INSTITUTE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

STRATEGIC PLAN 2019-2022

Our world is in crisis. Sustainability issues have never been more pressing — from steadily increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases to declining biodiversity and environmental degradation that affects people around the world disproportionately. At the same time, positive signals are emerging that suggest pathways to success, including the emergence of markets for clean energy, greater consideration of natural capital in decision making, and growing appreciation of socio-ecological inequality. These challenges — and their solutions — are also more complex than ever before, and while there is broad recognition that complex problems require collaboration across sectors and perspectives, few platforms exist to connect the leaders who take action on sustainability issues.

The University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment (IonE) strives to meet this social need — to confront sustainability challenges and accelerate the application of solutions. It uses the interdisciplinary tools of academia, brings thought-leaders together, and reaches outside the University to play a critical role in creating a sustainable future for Minnesota and the world.

MISSION: To lead the way to a future in which people and planet prosper together.

The Institute envisions a world where the **knowledge** needed to build a future where people and planet prosper together is abundant, the **leaders** needed to create that future are created and connected to one another, and **stories** that make sustainability solutions come alive are widely shared to drive sustainability at scale, for the benefit of all.

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HOW IonE DRIVES POSITIVE CHANGE

A theory of change explains how an organization causes or contributes to its intended impact.[1] Associated with the theory of change is a *major effect,* the overarching outcome that conditions the fulfillment of its mission.

> *IonE's major effect is the fertile cultivation of its community of affiliates, students, staff, and partners.*

To achieve its mission, IonE must attract, inspire, and enable innovative thinkers; develop the leaders needed to cause effective change; and allow for the distribution of information to the broader public. Participants in the IonE community are sustained through common goals and a sense of belonging that keeps them motivated to contribute to shared objectives.

The IonE theory of change (Fig. 1) shows the internal and external members of the IonE community being drawn into leadership development and the creation of novel insights through the process of identifying, characterizing, and achieving shared sustainability activities. The main products are intellectual and human capital that, when deployed via implementing partners, lead to new ways of thinking and doing that help people and the planet prosper. Information about those leaders and insights are communicated internally for the benefit of the community and externally for the benefit of the greater public. The theory of change implies a new model of community engagement for IonE (Fig. 2).

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[1] See Bradach et al. 2008. Delivering on the promise of nonprofits. Harvard Business Review.

Fig. 1: **Theory of Change** involving cultivation of the IonE community to produce activated leaders and novel insights. Partnerships with implementers lead to real-world outcomes. Communications scales IonE's activities and serves to build community engagement.
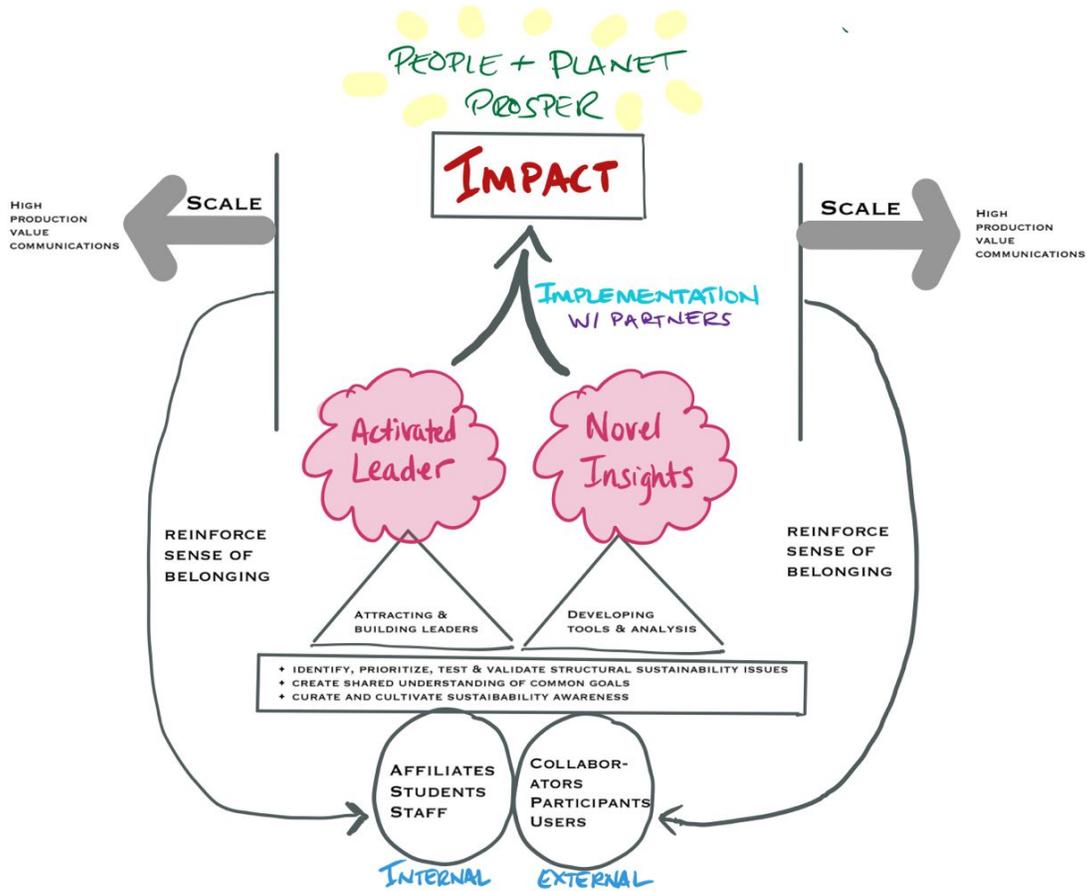

Figure 2: The Amplify Model (left): Stakeholders come to IonE to draw on resources and the interdisciplinary community to enrich and amplify their individual impact; this is IonE's status quo. The Amplify & Aggregate Model (right): Contributing stakeholders come to IonE to join forces in an interdisciplinary community and amplify their collective impact; this is an area of future opportunity.

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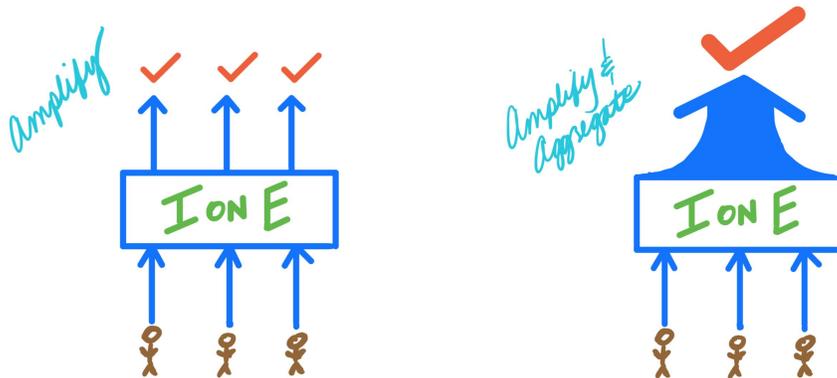
WHY THIS STRATEGY?

IonE has a distinctive role to play in promoting sustainability innovation and leadership. This plan draws on IonE's past and present to: refine the institute's strategic position, clarify the way it helps bring about positive change in the world and define next-steps that will lead to increasingly effective and robust organization. The plan will be operational for four years (2019-2022), allowing enough time for new strategies and initiatives to take root but short enough for adjustments in the foreseeable future. Four years also fits the pace of environmental change. The Special IPCC Report on the Impact of Global Warming published in 2018, for example, suggests we have ~12 years to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition our energy economy. This leaves us three strategic planning cycles to update and re-evaluate our contribution to that socio-environmental transition.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

The [longer version of this strategic plan](#) contains analysis underlying the development of strategy and a more detailed articulation of core competencies and the institute's strategic positioning. That analysis concludes that IonE can show up and support its community as an archetypical "innovator," an organization with the savvy to set big, audacious goals and then effectively convene and inspire teams to chase down those ideas. Further, it concludes that IonE provides three "products" for the benefit of the IonE community (affiliates, students, staff and partners[2]) and the broader world:

1) *Produce novel insights in sustainability through the creation of interdisciplinary knowledge*

The knowledge most needed to create a sustainable future <u>crosses different ways of knowing and learning</u>, has <u>practical value</u>, and is <u>co-developed with practitioners</u> in the broader world. In many cases and places, society is missing essential information about social-environmental problems and viable solutions, and IonE is committed to filling critical knowledge gaps where innovative insights and novel paradigms present new opportunities.

> IonE identifies and directs its resources to environmental issues of global significance where knowledge can move the needle on sustainability. It leaves to its partners and collaborators implementation of that knowledge, though IonE both co-creates with and informs its partners to make new knowledge accessible and practical.

2) *Build human capital to put sustainability innovation into practice*

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[2] See full strategic plan for a detailed description of the "IonE community."

The leaders most needed to create a sustainable future <u>understand the world's most important sustainability challenges</u>, are effective <u>agents of change,</u> and are <u>connected to a global network</u> of decision-makers.

> IonE creates and supports leaders who are sustainability-savvy and armed with the skills of collaboration, communication, and implementation. These leaders understand sustainability science and the local and global threats that undermine sustainability, and, importantly, they have practical knowledge in stakeholder engagement, entrepreneurship, strategy implementation, and excellent communication skills that allow them to win support for their ideas. We rely on the University's departments and colleges to build disciplinary excellence and confer degrees.

3) *Tell compelling stories about a sustainable future*

Research tells us that facts, said louder and with more statistics and figures, do not affect change in society. Instead, <u>stories that engage people with credible, tangible examples</u> are more likely to lead to sustainable practices. We also know that good storytelling today <u>crosses media and platforms</u>, requiring innovation in form and technology. In today's socially connected and digitized world, the ability to share compelling stories with the public is a powerful method to create rapid and significant change.

> Through high production-value storytelling in service of the public good, IonE makes sustainability knowledge and leaders come alive, scaling its impact. We leave it to news organizations to cover events and advocacy organizations to lobby; we specialize in "solutions journalism" that draws upon inquiry, demonstration, and experimentation.

IonE works with a variety of organizations and collaborators inside and outside the University that are also working toward sustainability. Those partners have their own capacities, and IonE does not replicate or compete with those capacities.

Thus, IonE is NOT a place of disciplinary research, even if that research is important to a sustainable future. It is NOT a place that advocates for known solutions, when society already knows what to do and how to do it, and it does not advocate for particular laws or policies. IonE is also NOT a place that provides specialized technical training. And it does NOT seek to advance any particular ideology or philosophy; instead, it is open to all ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that are informed by science and have the potential to bring about positive socio-environmental outcomes. IonE seeks to empower all people of good will working to build a sustainable future.

Fulfilling our identity as a producer of novel insights, activated leaders, and world-class sustainability storytelling, we seek to:

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1. Build a scalable and replicable model, so that IonE *leads the nation* in developing testable, replicable models of sustainability in the relevant sandbox of Minnesota, and advances the application of those models globally through best-in-class storytelling.

2. Grow and galvanize the IonE community, so that IonE *fully engages* each member, so that each person – from the most senior researcher to a first-year student – can articulate and act out the institute's mission, individually and collectively. In other words, the institute seeks to build ownership among its key internal and external stakeholders.

3. Improve our recipe, so that IonE is *top of mind* among university centers and institutes, as well as external partners, as having a proven method for convening, connecting, and moving the needle on sustainability challenges.

In so doing, we must:

- Increase our capacity for coordination and collaboration – the ingredients needed to scale our partnerships and create greater, more meaningful impact – without abandoning the creativity and ambition that helped launch the institute.

- Make successes systemic, communicating with clarity about our mission, methods, activities, and how to engage with IonE internally and externally.

- Tap into the deep desire for practical impact, shared among our external and internal stakeholders.

- Build a new culture and brand that retains the institute's reputation but increasingly strengthens the institute as an "innovator," an organization which champions big, audacious ideas and is capable of inspiring teams of people to pursue them.

ACTION PLAN

The theory of change and strategic insights from analysis compel five key actions:

1. ATTRACTING AND ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Internal and external stakeholders form the base of the IonE theory of change. Operating as an innovator also requires that IonE be able to form tactical teams to make progress on the most important ideas in environment and sustainability. IonE should continue successful methods of building community support and engagement and invest in high-risk projects and activities that bring new combinations of people together.

1) All those people who share the mission and vision of IonE are affiliated and partnered with us and their participation in the community is substantive and meaningful. To achieve this we will enhance our current practice of evaluating affiliate participation in the institute, market the institute to prospective affiliates and external partners, and build on the IonE Annual Meeting as a place of community engagement. Individuals who do not actively participate in programming, goals, and other IonE activities do not need to be maintained in the affiliate ranks.

2) The variety of IonE participants must grow to form effective teams that make progress on the institute's core mission. The arts and humanities are vital components of sustainability discovery and practice, and greater attention will be paid by IonE to participation of these fields through increased recruitment to the affiliate ranks and increased participation on funded project teams.

3) Inclusion of vulnerable people in projects and programming improves efficacy and enables institute priorities to be set more justly. IonE will enhance diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) among staff and affiliates through its DEI committee, create criteria for funding support that requires DEI considerations and deploy a special seed grant program for fostering DEI, with the hope and expectation that seeded activities will enliven and engage the broader IonE community over time.

4) Mini grants (small grants with few topical constraints that widely distributed across the university) have led to surprising outcomes and larger, shared initiatives. They also are a useful recruitment and marketing tool, bringing new people to IonE and helping individuals find ways to engage when they are not connected to a larger program or goal. Thus, IonE will continue the mini-grant program, but we will add a new criteria that ask proposers to explain how their work could scale to the institute as a whole and/or engage or enliven an IonE Impact Goal (see below).

5) An analysis of past successes suggests that the most successful affiliate programs at IonE involve cohorts that regularly interact and share purpose and peer mentoring. This has not

been a feature of the Fellows program, however. *To begin facilitating greater two-way engagement with and among IonE Fellows, new Fellows will be on-boarded to IonE as a group and organized with their incoming year to create greater affinity of affiliates for one another.*

6) To incentivize our mission and promote whole-community engagement, IonE will direct its "hard money" budget and institutional support to institute staff who model excellence in engaged and transformative scholarship and actively collaborate with members of the IonE community.

7) To advance IonE principles and strategies system wide, IonE will facilitate the creation of "hubs" on campuses other than the Twin Cities (e.g., IonE@UMD, established 2018). Programs and activities at these hubs should be initiated by the local campus community, through the leadership of IonE affiliates there and supported by IonE staff. Staff and financial support from IonE will be directed to activities identified locally that align with IonE's strategic priorities. Programs and activities should also receive direct support from the local campus administration so that IonE funds are leveraged to increase impact and reinforce local priorities.

2. BUILDING A NEW MODEL OF SHARED, GOAL-DRIVEN IMPACT

Our analysis and theory of change suggest that identifying shared, important issues and going after that as a coordinated community is a productive and unifying strategy that can yield tangible outcomes and attract financial support. Such activities form the rectangle linking the IonE community to programs and then products and outcomes (Fig. 1).

IonE Impact Goals are three outcomes that IonE will focus on achieving over 3-5 years.

The Impact Goals are globally significant sustainability challenges that have key aspects or bottlenecks that are limited by a lack of knowledge and capable leaders. Each goal will be scoped with insights from stakeholder engagement and scientific assessment. Teams will form around "subgoals" that are essential steps toward the goal where novel insights, activated leaders and storytelling at scale are needed.

By orienting toward goals, we reposition IonE as an innovator, an organization that *champions new ideas* and *inspires teams* to pursue them. Shared activities should follow a replicable method that is easy to scale and approachable to communicate, that allows for both deep-dives in areas of existing expertise and an ability to explore new and emerging topics in sustainability. The method should enable interdisciplinary and collaborative work that brings the entire IonE community together while promoting an entrepreneurial spirit that allows for good ideas to emerge and attract resources.

Goals are different than topic areas or sustainability themes. They are stakes in the ground that orient collaborative work toward tangible outcomes. They allow for research and leadership programming to be directed, progress toward the goal to be quantifiable and strategic priorities to be identified based on their significance in driving movement toward the goal. The goals invite IonE to specify its distinct contribution — relative to partners and implementers — in making progress.

As many of the tangible rewards and demonstration opportunities lie within Minnesota and the upper Great Lakes and north central region, our strategy will focus on collaborative activities that engage regional stakeholders and enliven regional outcomes in sustainability. Executed well, goals help IonE show up with other units across the University in service to the state and state constituencies. This regional emphasis will not need to replace our historic strength in global analysis or issues important to the developing world, but the near-term focus will be on global problems that have some connection to regional interests, including a connection via global supply chains.

IonE will direct funding, events, support staff and other resources to the IonE Goals. Progress on the goals will be reported annually with a series of metrics, and each goal is ended with a best-in-class report and other media products that suggest strategies and solutions to be replicated around the world.

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IonE goals will create a foundation of external support that will sustain an area of research after the goal period ends. Not all work within IonE will be directly related to a goal, but goals will aggregate and organize a substantial amount of institute activity and bring programs and people together. Ideally, goals will break down the programmatic silos that have become established at IonE, bringing senior researchers and leadership/education staff closer to one another and the IonE community as a whole. Affiliates and students will participate in programs that engage the goals and form teams on IonE-funded grants. A detailed Impact Goals strategy is forthcoming. IonE development (funding) will be focused on the goals.

BOX 1: IonE Impact Goals for 2019-2022:
- *Build a carbon-neutral Minnesota*
- *Ensure safe drinking water for all Minnesotans*
- *Achieve alternative land uses that result in a sustainable Minnesota*

3. REALIGNING PROGRAMMATIC PRIORITIES

Programs in research and education link the processes of issue identification to the main products of IonE (Fig. 1). These programs have operated as siloes and many of them are externally funded; over the strategic term, we will evaluate and align priorities. Programming should align with other priorities and actions described in this plan.

1) All programs—even those predominantly funded by outside organizations—should share the IonE mission and directly engage multiple members of the IonE community. They should drive toward the production of novel insights and capable leaders as defined by strategic positioning above. They also should engage implementing partners who will see products deployed in the wider world, work to attract participants and collaborators from the IonE community and engage in internal and external communication activities. Programs and activities that do not conform to these principles will not receive supplemental programmatic funding from IonE, beyond basal support for senior research staff and access to infrastructure and bridge funding.

2) Programs within IonE should participate in one or more IonE Impact Goals, in whole or in part.

3) Leadership programming for students (e.g., Boreas workshops and the Sustainability minor) should focus on identifying students most committed to sustainability and the IonE mission, rather than broad capacity building across individual people and disciplines. Enhancing the number of participants is a strategy for capturing a larger set of students who will deepen their commitment over time.

4) IonE will increase the number of affiliate and stakeholder-driven advisory boards, to engage broader ownership of IonE activities. These boards will cultivate future members of the Faculty Leadership Council and Associate Directors of IonE. By 2022, half of the enduring programs of IonE will have advisory boards, including each of the Impact Goals.

4. REFRESHING OUR PUBLIC FACE AND CULTIVATING OUR COMMUNITY

Communications plays an essential connective role in the IonE theory of change – scaling the reach and therefore impact of IonE's outcomes (insights, knowledge, leaders), attracting the necessary stakeholders to our community (who serve as inputs, so to speak), and providing the necessary connections among those community members to achieve our outcomes. Under this plan, the IonE communications team will prioritize activities that **create connections among community members; expand the reach of and engagement with IonE insights and achievements; and build a shared understanding of goals and reinforce belonging.**

1) With the completion of a strategic planning process, IonE must align its messaging and materials. During this plan cycle, IonE will launch a new positioning and messaging strategy across IonE owned channels. This includes the development of 2-3 signature stories and that clarify and enliven IonE's new brand archetype, and that can serve as centerpieces in the pursuit of IonE Goals and the next iteration of IonE's fundraising campaign.

2) Community communications: To prepare for the 2019 call for IonE Affiliates, the IonE comms team will conduct a deep-dive audit of affiliates communications, creating a journey map and an integrated plan to resolve bottlenecks, improve awareness, and build engagement. Repeat in the next fiscal year for IonE students & leadership audiences.

3) The scope of this plan includes redesigning the IonE website to reflect the organization's core capabilities, signature stories, and strategic priorities, and not only its programs and operational structure. Overall, IonE communications will invest in and prioritize channels, convenings, and content and that inspire, engage, and invite feedback – and that directly feed into Impact Goals and other strategic priorities.

4) Launch J-Lab to capture high production, external communications — including Ensia — as a core capacity of IonE, focused on innovation and experimentation in impactful sustainability storytelling, for the public good. *Detailed strategic plan forthcoming.*
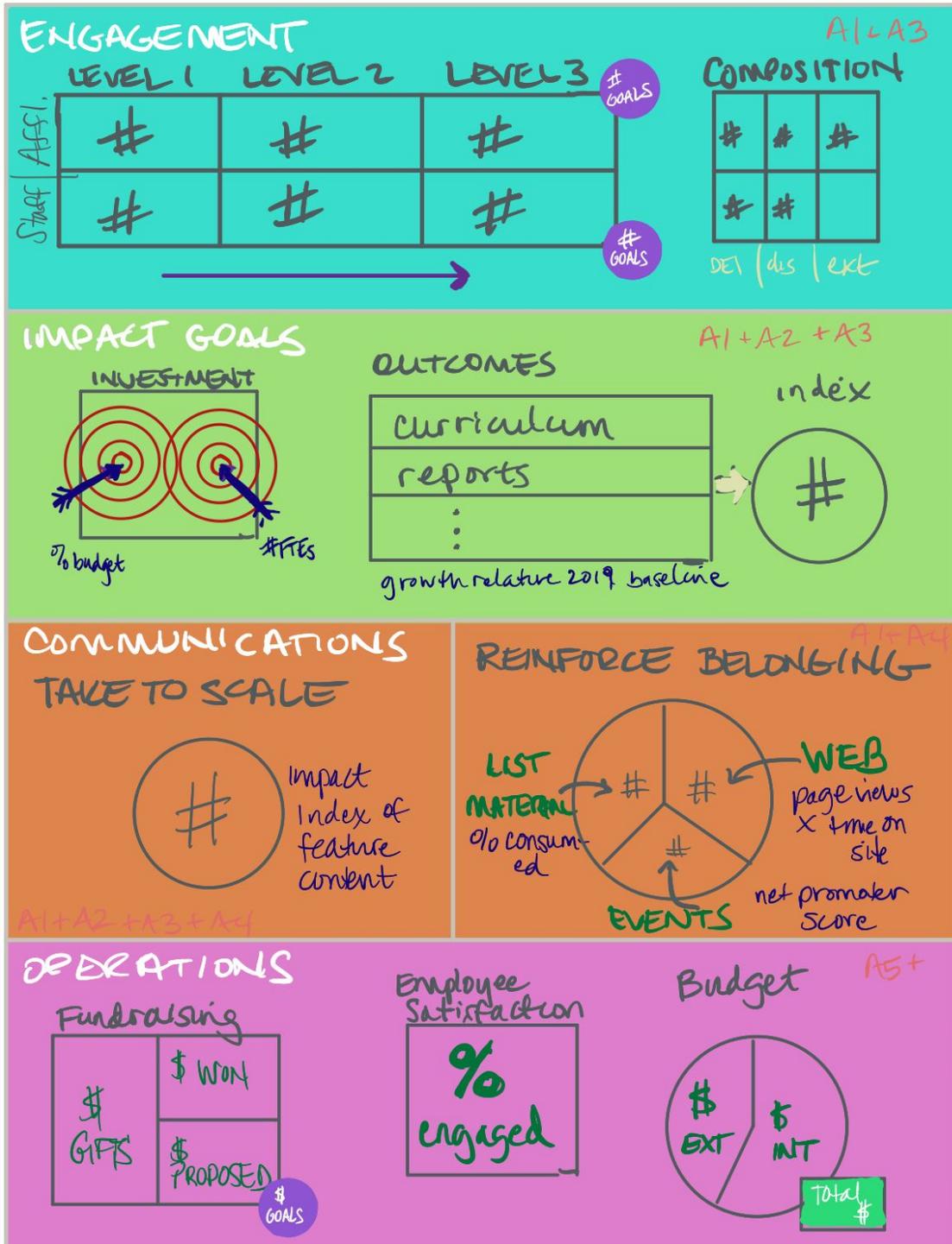
5. ALLOW ORGANIZATIONAL REDESIGN TO DELIVER ON THE THEORY OF CHANGE

In 2018, IonE was redesigned to create: 1) programming groups reflecting three core capacities (e.g., knowledge initiatives, leadership and education, and a J-Lab, with a "j" for journalism), each led by an associate director; 2) a central functions group composed of strategic communications, development and administration (accounting, human resources, and budgeting); and 3) two advisory functions (Appendix D). Associate Directors and the core functions directors form the institute's management team, members of which jointly share responsibility for delivering on the strategy described in this document. This includes:

1) Creation of a two-year budget planning process, to facilitate transparency with staff, affiliates and funders, clarify strategic priorities and allow for greater storytelling about where IonE makes investments and how it yields a return on that investment. The management team holds responsibility for planning and approving the budget, with oversight from the IonE Director.

2) In order for this strategic plan to be fully realized, substantially more interaction within work groups (e.g., within the Knowledge Initiative group) and collaboration across work groups (e.g., between Knowledge Initiatives and Leadership and Education) is necessary. Work groups will convene at least monthly, with annual retreats, opportunities for social interaction and other occasions to share work aims and achievements. A variety of practices and tactics for enhanced group coordination was identified at retreats in summer 2018. In 2018, an annual award also was implemented for a staff member(s) who demonstrate excellence at the IonE Way and have taken extraordinary steps to advance shared goals for the institute, enhancing and enabling "*one IonE*."

3) Showing up as an innovator for the entire IonE community, its stakeholders and implementing partners requires a set of unique skills be demonstrated by the IonE staff. These are described in "*The IonE Way*," a list of behaviors, including taking risks, practicing leadership, collaborating and communicating, embracing teamwork and diversity, measuring what matters, and honoring varied (career) paths. These behaviors will be assessed in annual performance reviews, and some of them are reflected in the metrics dashboard below.

METRICS OF SUCCESS

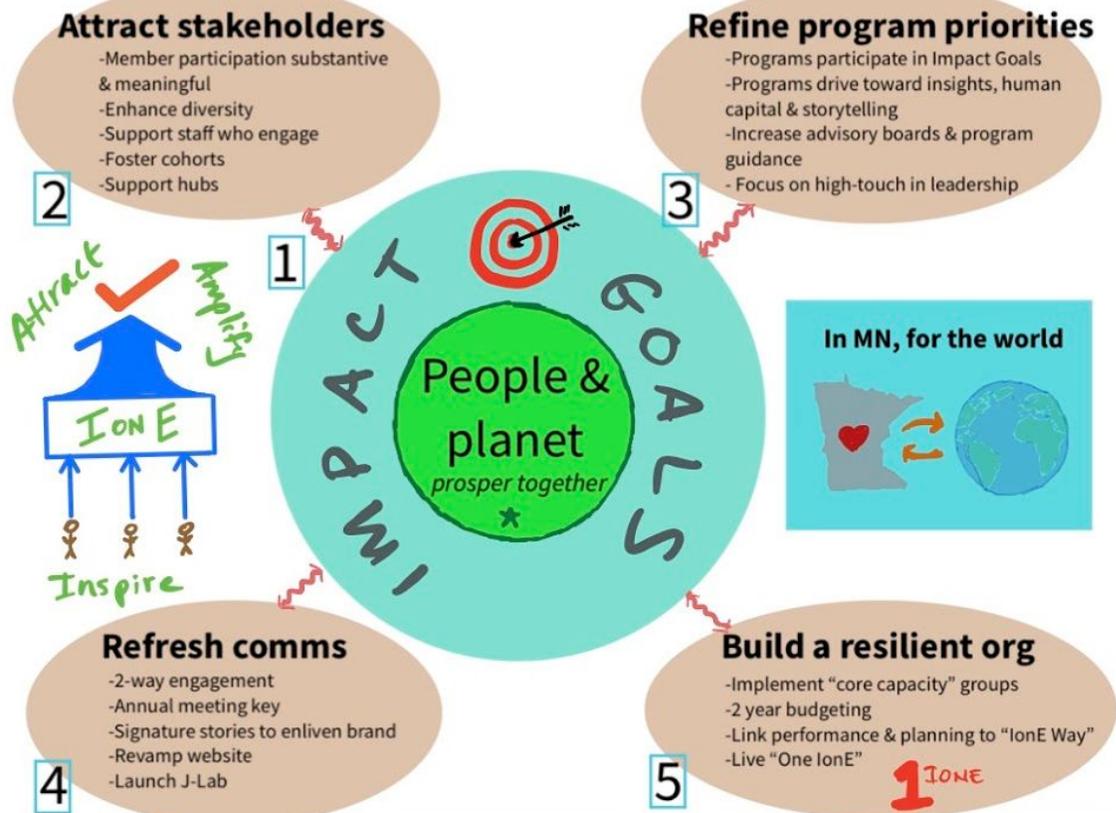Our success is defined by our ability to show up in the world as an "innovator," bringing the best that a land-grant university has to offer in service of tangible solutions in sustainability. The following metrics follow from the theory of change and the action plan above and include essential operational parameters. These metrics will be quantified and reported on annually, with quarterly updating.

Appendix: "CHEAT SHEET

IonE Strategic Plan Cheat Sheet

Attract stakeholders
-Member participation substantive & meaningful
-Enhance diversity
-Support staff who engage
-Foster cohorts
-Support hubs

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Attract   Amplify

✓

IonE

Inspire

Refine program priorities
-Programs participate in Impact Goals
-Programs drive toward insights, human capital & storytelling
-Increase advisory boards & program guidance
- Focus on high-touch in leadership

3

IMPACT GOALS

People & planet
prosper together
*

In MN, for the world

Refresh comms
-2-way engagement
-Annual meeting key
-Signature stories to enliven brand
-Revamp website
-Launch J-Lab

4

Build a resilient org
-Implement "core capacity" groups
-2 year budgeting
-Link performance & planning to "IonE Way"
-Live "One IonE"

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1 IONE

Strategy

1) *Produce novel insights*
in sustainability through the creation of interdisciplinary knowledge

2) Build human capital
to put sustainability innovation into practice

3) Tell compelling stories
about a sustainable future

How we show up
Ideator
Communicator
Enabler
~ *Innovator*

Measure what matters; e.g.:
1) Implementer participation
2) Affiliate engagement
3) Staff promoter score
4) Content uptake rate
5) Completive IonE award

NOT:
• Disciplinary research
• Advocating known solutions

• Specialized training
• Advance an ideology