 2024).

While these general characteristics of stakeholder theory were initially written regarding the private sector and business ethics specifically, stakeholders in a higher educational context often show similar processes of identity creation and both inter-organizational and intra-organizational negotiation of their specific demands (Boichuk & Fast, 2017; Choudhury & Pattnaik, 2020). In the context of higher education information technology (IT) departments, the priorities of these decisions are often targeted at improving the overall technological systems with the learning needs of students and faculty, the existing infrastructure of the university as a whole, the integration of technology into the future vision of the institution such as mobile cloud computing, or concerns related to cybersecurity (Ozkan & Spruit, 2020; Jackson et al., 2023; M. Azem Qashou & Mohamed, 2025).

As noted by Gong (2021), the competing interests of these duties emphasize the need for effective management of internal and external stakeholders in IT departments to meet the competing needs and values of these groups; this finding has been reinforced by stakeholder assessments of specific higher educational IT functions, such as tools for online exam proctoring (Mutimukwe et al., 2025). Tang and Yang (2025) noted that this management functions as an expression of corporate social responsibility for IT departments, especially in the context of

protecting end users from cybersecurity breaches. One method for evaluating the needs of these stakeholder groups is the framework of stakeholder saliency, first presented by Mitchell et al. (1997). In this theory, the interests and demands on the organization of stakeholder groups should be evaluated by those groups' respective power over the organization, the legitimacy of their attachment to the organization, and the urgency of the interests and demands presented. Stakeholder saliency, therefore, could function in tandem with the people-process-technology model (Taher, 2023) for the integration of stakeholder interests into the overall decision-making process in higher educational institutions in order to engage with diverse stakeholders when managing IT projects (Nusir et al., 2022). Additionally, higher education IT serves a key role in providing needed supports to students with diverse needs, such as those with disabilities (Sriwisathiyakun, 2024).

A number of studies have been conducted examining the dynamics of decision-making across the functions of IT departments. Fore and Mugobo (2024) found that regular communication and stakeholder involvement in the decision-making process were viewed positively by IT employees, regardless of whether the strategy used by the institution focused on decisions that were human-centered or technology-centered. A qualitative study by Jiya (2019) examined the role that responsibility plays in stakeholder dynamics in IT departments pursuing communication and research projects; this study found that ambiguity in how participants defined the concept of responsibility can lead to confusion in terms of role-assignment in these departments, a finding on the importance of roles and conflict that was echoed by Kumije et al. (2025). Durate et al. (2013) found that management in IT projects often relies upon the involvement of powerful stakeholders to be successful.

In a higher education context, Grey et al. (2022) noted the importance of support being given to analytics-based decision-making for stakeholders, with the implementation of learning analytics needing to be effectively implemented. Technology decision-makers, when faced with uncertainty, may be well-advised to weigh the probabilities of outcomes of their decisions to maximize the utility returns produced by their decisions (Uzhga-Rebrov & Kuleshova, 2022). Clarity around patterns of IT decision-makers via the lens of stakeholder theory would greatly assist in aligning decisions with expectations for results. Further, analyzing stakeholder theory via the decision-making processes used by a group of managers expected to work fluidly on projects—whether as individuals or agile teams—is instructive in the refinement of the model itself.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

For this study, the guidelines of Corbin and Strauss (2008) were followed, both in the design of the study and in the coding process. This study utilized a *priori* theory of Stakeholder Saliency (Mitchell et al., 1997) to aid in the process of testing and refining a theory in the context of higher education IT departments. The definitions of the three attributes groups possess in Stakeholder Saliency were utilized, as follows: (1) stakeholder power, which is defined as the ability of a stakeholder group to change or stop a project that the organization is forming; (2) stakeholder legitimacy, which is defined as a group possessing specific goals that are aligned with the goals of the organization as a whole; and (3) stakeholder urgency, which is defined as a stakeholder group having a demand that is time-sensitive in nature.

In terms of the underlying philosophical assumptions of the research design, this study was oriented towards the interpretivist perspective present in Orlikowski and Baroudi's (1991) notion of weak constructivism in order to understand the meaning of specific systems shared by the decision-makers who were the study's participants. Notably, subjects universally expressed

gratitude for having the opportunity to sit for extensive interviews wherein they were challenged to deconstruct their own decision-making and consider its effectiveness. The findings led to new terminology for how they framed or established "filters" for their decision-making, which the subjects deemed helpful.

Central Question

This qualitative study was guided by a central question and three sub-questions, as follows:

Central Question: How do IT department managers at higher education institutions prioritize stakeholder groups based on the saliency of those groups' demands when making decisions?

Sub-questions: How do IT department managers respond to the demands of stakeholder groups that are powerful (i.e. have the ability to change or stop a project)? How do IT department managers respond to the demands of stakeholder groups that are legitimate (i.e. the goals of the stakeholder group align with the goals of the IT department)? How do IT department managers respond to the demands of stakeholder groups that are urgent (i.e. the needs of the stakeholder group are time-sensitive)?

Participants

In this study, the participants were chosen using a purposeful selection in accordance with the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994). The key criterion for selection of these participants was that they are all managers who serve in decision-making roles in the IT sector at a publicly-funded state university in the Northwest region of the United States. It was important to ensure these decision-makers spanned numerous departments within IT and reflected a vertical selection that included participants at multiple levels of formal positional authority. Endemic to the IT mission (and particularly with limited public university resources) is an expectation to form agile teams that rely on diverse expertise for complex projects over time. Table 1 groups participants into functional clusters, with pseudonyms assigned to each individual. Rather than using formal titles, which could risk revealing identities, we have organized participants according to broad functional categories. This preserves confidentiality while still providing enough context for readers to understand both their roles and their important perspectives within the IT department.

Table 1

Participants

#	Pseudonym	Generic Title
1	Alan	Executive Leaders
2	Bernard	Strategic Program Managers
3	Carter	Senior Functional Managers
4	Devin	Senior Functional Managers
5	Evelyn	Senior Functional Managers
6	Frank	Senior Functional Managers
7	Gus	Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader
8	Henry	Senior Functional Manager
9	Ian	Executive Leaders
10	Jodie	Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader
11	Kevin	Infrastructure & Data Platform Managers
12	Lily	Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader

Data Collection Procedures

Participants, all managers with private offices, were asked a list of 15 questions (with full indulgence for follow-up) based on Mitchell et al.'s (1997) theory of stakeholder saliency. Questions focused upon their decision-making processes in in-depth, wide-ranging interviews. These interviews were held privately for purposes of confidentiality and sometimes allowed participants to reach for memoranda or reports undergirding specific examples they chose to share. The interview questions were split into three thematic categories: (1) the identification and description of stakeholders internal to the IT department utilizing the dimensions of power, legitimacy, and urgency; (2) the identification and description of stakeholders from outside the IT department that could exert influence upon the department in ways that influenced perceptions of power, legitimacy, and urgency in the IT managers; and (3) the personal decision-making processes that the individual managers employed when passing judgement on how powerful, legitimate, and urgent a specific request was.

Data and Coding Process

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft CoPilot and verified for accuracy. Major themes in the data were then coded using nVivo software following Corbin and Strauss's (2008) approach of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Overall, 197 pages of interview text were analyzed, and due to the committed professional IT managers involved, every single invited participant chose to contribute.

At the initial open coding stage of the data analysis, the transcripts were analyzed to generate lists of the common stakeholder groups that were being addressed across the interviews. Stakeholders such as the CIO and executive vice presidents, the IT helpdesk, university faculty, and so on were identified as either possessing influence over the decision-making processes of managers or as making demands of the management structure that called for specific remedial action to be taken. For each of the identified groups at the open coding stage, it was additionally indicated whether or not a group was positioned as internal to the IT department, and therefore under the purview of the IT chain-of-command, or external to the department's existing hierarchy.

For the axial coding stage, the interview excerpts that were identified in the open coding process were then coded utilizing the stakeholder saliency dimensions of power, legitimacy, and urgency. Mitchell et al.'s (1997) model specifies that each stakeholder group possesses these three characteristics to either a high degree or a low degree. For example, a stakeholder group might possess high power, high legitimacy, and low urgency; in stakeholder saliency, such a group would be categorized as a Dominant Stakeholder, a distinct sub-category of stakeholders that are identified on the basis of their shared characteristics.

Alternatively, a low power, low legitimacy, high urgency stakeholder group would be considered a Demanding Stakeholder, and it should be managed using different techniques within the organizational context. At the axial coding stage, the utilization of the *a prioi* theory allowed for the creation of a nuanced mapping of stakeholder groups internal and external to the IT department utilizing the stakeholder typology framework (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 874).

Finally, at the selective coding stage of data analysis, the findings from the axial coding stage were analyzed in the context of how managers made decisions when presented with a demand from a specific type of stakeholder group. We utilized the selective coding process to determine what stakeholder characteristics outside of the dimensions of power, legitimacy, and urgency caused a manager to perceive a group's demands as worthy of managerial attention. In other words, the selective coding stage specifically sought to identify themes that unified managerial judgement

across the dimensional characteristics to develop *filters* that divide stakeholder demands into being either high or low in IT department prioritization. The specific nature of these *filters* will be discussed in the Conceptual Framework Refinement section of this paper.

Results and Findings

Power

As defined by Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholder power is the degree to which a particular individual or group is capable of changing or stopping a project. The participants were asked questions regarding the power of stakeholder groups both internal to the IT department itself and those that fall outside of the department, including other departments and stakeholders across the university itself and even those outside the university's structure. Regarding the stakeholders that participants believed held power over the IT department's activities, several individuals both internal and external to the department were highlighted as having the ability to change or stop projects. The first of these key individuals was the Chief Information Officer (CIO), whose leadership was seen to be pervasive, influencing numerous projects and decisions that the department was undertaking.

> If we're involved with the decision to purchase a service or address a service that has its issues, or we want to replace [a service] or there's gaps that we would like to get another service… a lot of times that can come in through [the CIO] and discussions with him and cabinet level members.
> -Bernard, Strategic Program Manager

> I think a lot of the decision making really is going to be on the leadership team level…. I mean, [others] do have a lot of sway. But at the end of the day, that decision falls under the CIO. So, if they could convince the CIO to go in one direction, that really will hold power over the department.
> -Gus, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Manager

> The CIO's influence was seen as not necessarily being one-directional, with the executive level decision-makers passing down directives to those lower in the organizational chart. In some circumstances, the CIO's power was expressed through consultations with specific decision-makers, often on the allocation of resources throughout the department. As far as one of the big influences, that would be the title of CIO or the Deputy CIO. They make some of the purchasing decisions, budgeting decisions, and stuff like that. I don't control my own budget, so I don't need to worry about such things.
> -Kevin, Infrastructure & Data Platform Manager

> That's a lot of the type of fires that we get on a day-to-day basis. and we try to honor all urgent requests. But, there's only three of us and lots of projects, and so, sometimes that can't always happen…. We try our best to keep the programmers happy, keep our own security team happy, and obviously keep the Deputy and CIO happy.
> -Henry, Senior Functional Director

In addition to the CIO, the role of the university's president was also emphasized as a source of power over the IT department, frequently mentioned in conjunction with the CIO and additional executive level leadership.

> The President, the Provost, and the cabinet certainly have some influential power, as you know, [they are] leads of the university and able to dictate strategy and the very important stuff that they want the CIO to execute in the IT department level.
> -Bernard, Strategic Program Manager

> Obviously, you know, the President has all power, so I would say the President. The Provost could probably have some input. The Research Office for us specifically because we're very research heavy…. And then, of course, IT leadership and the CIO's Security office, too.
> -Jodie, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leadership

Several of the participants gave specific mention to the power that is held based off the chain of command within the IT department; however, this power was dictated by the specific governance issues that the decision-makers had authority over. A recurring theme with power in the data was the authority that specific leadership positions held over issues that had the ability to impact the functions of the IT department in providing a secure environment. One of the foremost of these governance issues was the security of the technology systems on campus.

> Any [members] of IT leadership up the chain can absolutely stop and change a decision we're making. Our Information Security Office team, I would say, has the definite ability to change our policies [and] procedures because of security implications. Senior campus leadership definitely could put pressure on IT leadership to affect those changes as well.
> -Carter, Senior Functional Directors

> Well, we have a group of developers and programmers that are impacted by our patching schedule and some other things we choose. Security updates and some things like that. They're affected [by demands from powerful stakeholders], certainly so.
> -Kevin, Infrastructure & Data Platform Leadership

> The Information Security Office can stop us in our tracks with a single word. We tend to work pretty closely in tandem. It's not an adversarial relationship, but they are the ones who understand the risks and compliance concerns and things like that. So, when they say stop, we stop.
> -Evelyn, Senior Functional Manager

Often, the individual IT managers are responsible for the enacting of specific requests that come from the most powerful stakeholders, where the decision-makers who were participants in this study served as intermediaries with a limited degree of latitude in their managerial decisions.. In some cases, participants were willing to identify themselves as possessing power as a stakeholder within the IT department.

> My managers have that ability and latitude [to influence implementation]. If I've made a decision and they feel that something isn't going right, et cetera, they have the authority to put a stop to it. Now we would revisit that and have a discussion as to why, and that stop might not be permanent, but they definitely have the ability to put something on hold.
> -Carter, Senior Functional Manager
> I have a lot of just implied power with the people I know. Let's ask me, and they can do all of this. I don't know if it's a security thing [in our relationships], or if they just know

> I'm going to be vocal about [possible alternatives]…. You know, managers coming in to ask me questions about and about connecting processes. There is that that kind of implied [power], and I try to use it in a good way.
>
> -Lily, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader

However, despite individual impetus and authority for decision-making, some participants believed that following established procedures and protocols was a requirement of their managerial priorities, regardless of the power that the requesting stakeholder possessed.

> We try to make sure everything goes through the formal policies and procedures that exist within it. Regardless of who the requester might be, you know that you might have to kind of walk through some things [or] do a little bit more hand holding with some individuals. But, you know, we stick with established policies and procedures for these things.
>
> -Kevin, Infrastructure & Data Platform Leader

Legitimacy

According to Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholder legitimacy refers to a particular individual or group possessing goals that align with the goals of the organization as a whole. In the case of legitimacy, the participants were asked questions related to legitimacy of stakeholders inside the IT department and those who are outside of the department itself. When asked to identify legitimate internal stakeholders, the participants were quick to emphasize inclusivity.

> In my eyes, it'd be my entire staff that would be legitimate. Because what I really look toward is my executive leadership team doing goal setting for the fiscal year that sets out strategic priorities and objectives, and it is my intention that they are meeting with their directors and managers who are also meeting with their staff to align with what our goals are for the upcoming fiscal year.
>
> -Ian, Executive Leader

> I would say all of them. They all have legitimate needs. And that's why I need to make good decisions.
>
> -Jodie, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leadership

> I would say they're all legitimate. I think their goals might not directly align with the goals of the IT department, but we're servicing the goals of the university and that's where the alignment is.
>
> -Bernard, Strategic Program Manager

The reasoning behind this inclusive attitude towards internal stakeholders varied across the participants. One major theme regarding legitimacy was the mutual purpose that all members of the IT department share with each other. This was expressed by some of the stakeholders as being deeply intertwined with the mission and vision of the university itself.

> I work to maintain IT operations and security and all the things that are important to us, and also support the campus mission, especially if we need to change in some way to do it better.
>
> -Bernard, Strategic Program Manager

Another expression of this mutual purpose did not explicitly refer to the mission and vision of the university, but instead by emphasizing the responsibilities and projects that are shared across the department itself. Accomplishing these cross-department projects meant that requests coming horizontally across the organizational structure were perceived to be highly legitimate.

> I think because we build our goals around information from those sectors [that report to the President], I would again say those on mission, those direct mission departments, they certainly have legitimacy.
>
> -Alan, Executive Leadership

One specific internal stakeholder group whose interests were emphasized as being highly legitimate was the IT helpdesk, located at the university's library. The helpdesk was seen as being on the front-line of the end user experience, and requests that originated with the helpdesk were spoken of as being high priority. This theme was particularly noteworthy given the IT helpdesk was not mentioned as being a high-power stakeholder.

> I always work with [the helpdesk] closely, and I feared that I might have given you the idea that I don't think the desk is important. I think they're incredibly vital, and I work with their leadership a lot because of my team's work. When we do make a change, oftentimes the helpdesk feels it first.
>
> -Evelyn, Senior Functional Directors

Outside of the IT department itself, the participants were initially highly inclusive of other groups on campus having legitimate demands. However, instead of speaking of legitimacy in the sweeping terms they did with the internal stakeholders, the participants instead referred to specific departments on campus. Several of these high-legitimacy departments overlapped with departments that were considered high in power, such as the registrar's office, financial aid, the Provost's office, and more.

> Any of the on-mission type people [like] financial admissions, the Provost's office: if they have a significant need or significant issue, it certainly will and can change our priorities and our strategic goals.
>
> -Alan, Executive Leaders

> And it's more, you know, we support admissions and registrars and financial aid. What they do impacts [legitimacy] because they're the ones that request things to happen to financial aid. [It's] a prime example because of all of the issues that went on with FAFSA. And so, when something would come out from [the financial aid office], we need to address it; that would be something we needed to jump on right away.
>
> -Lily, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader

The student body was also seen as possessing a high degree of legitimacy. The client experience for students was considered high priority, with the IT helpdesk once again being seen as a key contact point between students and the IT department.

> I'd like to think that everybody's ultimate goal is the support and the education of our students, and I think it, for the most part, it is. But, many times that gets swayed 'cause it's indirect, but I feel like for the most part, everybody on is on the same path of trying to educate students.
>
> -Frank, Senior Functional Manager

With regard to faculty, however, there was some disagreement in regard to the legitimacy of demands made on the department. Several participants emphasized the usability of classroom technology as being a legitimate request.

> Any area where they are teaching classes [or] they are using infrastructure [provided to] those people who are instructors, they have priority in the queue of general requests. Anything that stops instruction, that's priority for us.
>
> -Evelyn, Senior Functional Manager

However, when asked about examples of requests made from across campus that were deemed to be lacking in legitimacy, the participants gave examples that often involved faculty. These requests were characterized by faculty who were asking for exceptions to be made to the operational protocols and procedures that the department utilizes.

> We work with faculty or researchers, and we've had multiple occasions where they wanted to use a particular piece of software that is not something we're going to either allow on our network or on a state computer. And so, we would say 'No,' and that is definitely an area where our views don't align any longer.
>
> -Carter, Senior Functional Manager

> For a couple faculty, we talked them into moving the web presence back into [the platform] so that we have control over it, which is good for all sorts of things…. They wanted some functionality that we don't have, and they were trying to get us to hand the domain back over to them…. And we told them 'No.' And that's a policy decision. We're trying to prevent that as much as we can because it opens up the university to a liability [issue].
>
> -Devin, Senior Functional Manager

Urgency

Mitchell et al. (1997) defined urgency as the degree to which a demand made by a stakeholder group is time-sensitive in nature. Of the three sub-questions in this study, urgency had the greatest amount of disagreement amongst the participants in determining whose interests should be prioritized. The first major theme here was requests being seen as high in urgency if they pertained to the critical operational functions of the university; these requests were not ongoing in nature but were instead a product of crises that were time-sensitive based on major dates and deadlines in the academic calendar.

> If we're trying to get rid of a certain piece of software or a service, and the person who knows it frontwards, backwards, and upside down is leaving in six months, we might try to speedrun that project so that we are able to get off of that system before that person retires.
>
> -Bernard, Strategic Program Manager

Classroom technology was again referred to as being generally urgent; demands made by stakeholders that involved malfunctioning classroom technology or the accessibility of students who had registered accommodations through the Office of Disability Equity were seen as being high priority. Some participants directly referenced the impact of COVID-19 restrictions forcing urgent changes to how classroom technology was managed.

> Classroom tech is one of those ones that I'd say once again is the urgency is ASAP, 'cause you've got a professor standing in front of 250 kids. It's an urgent situation.
>
> -Frank, Senior Functional

> When COVID hit, we deliver a lot of high-end computer classes in a computer lab. We heavily had to work with IT in an urgent way to provide students [with] off-campus access to our computer labs so that they could continue courses.
>
> -Jodie, Enterprise Solutions & Leader

Urgency was described as being highly dependent on the specific project that was being requested of the department. If these requests originated from elsewhere in the IT department, the participants were inclined to honor the requests in a timely manner. This was especially the case if the request dealt with issues related to security and data concerns across the department.

> That's another role, another hat I wear. Keeping the data center up, that's an internal [task] which does end up being external [in impact]. I would say there's a large amount of urgency of making sure the data centers keep up and running, power, heating, cooling. You know: the whole nine yards.
>
> -Frank, Senior Functional Manager

> The helpdesk area, with our student employees--they're the boots on the ground. If there's an issue or an outage on campus, they are the first ones to be hammered by campus customers…. I would say that'd be like my Tier 1 of urgency, and then Tier 2 would be the staff that supports them on the back end. Depending on what system is down or in outage--it could be our systems administration team, it could be our programmers…. [It] would depend on the situation and environment [who is most urgent].
>
> -Ian, Executive Leadership

However, not all participants felt that urgency was variable in nature. Participants who worked in IT departments on the back-end of campus services emphasized that requests that are so urgent that they require immediate managerial attention are rare; this was described as being a product of the longitudinal schedules of updates and maintenance that had been pre-approved using existing procedures and protocols.

> You know, it's not like we're pouring molten steel and you have 5 minutes to get this done before it solidifies. It's a different thing…. I guess the only time--and it would apply to everyone for urgency--is when we use Microsoft Teams pretty heavily and have lots of communications in Teams.
>
> -Carter, Senior Functional Directors

> We do get things that are mission-based [or] time-sensitive due to legal or other regulatory requirements. But we also get requests that are out of the blue that we can maybe push back and filter into the schedule a little better. But I think that's the analysis that's done on every one of those requests: What's the genesis of it? Where is it coming from? Is there any wiggle room for us or for them?
>
> -Alan, Executive Leadership

Another major theme that emerged from discussions of urgency was the interplay between urgency and the other two dimensions. Powerful stakeholders external to IT, such as the university President and the CIO, were seen as having the ability to influence the department towards more aggressive turnaround on the demands they brought to decision-makers in the department itself.

> Everybody has the power to tell me something is urgent and that we need to accelerate. Usually that falls to the senior folks. They're the most likely ones to speak up, but everybody does have the power to tell me that something has to be accelerated.
>
> -Evelyn, Senior Functional Manager

> When you know if it is time sensitive, if it is, and if there is money involved, if there is a compliance reason…. We [will] decide to pivot and prioritize their project versus whatever other projects that we're working on and really like if they have the backing of the President or the VPs, if they're really championing it, we will consider it urgent.
>
> -Gus, Enterprise Solutions & Integration Leader

Additionally, the legitimacy of the requesting stakeholders was also a factor in whether or not their demands possessed a high degree of urgency in the minds of managers.

> Well, certainly for the ones that are legitimate, the answer would largely be the same [as urgency]. Follow policy and procedure, and if they're illegitimate, requests that aren't aligned with policy, route them back toward the policy. They'll get derailed somewhere before it gets to me. That would be an example of having an effective policy in place in the first place, as it prevents illegitimate requests from ever reaching anywhere near the implementation stage.
>
> -Kevin, Infrastructure & Data Platform Manager

Conceptual Framework Refinement

Based on the data in this study, there are several conclusions that can be drawn applying Mitchell et al.'s (1997) model of stakeholder saliency to the context of higher education IT departments. The first major finding is that, unlike in the original model, there are instances in which stakeholder groups can possess a consistent and overarching degree of power, legitimacy, or urgency. This, however, is coupled with stakeholder groups possessing a variable degree of these three characteristics. To distinguish between the two ways that a stakeholder possesses these

characteristics, the following terms characterize these findings better than the extant literature, and thus emerge as elements of the model refinement:

Strategic Stakeholders: These stakeholders possess either power, legitimacy, or urgency on an ongoing basis that persists regardless of the governance issue, project, or specific circumstances that the stakeholder has the capacity to affect or be affected by.

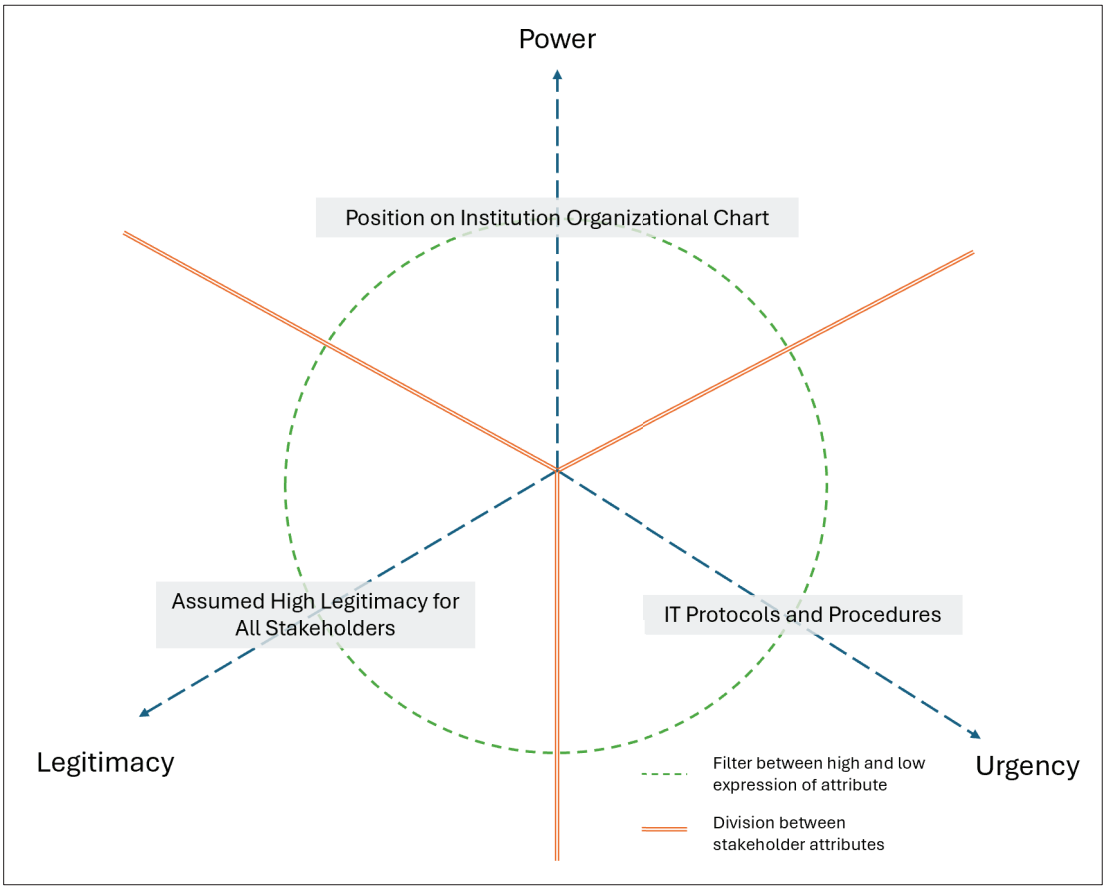
Situational Stakeholders: These stakeholders possess either power, legitimacy, or urgency on a conditional basis; the nature of the demand or request made by situational stakeholders will be evaluated by decision-makers in the IT department to determine the degree to which the specific characteristic is possessed by the individual or group in question.

Interestingly, these two different categories of stakeholders were present across all three characteristics (power, legitimacy, and urgency). Additionally, stakeholders were able to possess either a high degree of the characteristics or a low degree. For example, in terms of stakeholder power, stakeholder groups could be either high/low in strategic power or high/low in situational power. The classification of stakeholder groups as being either high or low in each of the three dimensions is largely a product of *filters,* which are aspects of the demand made on the IT department itself or specific features that the stakeholder group itself possesses.

We understand these *filters* to function as a combination of Eisner's (2017) concept of lenses and Gladwell's (2013) concept of decision tipping-points. For example, a manager working with a strategic stakeholder may view the group through the lens of being either high or low on the dimension of stakeholder urgency. To make that determination, the tipping point for the manager will be whether the group's demand falls within the existing protocols and procedures of the IT department itself. If the group's demand *is* within the existing protocols, the manager will view that stakeholder group through the lens of high strategic urgency. If the group's demand *is not* within existing protocols, the manager will then view the group through the lens of low strategic urgency due to the decision tipping-point influence of the filter. Once the manager has utilized the dimensional filter and categorized the stakeholder demand into the appropriate lens, the managerial action taken by the higher education IT department is then guided by this categorization, just as the specific sub-categories of stakeholders in the stakeholder saliency model also guide managerial interactions with individual groups.

Figure 1 presents a framework that accounts for the strategic stakeholder groups, as well as the filter that decision-makers in the IT department will utilize to categorize them as possessing either a high or a low degree of the dimensional characteristic itself.

Figure 1
Strategic Stakeholder Dimensional Filters



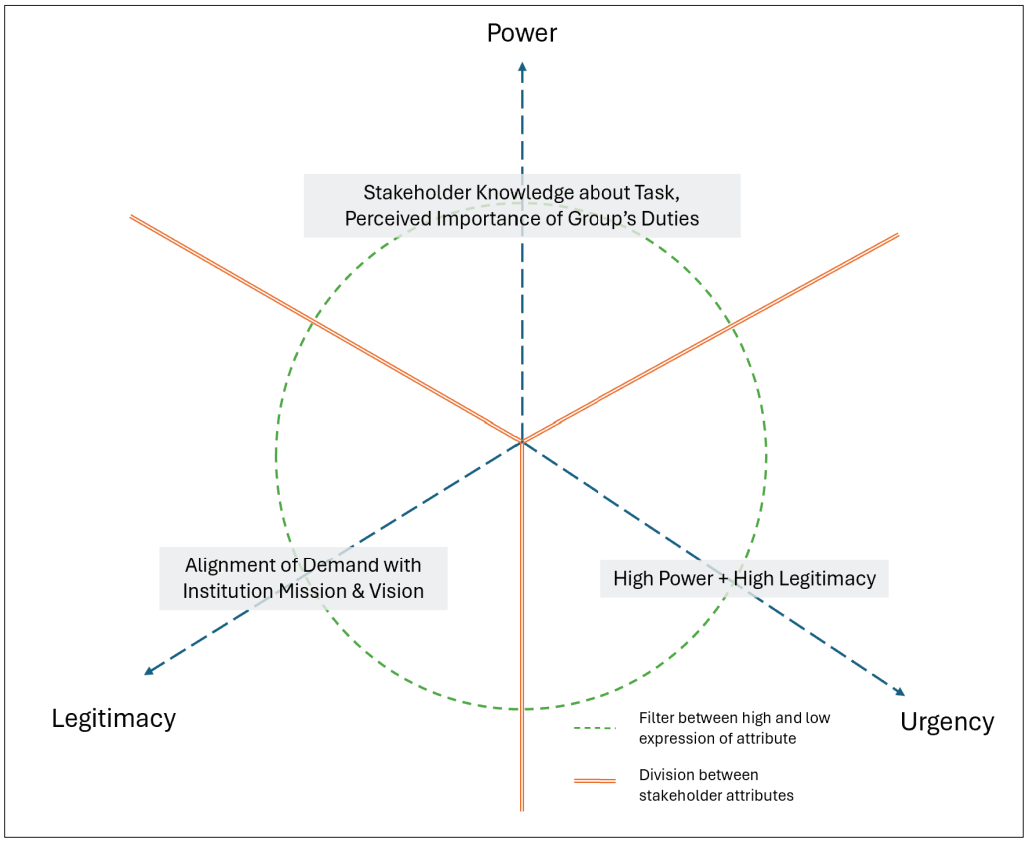
On the dimension of power, IT managers identified stakeholders that possessed either a high or low degree of dynamic or static power. For strategic power, the decision-making filter that separated high/low power stakeholders was the group in question's position on the university organizational chart. Stakeholders such as the university President, CIO, and upper-level managers within the IT department were considered powerful regardless of the governance issue being faced.

For strategic legitimacy, as noted in the above results section, participants were quick to identify all stakeholders at the university, both internal and external to the IT department itself, as possessing high legitimacy. It should therefore be concluded that these IT decision-makers generally believe that all stakeholder demands have a high degree of legitimacy in a generalized sense, yet specific circumstances could once again delineate between stakeholders with a high degree of situational legitimacy and a low degree.

For strategic urgency, as noted in the Results/Findings section of this paper, IT managers made note of the consistency within standard protocols and procedures as being indicative of high urgency. For certain specialized groups within the larger IT department, such as the back-end data processing and maintenance, the vast majority of their projects are encountered on a routinized schedule, with little room for new undertakings that are outside of this schedule. Therefore, the filter for strategic urgency is the degree to which the request fits within current policy and protocol for the undertaking of new projects in the department as a whole. In addition to the strategic

stakeholder dimensions and filters, decision-makers in higher education IT also identified situational filters, which are depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Situational Stakeholder Dimensional Filters



For situational power, two filters were identified. The first was the knowledge a stakeholder group had about the project. In specialized cases, IT decision-makers deferred to departmental leaders with relevant expertise. The second filter dealt with stakeholders outside of the IT department, involving the perceived importance in the function of the department in question. Two recurring examples of this external power were the registrar's office and the VP of Finance; both of these non-IT leaders possessed heightened power in the eyes of the IT decision-makers if the project at hand threatened the function of the department itself.

In the case of situational stakeholder legitimacy, the dimensional filter functioned as a qualification to the inclusivity offered to all stakeholder groups as being highly legitimate. Here, the situational legitimacy dimensional filter was parsed through the mission, vision, and overall purview of the IT department itself. Stakeholders who made requests of the IT department that were considered in close alignment with the mission and vision of the university, or the overall responsibilities of the department in supporting the mission and vision, were considered to have high situational legitimacy regardless of the project at hand (e.g., the IT helpdesk, classroom technology functions,). IT decision-makers considered demands that were made outside of these confines as being low in legitimacy, such requests made by faculty or research units for specialized software that were not acquired nor serviced within the existing processes across the department.

Finally, for situational stakeholder urgency, if the stakeholder request did not fall within the general procedures of the department, situational urgency was filtered between high and low degrees as a product of a combination of the other two dimensions of power and urgency. Stakeholder demands were considered situationally urgent if they possessed a high degree of both power and legitimacy, regardless of whether or not the variation of the characteristic possessed was strategic or situational in nature.

Implications for Practice

While not generalizable, these findings nonetheless provide insight into IT managers' decision-making approaches as they work in all universities to support both the institutional mission and their own refined and aligned versions. This means, in qualitative terms, the results could well be transferable insofar as they illuminate previously unexplained or analyzed layers of stakeholder analysis beneficial to managers of many IT departments. They provide enhanced details useful to understanding stakeholder theory in settings most relevant to their work: fast-paced, sometimes chaotic environments, where many managers function in fast-paced, sometimes chaotic environments that are often deemed "too chaotic" to analyze effective decision-making. Fostering a deeper understanding of this model can help re-align the team's thinking as they address the issues at hand in ways that reflect stakeholders' influence.

Conclusions herein heartily endorse the findings of Menghwar et. al. (2025) in determining that "…it is crucial to take future crises into consideration" (p. 701). Of primary importance for managers is that these recommendations are founded upon a resolve for managers to make explicit what might be merely inferred or implicit (and thus is rarely analyzed or replicated) in their organizations. Here then are the primary recommendations for practice directed at Chief Information Officers and their IT manager/leadership teams:

1. Power:

Decision-makers should identify stakeholders with strategic power—such as the university President, CIO, or senior IT leadership—who can influence or halt projects. IT leaders can develop standard escalation procedures to ensure these high-power requests are addressed promptly while maintaining governance processes. For situational power, leaders should assess the technical expertise or criticality of external stakeholders (e.g., registrar's office or financial aid) and consider their influence based on the current context. For example, during a period of declining enrollment, the Admissions and Recruitment offices may gain heightened situational power, as their actions directly impact the university's priorities. In other contexts, their influence may be lower, demonstrating that stakeholder power can be dynamic and issue-dependent.

2. Legitimacy:

Stakeholder legitimacy in this context is defined by the alignment of a request with the goals and mission of the IT department. Requests from mission-aligned internal teams and departments such as Network and Infrastructure or Web Technologies are consistently viewed as highly legitimate, whereas requests outside these parameters—such as specialized or non-standard software from faculty or research units—may be assessed as lower in legitimacy. However, lower legitimacy does not mean such requests are ignored or unfulfilled; IT decision-makers at research institutions often accommodate these requests through careful evaluation, risk assessment, and adherence to policy, recognizing that innovation and research experimentation sometimes require support for initiatives outside standard procedures.

3. Urgency:

Urgency is context-dependent, often tied to operational deadlines, student-facing issues, or regulatory requirements. Leaders can implement triage systems that categorize requests based on their time-sensitivity and potential impact. Combining urgency with power and legitimacy allows IT departments to make systematic and context-dependent decisions—urgent requests from high-power, high-legitimacy stakeholders should take precedence, whereas low-urgency or low-legitimacy requests can be scheduled or deferred. Documenting these decision criteria also facilitates consistency and fairness in stakeholder interactions.

Summary of Practical Implications and Further Research

By applying the stakeholder saliency framework, IT departments can balance competing demands, align decision-making with university goals, and maintain accountability. Leaders are encouraged to adopt decision matrices or dashboards reflecting stakeholder saliency dimensions, which can be updated dynamically as projects evolve. This ensures that resources are allocated efficiently, critical governance issues are addressed timely, and internal and external stakeholder relationships remain constructive.

In the context of further research, we would encourage future studies to use stakeholder saliency's three attribute model to be applied into additional organizational contexts beyond the private sector, given the robustness of the definitions at illustrating the web of demands made on decision-makers. In the context of IT departments in higher education, we conclude that the theory's refinements developed in this paper have laid the groundwork for future quantitative research into how IT decision-makers prioritize specific groups given the governance issue faced. In particular, a quantitative methodology co-developed by one of the authors of this study (Evans et al., 2024) utilizing the Jerry Evans Ranking of Stakeholders Instrument (JERSI) could reveal additional nuance into the situational prioritization of stakeholders beyond the dimensional filters described in this study.

Endnote

The authors, faculty in a College of Business, would be remiss not to acknowledge the impressive engagement of these IT managers and the apparent success of their fluid teams in responding to stakeholders so thoughtfully. Not only were these managers eager to examine stakeholder frameworks for prioritization of departmental projects, but they also exhibited commendable tenacity in pursuing the right results in agile means. We attribute those observations to the leadership of a CEO who is confident in his managers' decision-making and values their unfiltered input regarding stakeholder influence, project priority, and horizontal contributions to fulfill a complex and ever-expanding university mission in teaching and research. Perhaps Roger Spitz, author of *Disrupt with Impact Achieve Business Success* in an Unpredictable World (2024) best captured this attribute, noting, "In an era of predictable unpredictability and untamed algorithms, agility allow us to emerge in the here and now, without sacrificing our longer-term vision" (p. 18).

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