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IAM Modernization Thread Meetup

Report

Virtual Session:

June 25, 2025

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Overview

On June 25, 2025, the InCommon Academy hosted a Thread Meetup on the topic of IAM Modernization for over 50 community members. The discussion began with context-setting by Grady Bailey, Senior IAM Architect at InCommon, followed by a broader conversation by the community. The key themes that emerged from this discussion revealed that while the technical aspects of IAM are complex, many of the most significant challenges are organizational, resource-related, and process-oriented.

The golden thread, or central insight, of the discussion was that "modernization is what you make it" and reflects the reality that successful IAM modernization isn't about implementing a checklist of buzzword technologies, but rather about understanding your institution's specific context, building mature foundational practices, and making incremental progress toward a clearly defined vision.

The discussion particularly highlighted the tension between aspirational "modern" IAM concepts and the practical realities of resource constraints, legacy systems, and complex organizational needs that characterize higher education institutions.

Conversation Highlights

- The Thread Meetup centered around the "Golden Thread" concept that modernization is what you make it, recognizing that each institution's process will look fundamentally different.

- Participants discussed a variety of challenges and considerations around IAM modernization at their institutions. Some were in exploratory phases, while others grappled with potential risks involved in relying on a single platform solution, and the need to integrate physical access control with digital systems.

- The concept of "Unicorn Island" was introduced, as a framework for approaching ambitious modernization goals by breaking them into smaller, manageable phases that allow teams to celebrate incremental wins.

- Participants emphasized several critical success factors, such as the importance of stakeholder buy-in, maintaining thorough documentation throughout, and leveraging crisis situations to move initiatives forward.

Modernization Considerations

- **The Foundation Before Innovation Challenge**: Institutions must establish mature foundational practices before pursuing modern, buzzword-driven IAM technologies. “Shoot for the moon (modern IAM) because at least you’ll land among the stars (mature practices).”
    - The “Elephant in the Ocean” complexity of modern IAM creating overwhelming choice paralysis, a play on the phrases describing how to tackle seemingly impossible tasks, “It’s like boiling the ocean,” and “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”
    - Need for documented architecture, clear communication, and stakeholder alignment
    - Recognition that advanced technologies require solid governance and processes i
    - Understanding that incremental maturation is more valuable than pursuing perfect modern solutions (progress over perfection)

- **The Resource Reality vs Pressure to Modernize**: Institutions face mounting pressure to reduce technical debt while dealing with shrinking resources and increasing complexity. Successful modernization requires realistic resource planning and leveraging constraints and strategic drivers.
    - Budget constraints limit access to expensive commercial solutions
    - Staff reductions and consolidation efforts are impacting modernization capacity
    - Need for crisis-driven change management to gain momentum (never waste a good crisis)
    - Platform vs. best-of-breed decision paralysis due to resource limitations

- **The Complexity of IAM in Higher Education**: Universities manage uniquely complex and diverse identity ecosystems that don’t fit standard enterprise IAM models. Higher education requires specialized approaches that embrace complexity rather than trying to eliminate it.
    - Diverse and shifting roles (students, faculty, staff, guests, researchers, alumni, emeritus)
    - Fragmented systems (physical access, digital identity, business systems operating in silos)
    - Complex identity matching challenges for people with multiple institutional relationships
    - Exceptions and edge cases that complicate standardizations efforts

- **The Organizational Alignment Gap**: Success depends on organizational factors as well as technical capabilities. Technical modernization fails without corresponding organizational maturation and executive support.
    - Leadership understanding of IAM as strategic security function, not just IT support
    - Communication pathways between IAM teams and institutional stakeholders
    - Integrations with security teams and recognition of IAM's security role
    - Change management and identification of institutional champions
    - Stakeholder engagement across departments (HR, Registrar, academic units)

- **The Community-Driven Solution Approach**: Individual institutions cannot solve IAM modernization challenges in isolation. Peer learning and shared resources are essential. A valuable modernization resource is the collective wisdom and experience of the higher education IAM community.
    - Recognition that every institution's modernization journey is different
    - Value of persistent community connections and ongoing peer learning
    - Need for shared resources (templates, frameworks, vendor evaluations)
    - Documentation and knowledge management as community assets
    - Incremental success strategies that can be adapted and shared

Next Steps

Remember, it will take significant time and effort to move your IAM modernization efforts forward. Take it in strategic, incremental steps. Here are a few ways you can get started.

Connect with your peers: Follow up on conversations from this meetup with your colleagues sharing similar challenges. Participate in the next Thread Meetup taking place on August 6, 2025 on Navigating Hybrid IAM & Entra ID Integration, contribute to community knowledge by sharing what works and what doesn't. Share templates and frameworks, participate in working groups, and help shape future InCommon programming and resources by providing feedback.

Assess your current state: Document your "Ocean Elephant" by writing down your specific modernization challenges and overwhelming factors. As discussed in the meeting, catalog what you're working with and identify your oldest and newest systems.

Start your "Unicorn Island" vision: Define your ideal end state. What does success look like for your institution? Break it into 3-5 year timeboxes for major initiatives. Identify quick wins you can implement right away to build momentum.

Improve internal communication: Educate your leadership that IAM is an essential security function, identify who else on campus needs to be involved in IAM decisions, and create a communication plan to establish regular touch points with key stakeholders.

Document what you have: Create a basic architecture diagram and map your current IAM component and data flows (Pro tip: Attend the IAM Online on July 16 for a peek at InCommon's IAM Sketch for Architecture Planning) Start an identity data dictionary to document what makes up an identity at your institution.

Address knowledge management: Document institutional knowledge by capturing processes and decisions before people leave. Create process documentation and establish change management processes for updating documentation and procedures.

Plan your modernization strategy: Focus on areas where you can make progress with available resources. Look at what peer institutions have implemented successfully, and make informed decisions about tools and platforms based on your specific needs and constraints.

Crisis preparation: Develop contingency plans and be ready to leverage security incidents or compliance requirements for modernization momentum. Build business case templates and prepare justifications for IAM investments before they're needed.

For Leadership/Decision Makers: Align IAM with institutional strategy, budget for sustained investment rather than one-time project, and support your IAM team's participation in staff development and community learning.

Looking Ahead

The InCommon Academy encourages participants to consider further professional development opportunities such as:

- IAM Online: Wednesday, July 16, 2025 @ 1pm ET
    - Sketching Success: A Peek at InCommon's IAM Sketch for Architecture Planning with Grady Bailey, Senior IAM Architect and Romy Bolton, Interim AVP, Trust & Identity at Internet2
- Thread Meetup: Navigating Hybrid IAM & Entra ID Integration - August 6, 2025 @ 3pm ET
    - Ready to untangle the complexities of integrating Entra ID into your existing identity landscape? Whether you're exploring an Entra ID implementation or refining existing hybrid environments, join the conversation with peers navigating similar transformations.
- TechEx25: Denver, CO - December 8-12, 2025
    - With a wide range of talks, tutorials, posters, working meetings, and sponsored social events, this is a must-attend event for our community.
- Trusted Access Platform Component Training: Ongoing

APPENDIX

Meeting Recording & Assets

Select the following links to access the recording and other meeting assets:

Zoom Recording Passcode: Y%8tm0A.
Presentation Slides

Please note that audio and chat transcripts are available within the recording.