Making the Case for

Digital Learning





About WCET

WCET is the leader in the practice, policy, & advocacy of digital learning in higher education. We are a member-driven organization that brings together colleges, universities, higher education organizations, and companies to collectively improve the quality and reach of digital learning programs.

WCET's Mission

WCET is the leader in the practice, policy, & advocacy of digital learning in higher education.

WCET's Vision

WCET envisions a future where high-quality digital learning fosters success for educators and learners.

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Making the Case for Digital Learning

The experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have irrevocably changed higher education institutions. One area that institutions undoubtedly built capacity in during COVID was working in collaborative online spaces, including delivering millions of hours of emergency remote instruction in a variety of digital formats.

In 2021, EDUCAUSE imagined several possible scenarios institutions may go through as they adapt post-pandemic:

- 1. **Restore.** We will focus on figuring out how to get back to where we were before the pandemic.
- 2. Evolve. We will be focused on adapting to the new normal.
- 3. **Transform.** We will be focused on redefining our institution and taking an active role in creating the innovative future of higher education.

Whatever vision your institution chose immediately following COVID-19's initial surge, these three models continue to offer a lens for examining new data and information, and for making decisions about your institution's future.

More recently, the CHLOE 9 (2024) report and the EDUCAUSE Student and Technology Report (2025) painted two different pictures of the current landscape. In CHLOE 9, which reports from the perspective of Chief Online Learning Officers (COLO), online learning remains an enormous priority. COLOs also see online learning as key to recruitment for students both near and far, and as a means to support the needs of on-ground learners. Key to placing the CHLOE 9 results in context is the importance of using an online learning strategy to recruit adult learners. The EDUCAUSE report indicated that traditional-age learners now seek more synchronous learning experiences, and may even eschew technology-enhanced options in those experiences, preferring to be in the same room with their fellow learners and the faculty.

This contradiction points to the need, now more than ever, to know your students - both the ones you are serving right now and the ones that you must serve in order to fulfill your mission. WICHE's Knocking on the College Door research has been projecting and describing an enrollment decline for nearly a decade. Many institutions will now begin seeing the direct impact of that decline. The total number of high school graduates peaked with the 2025 graduation season and is now projected to steadily decline for at least 16 years, through 2041.

Furthermore, higher education must be a contributing partner to the educational problem it has allowed to occur: the 36.8 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 64 who, as of July 2022, had some college but no degree. These students, for whatever reason, did not complete a college credential. As such, there is no better time than the present to consider how your institution is serving adult students. This may also include how you will reengage with students who left your institution without completing a credential.

As institutions adapt to serving the complex diversities of adult students, they may also want to think about what path they will take. Will they:

- Restore some semblance of the current services and offerings, but for a different population of learners?
- Evolve by changing how they do things to best serve all learners?
- Transform by pioneering new programs and new ways of educating students to create a completely new landscape in higher education?

Regardless of the path you take, now more than ever, change management is an incredibly important skill for digital learning leaders. Harvard Business School separates change into adaptive and transformational changes. As a digital learning leader, you are likely to attempt to navigate both types of change every day.

Sadly, many institutions are not choosing a path, at least not at the strategic planning level. Many remain reactive to changes that deeply involve digital learning. According to the CHLOE report, less than 40% of institutions report that digital learning goals are integrated at the institutional level. Furthermore, many digital learning leaders are not trained specifically in change management, project management, finance, or any of the many other skill areas required to excel in the complex landscape of higher education today.

How to Use This Document

This guide is designed to help digital learning leaders build institutional support for digital learning by:

- 1. exploring stakeholder-specific case studies,
- 2. highlighting change management principles, and,
- 3. offering tools to increase alignment with strategic priorities and enhance engagement across stakeholder groups.

Each stakeholder group receives a brief introduction to the group, a scenario, and questions or actions to consider. These cases can be used in a wide variety of ways, such as:

- for personal reflection.
- in team meetings to deepen conversations around change management, institutional alignment, and stakeholder engagement.
- during team retreats, strategic planning sessions, or professional development workshops.
- as diagnostic tools to identify weak points in stakeholder engagement.
- as exercises highlighted in or inspired by this document's For Your Consideration section, to build shared language and tools for cross-campus collaboration.

Across the five scenarios, we incorporated ideas from different stages of successful change management efforts:

- Intentionally and regularly engage stakeholders to assess the internal and external landscape to identify the need for change.
- Prepare for change by making the case for change and creating a plan that continues to engage stakeholders at all levels.
- Implement the change, which will nearly always involve adapting the plan to meet reality.

Assess how things are going and take opportunities to celebrate success and learn from missteps.

Sometimes, institutions in these cases demonstrate strong change management. Other times, they do not. We urge you to reflect on how change management is approached at your institution, particularly in relation to your work and its broader impact across campus, which may benefit from more effective change management strategies.

Looking at Digital Learning Through Different Lenses

Senior Administrators

The best senior administrators set a clear vision and then empower and enable their teams to deliver on it. As a digital learning leader, it is critical to understand how the institution's vision is developed and communicated. Some institutions have beautiful strategic plans aligned to their institutional vision and mission, regularly used to set priorities and launch and evaluate initiatives. The strategic plan in these institutions serves as a rallying point for the campus community. At the other end of the spectrum are institutions where the strategic plan is an exercise completed for the purposes of accreditation but is rarely, if ever, used in any actionable capacity. Wherever your institution sits on that spectrum, a key to facilitating high-quality digital learning is knowing how to get on the radar of the people making the decisions about how money, time, and effort will be used at the institution.

As a digital learning leader, you must have a clear vision and be able to articulate how digital learning should support the future of the institution. From there, you must begin to match your vision with how decisions are made - and how success happens - at your institution. It's also critical to remember that, just as we're outlining in this document, the vision must be communicated to a myriad of people who have very different contexts. Spending time listening and considering the impact on all parties is critical to the success of any planning effort.

You also want to view the vision through a variety of lenses, the three most crucial being people, money, and time. As you read, consider the following case through those lenses and then answer the questions that follow.

Transform On-Ground Success into Online Success

Your vision: the institution should develop its three most popular on-ground degree programs as online options. You sketch out an initial plan and believe that you could develop these programs online over the next three years, with the first semester of the programs being delivered a year from now. These three programs are enjoying steadily increasing enrollment. All three programs also have high workforce demand. When viewed through the lens of people, your vision has the potential to further increase enrollment from students both near and far. This, in turn, will lead to more revenue.

However, the institution has been slow to hire additional faculty to support the existing enrollment growth. The faculty members in these programs are showing signs of burnout. You don't want to force more work upon them and know that hiring additional faculty and staff is a key sticking point for the senior administration due to money, as well as other less tangible reasons. Specifically, for a myriad of reasons, senior administrators are unwilling to add more full-time, benefits-eligible positions. You adapt your vision to this reality.

First, you develop a strong relationship of mutual collaboration and communication with one of the program's chairs. They share your vision but aren't able to free up the human resources to bring it to life. With

that chair's agreement, you work with human resources to understand how you could use a part-time workforce of adjunct faculty and contract instructional design staff to design the program and begin its delivery.

The program chair shares that there is an employer partner who is desperate for more qualified graduates and wants to support the work. The employer partner will provide enough funding to support half of the part-time workforce, but only if you can launch the program to at least 30 students within six months. Again, you adapt your vision to this reality. You'll focus all development and delivery efforts on this one program, while continuing to build relationships with the other two department chairs. You'll also be able to apply what you're developing in the first program to make the work even easier for the second two programs. However, one of the chairs is now incredibly upset because they wanted to teach online in retirement and are set to retire at the end of this year.

On Monday morning, you find yourself in the Provost's office with the chair of the program you want to develop. You're ready to lay out the plan for how this will get done. You've assembled a coalition from marketing, admissions, financial aid, the business office, and a few other key departments. Everyone agrees this is an important effort. However, you now need a critical component. Since this is a new online program, the Provost must take it to the state higher education board for approval. The process is slow and arduous. You need the Provost to use her relationship with the team at the higher education board to make sure this approval gets done in order to meet the six-month time frame. You know that she's just gone through a year-long process to get a new healthcare degree approved by the higher education board as well as the professional standards board for that degree. As you open the meeting, the Provost lets you know she spent most of her weekend talking and emailing with the very angry chair who runs the program that isn't moving forward as quickly.

- 1. How are you communicating your vision for the future of digital learning at your institution?
- 2. Who are all the various stakeholders involved in this case study? What are the objectives of each stakeholder?
- 3. When you look at the three lenses of people, money, and time, what would you have done differently in the case study above?
- 4. How could the start of the meeting in the Provost's office have gone differently? What would you do in this situation?
- 5. In cases like this, the employer partner may offer their support with the requirement that they have input on the curriculum. How would you handle such a requirement? What are the guardrails you must respect in order to maintain academic integrity and quality?
- 6. In this case, we noted that the vision was adapted to reality. Think of a time when the vision and reality got out of alignment. How did you adapt? What did you learn from the experience, and how would you adapt now?
- 7. If you don't have a clear vision for the future of digital learning at your institution, develop one and begin discussing it with your colleagues. Adapt and revise as you gain more input and feedback.

Faculty

Some faculty were thrilled to return to the traditional classroom and not look back following the COVID-19 shutdowns. However, other faculty found there are interesting challenges and opportunities to pursue by continuing to teach some of their classes at a distance. These shifting interests around digital and online learning have exposed various challenges, most of which are not new. However, many have not been appropriately addressed by institutions as digital learning has evolved. Here are a few of the challenges you may see daily on your campus:

- While you have a strong coalition of the willing, there are significant pockets of resistance, both from individual faculty members who are outspoken against digital learning and from entire departments and even colleges/divisions who oppose digital learning.
- Faculty want more training but are slow, or even resistant, to participate in the training you offer.
- ► Faculty are outspoken critics of digital learning and believe it is not of the same quality and rigor as face-to-face instruction.
- ► Faculty who have been champions of digital learning, or those who express interest, lose interest as they realize the high number of additional regulations they must adhere to in order to teach online.
- ► The institution's intellectual property policies are not keeping pace with the evolving needs in digital learning. Faculty are concerned that their intellectual property will be used without their consent and benefit.
- ► Faculty members, particularly those who taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic, come to you believing that they can offer a high-quality course without going through a development process. They fail to see the difference between the emergency instruction offered in the wake of the pandemic and the high-quality digital learning you are striving to make a hallmark of the institution.

Adding to the layers of challenges is the fact that many of your faculty members are adjunct faculty. The specific percentage of adjunct faculty use and the ratio of adjunct to full-time faculty on your campus may add context to each of the bullets above, and cause you to add additional items not covered in this list.

Let's consider the following case as we think about how best to work with faculty members on our campuses.

Taking Course Redesign Efforts to Scale

In close partnership with the faculty members of three different departments, your team of instructional designers offered significant support in redesigning eight courses that had large enrollments but had major success rate gaps between the online and on-ground versions.

The faculty members who participated in this redesign effort took part in a "boot camp"- style, two-weekend program led by the instructional design team. During this program, faculty learned important skills and tools to help them embed quality standards in their development process and to engage in a backward design process. Faculty were fairly compensated, with some even calling the compensation generous.

Additionally, the departments all agreed that these courses would become the model courses for those departments and your team would be allowed to load these courses into the shell of all online sections of those courses. The department chairs would work with you to encourage faculty members, many of whom are adjunct, to use these shells as the basis for their classes.

You have looked at this through the lenses of people, money, and time, and considered how you could scale this approach to as many as ten more departments in order to address success rate gaps in some of their high-enrollment courses. Two departments agree immediately and are excited to have this additional funding to do work they believe is essential. They've also heard from their colleagues in the first three departments that did the initial pilot that the experience was hard but extremely rewarding and they are excited to get started.

However, the other departments are resistant:

- Two departments refuse to participate because faculty members in those departments believe that the university is stealing the intellectual property of their colleagues by allowing it to be loaded into the courses of other faculty members. They say that they heard that your team pushed aside considerations about intellectual property throughout the development process and that faculty members, especially the five adjunct members who you worked with on the pilot to ensure representation, in those three departments who raised concerns, feared retaliation if they continued to bring up the issue.
- ➤ Three departments agree that the courses need to be revised, but don't want to work with you to do the work because they don't want to participate in the training. The reasons for not wanting to participate vary. Some are due to past experiences with training from the digital learning department. While this was during the time of a past leader, and you share their opinion that how the training under that leader was run could have been done much better, it's not how you run things, but the faculty members don't care or don't believe that. Others simply don't believe that they should have to stay current on digital learning needs. They are charged with remaining current in their field of study. They aren't required to get current on things that some other department tells them are important.
- ► The final three departments want to use your evidence as a reason not to offer classes online anymore. They are outspoken against all forms of digital learning and see your coming to them to participate in this redesign effort as proving their point for them that digital learning is of poor quality. They don't believe anything you can do will change that.

- 1. Do you have a concrete menu of services and supports that you offer to faculty at your institution? How does that menu of services and supports match with what faculty want and need? How are you determining what faculty want? How are you determining what faculty need?
- 2. When reviewing the list of challenges from faculty members regarding digital learning, which ones did you identify with most closely? What others would you add?

- 3. In the scenario presented, the two departments that signed on immediately were at least partially swayed by the experience their colleagues shared with them. How do you work with the faculty with whom you have close relationships to aid them in being peer influencers? How could you expand your network of faculty relationships to better support this kind of peer-to-peer relationship building?
- 4. In the scenario, how did data work both for and against the effort of case-making? How have you seen these types of interactions play out on your campus? What could have been done differently in the case or in your own experiences to change the outcome?
- 5. How did the role of intellectual property rights show up in the case? How does it show up in your day to day life? What's an action you can take to improve the situation on your campus today in regard to intellectual property rights?

Staff

Staff play key roles in learner and institutional success across the entire higher education experience. From admissions staff who describe the culture and experience of the campus to academic advisors who guide students through their learning journeys, to instructional design and curriculum staff who focus and engage faculty and students in ongoing curriculum design efforts and the alumni staff who work tirelessly to engage graduates in the life of the university, staff are critical to the mission of the institution - and to the success of any digital learning efforts.

Intentionally engaging staff members in these departments often requires navigating political relationships across various institutional silos. Additionally, staff members often don't feel comfortable advocating for their needs in a room full of faculty members. Furthermore, staff in different offices operate in accordance to different schedules than the regular institutional academic schedule. Admissions staff are thinking about recruiting for next year's class right now. Financial aid staff must deal with a myriad of federal and state deadlines.

Higher education institutions are broad systems and systems are only successful when all of their individual parts are working together towards a common goal. As you review the case that follows, consider the three lenses of people, time, and money and focus on the unique needs of staff in this scenario.

Rolling Enrollment in a New Certificate Program

For the past year, instructional design and faculty members from the College of Arts and Sciences have partnered to launch a new interdisciplinary, fully online undergraduate certificate program. The program focuses on data storytelling and digital communication. The program design was developed in partnership with career services, which is organized under the University's Senior VP for Student Success. The Senior VP has been incredibly supportive of the program and assured you that admissions and enrollment (A&E), advising, student success (which includes tutoring and coaching), financial aid, and career services are all on board and ready to support the initiative.

Faculty engagement has been incredibly strong. The program has regularly been discussed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. The President even touted it as an excellent example of university-wide collaboration in her state of the institution speech.

As the lead instructional designer, you held regular design meetings, aligned learning outcomes, produced engaging content, and worked hard to apply the latest online learning best practices. Everyone agrees it's some of the most innovative work the institution has done in years. In the past, programs like these suffered from not including marketing early in the process to ensure enrollment met demands. Additionally, a program developed last year didn't bring in student accessibility services early in the process, resulting in content being inaccessible to some students and a scramble to get alternative options available in the course. You were careful to learn from these past missteps and brought both marketing and student accessibility services in from the beginning.

The program is designed to run on a unique rolling enrollment model that the Senior VP for Student Success has been extremely excited about. He has said many times that he and his teams are fully on board. The program launches and all of the work the design team did with marketing immediately shows a payoff. You have 35 students who enroll within the first week! Because of the rolling enrollment model, these students can begin the program the week after they enroll - and that is when some cracks start to appear.

Enrolled students cannot log into the Learning Management System. Your team assumed students would be able to access courses within about 48 hours after their enrollment - just as your "regular" students do. However, the help desk is swamped, creating an immediate customer service crisis. Several students drop within the first week, frustrated they can't access course content. You learn that the regular feeds that IT uses to update the LMS are run by term. Since your program uses a unique term structure, IT isn't catching these students. You work with IT and get the feeds set up and running so that this new structure will be caught. However, the CIO is frustrated because this is adding significant additional work to her team that they were not expecting while they are in the midst of a major system upgrade.

Now that students can log in, you start to see that the vital support you had from the Senior VP for Student Success didn't include sharing all of the regular updates on the project with his teams. Specifically, the data storytelling classes include quite a bit of statistics. Early student feedback suggests that assignments are challenging and the course material isn't enough. Faculty are confused-their syllabi mention tutoring support. What no one realized was that the tutoring center was unaware the courses existed or that they so intentionally guided students to the tutoring center for support. They had no tutors prepared for these assignments and so early student sessions with tutoring were less than ideal.

About a third of enrolled students are counting on federal financial aid. Unfortunately, the 6-week modular format of the courses didn't match the institution's existing financial aid calendar. You had an initial conversation with the director of financial aid at the request of the Senior VP of Student Success, but after that he assured you that financial aid was on board and prepared and you didn't need to have them in the ongoing meetings. Unfortunately, the impact is that many students didn't receive timely aid disbursements, and some were dropped for nonpayment.

- 1. How did reliance on the Senior VP for student success work for and against the team in this case?
- 2. How would you go about repairing relationships with the CIO, their team, financial aid, and tutoring if this was your project?
- 3. At your institution, what are some of the unique challenges that staff face that faculty do not face?
- 4. Do you have a checklist of your institution's various staff departments that you can review anytime you engage in a new project? If not, take some time to develop one. We used ChatGPT to create a template to get you started. You'll find that in Appendix A.
- 5. What are some of the unique calendars and deadlines used by departments on your own campus? How do tutors prepare for the offering of new classes? Choose a staff area on campus and set about learning how your team could better collaborate and communicate with that department.

6.	What are other staff concerns not discussed in this case that impact your institution? How are you working with staff to help address these issues? Here are a few ideas to consider as you brainstorm your list: hours of operations, developing staffing ratios (student-to-staff ratios), providing support to remote students, cultural issues, and the need for professional learning about new technologies.

Learners

Just as faculty want to know how their needs will be met when they arise, so do students. Students have largely voted with their mouse buttons by selecting online learning and distance education in growing percentages. However, institutional leaders still have many responsibilities to students they must consider as they design programs that meet students' needs.

The first thing institutions must do, but many struggle to do, is to listen to their students regularly. You must know your students, both the ones you serve and those you do not serve. This means developing and administering an appropriate model for gathering student data and feedback across all facets of your educational operations. Many institutions build their academic program catalog and students' schedules year after year without ever once asking students for their feedback on the programs and schedules.

Additionally, just as with faculty, students need to know you're there when they need you and that they are not left to complete their online classes seemingly alone. Institutions must consider how they deliver all support services in ways that meet the needs of online and distance learners. Students need support beyond technology help desks. They need the full support of the institution, from admissions to alumni, to understand that digital learning is part of the fabric of the institution.

Al Experience and Expectations

It's three p.m. on Friday afternoon at the end of what has been a good week. You had no meetings on your calendar following lunch, meaning you got some real work done this afternoon. You turn to your inbox to clean up a few emails, eagerly anticipating a weekend where you don't feel the usual stress of an inbox that needs to be cleaned and the critical work that needs to be done next week still needs to be done over the weekend.

As you turn to your inbox, an email from the Student Government Association (SGA) President, Sawyer, pops up. They are an excellent student and have shown incredible leadership abilities as well. SGA members hold regular student listening sessions in the food court, and they are extremely well attended. As a result, SGA has brought several issues to the attention of institutional leadership, and members of the student body have volunteered to help resolve these issues.

Here is the email:

Dear John,

As you know, we've been holding listening sessions in the food court every Thursday to gather student feedback. The overwhelming topic this week was the inconsistency in Al use and support across campus. Here were three issues that came up:

- Advising Chatbot SGA members were extremely excited to help you test out the Advising Chatbot
 before it was launched last year. We have found that it helps us quickly answer routine questions.
 However, some of the first-year students have indicated that their advisors are telling them to
 use the chatbot rather than making appointments with them. However, they have some complex
 questions that the bot cannot answer accurately. They persisted in making appointments, but said
 they felt a lot of tension with the advising staff.
- 2. Writing Assistant Students at the listening session were frustrated that the new writing assistant tool being piloted is not more like ChatGPT. A few said that they believe writing papers is no longer a skill they need to have since the AI can do it for them. They don't understand why the university isn't trying to teach them how to use the AI to write rather than trying to help them do their own writing.
- 3. What is allowed with AI Use? The conversation on the "Writing Assistant" led to a broader conversation on the institution's policy around AI. It feels like faculty just get to do whatever they want. In some classes, students are told they aren't allowed to use AI at all, and in other classes, it feels like the faculty member is outsourcing instruction to AI.

As you know, SGA doesn't bring these challenges forward to dump them on your lap but rather to partner with you to try to solve them. The SGA executive team and I stand ready to help. I'd love to set up a meeting next week to discuss these issues in more detail.

All the best.

Sawyer

As you read the email, your heart sinks a bit. First, the advising chatbot rollout did go great from a student perspective. The project came from an idea from your student interns. You worked with some of the IT classes on campus to get this done as a student-developed project that was tested and refined with students. The Director of Advising and a few of her staff were on board from the very beginning. However, a few of her staff also thought you were trying to replace them with technology. It's disappointing to read that the students have experienced this resistance firsthand.

The second and third items, and especially the third one, just make your head hurt. You've had meeting after meeting with the faculty senate president as well as the chair of the subcommittee on digital technology. They keep telling you that AI is just too new for the university to develop any sort of policy or guidance

around its use. Faculty will need at least another year or two in order to experiment and see what works and what doesn't before they are ready to talk about a policy.

- 1. If you are John, how would you show students that you hear their concerns and take them seriously? What timeline is appropriate for this?
- 2. How would you engage the students to help resolve these issues?
- 3. John and his team have clearly worked with students on projects in the past. In what ways does your team regularly engage students? How could you enhance and expand these engagements?
- 4. You've taken the approach that the institution needs an instructional Al policy. Faculty disagree. What other things could you suggest to try to move the conversation forward? What guidelines, tools, and values can be communicated to help students, faculty, and staff navigate AI appropriately?
- 5. Some advising staff clearly feel threatened by the Al Chatbot. How do you respond to those feelings in an appropriate manner?
- 6. At your institution, how do you gather student feedback today? How is the feedback that is gathered used to drive action?
- 7. How is your institution using AI today? What is your vision for AI use across the University or within your specific sphere of influence? How are you communicating that vision?

External Stakeholders

Institutions serve the broader community by serving students. Institutional stakeholders, both internal and external, need to be assured that the online and distance learning programs meet quality standards, ensuring a high-quality student experience and meeting regulatory requirements. Some may also wonder about the cost of online education and digital learning tools as compared to "normal" on-ground education.

External stakeholders also have different levers they can use to direct your institution. State and federal legislators typically use money as a tool to guide institutional actions. Employers and community stakeholders may use representation, relationships, and communication to and about your institution as levers.

All stakeholders want institutions to be responsive to their needs. Specifically, employers and companies often want institutions to be quick to adapt to their needs as they are not subject to the same regulatory framework as higher education institutions.

Balancing Reality with Policy

You are the Chief Digital Learning Officer at a community college. While news coming from the state legislature this year, particularly around funding, has mostly depressed you, there has been a bright spot. The state legislature has announced two new funding sources that your institution is well situated to leverage.

The first is matching grants to fund workforce training programs. The matching grants are awarded to institutions that partner with companies to provide opportunities for employees to earn certificates and degrees in a specific list of programs. Your institution has done something similar with your community foundations for years. The initiative has been so successful that the community foundations have used all the funds every year and there are more employers who want to take part in the program. The college's President and the Executive Directors of the community foundations were invited to attend the bill signing and were touted as the model on which this program was based. The College's President estimates that you'll be able to offer opportunities to at least twenty additional companies to participate in the program this coming year.

The second is an expanded dual credit program that awards additional funding for students who complete full certificates or degrees while in high school. Traditionally, you've only been funded for pennies on the dollar for the dual credit that your institution has done. However, your institution's President and Cabinet have made sacrifices in other areas because the communities you serve needed a trained workforce right out of high school. You already have two key workforce programs that students can earn while in high school. The President and Provost have said they want to make five additional programs available in key high schools beginning in the next academic year. Not only will this provide key funding, but they hope it will help employers fill critical positions.

Digital Learning has played an important part in both of these efforts. One great example is how many of the students taking courses through the employer/community foundation partnerships initiative needed HyFlex offerings. Employees overwhelmingly preferred face-to-face learning. However, the five largest employer partners employ two or three staff shifts, and students often need or want to work between

shifts. HyFlex made the most sense to support these programs. Many of the local high schools lacked credentialed faculty, particularly for required dual credit eligible general education courses. You and the high school partners worked together to align schedules so that a faculty member from the college could teach synchronous courses to the high school. In a few cases, the college faculty and the high school teachers have created wonderful learning communities. Plus, several of the high school teachers are now pursuing masters degrees so they can also teach college-level courses. Since your institution struggles to recruit and retain credentialed faculty, this is seen by most people as an enormous positive.

As you and the rest of the President's Cabinet review the overall outcome of the state's budget updates on your operations, it is clear that you'll be able to make it through the next funding cycle with only minor cuts. Other institutions in the state, however, are beginning to consider much more dramatic cuts as a result of the changes in funding.

- 1. What in this case resonates with you? How do the situations presented in this case reflect what you've experienced? How does it differ from your experience?
- 2. In what ways do both internal and external politics play a part in your role in the college? What about in other areas of the college?
- 3. In this case, the institution seems to have invested in HyFlex courses as well as synchronous courses to serve specific populations. What student population do you need to serve? Is there a way that some level of digital learning could help support these stakeholders? We used ChatGPT to build Appendix B, which provides a list of levels of digital learning support that you can review to aid your thinking and brainstorming.
- 4. As presented in this case, the institution seems to have broken down a lot of internal silos and found innovative ways to solve big challenges faced by their community. What struck you as innovative or significant about the work this institution was doing? Is there a step you can take at your institution to move in the direction of this type of substantial work in your community?
- 5. One of the aims of this case was to present an institution that has a clear understanding of who it is, who it serves, and how it serves. While fictitious as a whole, it is based on real programs at real institutions where the hard work has been done to figure out the answers to these questions. At your institution, is it clear what your institutional identity is, who you serve, and how you serve each of those groups? If it is, how is that shared with all team members? Could this improve? If it is not clear, how could it be made clearer?

Building Your Digital Learning Change Toolkit

As you've read through these scenarios and considered the questions posed, you've likely recognized situations that feel familiar. You may also have been encouraged by the creative problem-solving and strategic thinking demonstrated in some of the examples.

Digital learning isn't just a modality or a toolset. It's a mindset, one that must be adaptive and intentional during ongoing change. Advocating for digital learning is as much about navigating people, culture, and systems as it is about technology.

This final section encourages you to take time to consolidate your insights and move from reflection to action—so you can build or refine your own case for digital learning change.

Where Are You Now?

Leading change in digital learning requires an understanding of where you are. If you aren't able to articulate clearly to all stakeholders why you are moving to an envisioned future state, you won't be able to lead change effectively.

Create a "current state" statement or other artifact to describe your institution's current state of digital learning. Here are some questions to guide your development:

- Which case study most closely mirrors something happening at your institution right now? How could you use this to describe your current state?
- Which stakeholder group or groups do you find the most challenging to engage? Why? How will you reflect that in your current state?
- What assumptions do people at your institution commonly make about digital learning, and how do those assumptions help or hinder your work?
- ► How clearly defined is your own vision for the future of digital learning at your institution? What role does this play in your current state?
- ▶ What are the strengths and weaknesses of digital learning at your institution? How are you improving on your strengths and trying to account for your weaknesses?

Develop a Plan for Change

Using your current state, consider a change underway at your institution or one you are considering. Using the different stages of successful change management efforts to assess how you implement change at your institution. Those stages again are:

- Intentionally and regularly engage stakeholders to assess the internal and external landscape to identify the need for change.
- Prepare for change by making the case for change and creating a plan that continues to engage stakeholders at all levels.
- Implement the change, which will nearly always involve adapting the plan to meet reality.

Assess how things are going and take opportunities to celebrate success and learn from missteps.

Use the prompts below to build the case and to draft a plan for digital learning change.

- What problem or opportunity can digital learning help solve at your institution?
- ▶ Who will benefit? How will you measure that benefit?
- Who must be informed, consulted, and engaged from the start?
- What do you already know about stakeholder perspectives on digital learning?
- What don't you know about their perspectives on the change?
- Where do you need to build or rebuild trust?
- What data, stories, or values will you use to make your case compelling?
- ▶ What language will resonate with different audiences? Consider faculty, students, administrators, staff, and external partners.
- Is this an adaptive change (evolving practices) or a transformational one (redefining your institutional approach)?
- ▶ What steps can you take to begin in the next 30-90 days?
- What change management practices can help you keep momentum and engagement?
- ► How will you check back in with these practices to ensure that you are using good change management principles across the entire project?
- What communication channels will you use to build awareness and engagement?
- How will you listen to feedback? How will you show the ways you visibly act on it?
- How will you celebrate both large and small wins?
- ▶ How can you make your progress visible across campus to build broader support?

Final Thoughts

You don't have to have all the answers, but you do need to start the conversation and keep it going. This document is meant to be a tool to help you begin that conversation and move it forward.

Whether you guide policy creation, redesign courses, advocate for resources, or just simply plant seeds for future collaboration, you are leading essential work. Digital learning is not separate from your institution's mission; digital learning is one of the most powerful ways to fulfill it.

So, build your case. Invite others into the conversation. And keep asking the most important question: "How do we make learning work better for everyone?"

Appendix A: Staff Departments List

In the staff scenario, you are encouraged to make a list of the various departments at your institution that you can use when considering changes. This planning tool serves as a checklist to aid your thinking about what other areas might be impacted by a change you are considering or are implementing.

To help you get started, we asked ChatGPT to help us brainstorm a common list of non-faculty offices found on college campuses. Feel free to use this as a starting point for your own list. Adapt it to your institution's specific context and structure.

Academic Support & Student Services

Academic Advising

Helps students select courses, understand degree requirements, and stay on track for graduation.

Career Services

Supports students in preparing for internships, job searches, resume writing, interviewing, and connecting with employers.

Disability Services (Accessibility Services)

Ensures equal access for students with disabilities through accommodations and advocacy.

Registrar's Office

Manages course registration, transcripts, degree audits, and enrollment records.

Library Services

Provides access to academic resources, research help, and study spaces.

Tutoring and Learning Centers

Offers academic support services including tutoring, workshops, and study skills development.

Testing Services

Coordinates placement tests, standardized testing, and accommodated testing for students with documented needs.

► TRIO / Student Support Services

Provides academic and personal support for first-generation, low-income, or disabled students.

Technology & Digital Infrastructure

► Information Technology (IT) Services

Manages campus networks, help desks, classroom technology, cybersecurity, and enterprise systems.

Instructional Design & eLearning Support

Assists faculty with online course development, digital pedagogy, and LMS management.

Media Services / AV Support

Supports classroom technology, event tech needs, and media production services.

Enrollment & Financial Operations

Admissions

Recruits and enrolls new students through marketing, outreach, and application processing.

Financial Aid

Administers student aid, loans, grants, scholarships, and compliance with federal/state aid regulations.

Bursar / Student Accounts

Manages tuition billing, payments, and student financial records.

Institutional Research / Data Analytics

Gathers and analyzes data to support planning, assessment, and accreditation.

Campus Life & Student Affairs

Residence Life / Housing

Manages student housing, assignments, and residential programming.

Student Conduct / Judicial Affairs

Upholds student behavior policies and oversees the disciplinary process.

Student Activities / Campus Life

Coordinates student clubs, leadership programs, and campus engagement initiatives.

Multicultural Affairs / DEI Offices

Promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion through programming, education, and student support.

Counseling Services

Provides mental health counseling, crisis intervention, and wellness education.

Health Services / Student Health Center

Delivers basic medical care, immunizations, and health education to students.

► Title IX / Equity Compliance Office

Handles reports of sexual misconduct and ensures compliance with gender equity laws.

Human Resources & Institutional Operations

Human Resources (HR)

Manages hiring, employee relations, payroll, benefits, and training for faculty and staff.

Facilities Management / Physical Plant

Maintains campus buildings, grounds, custodial services, and sustainability initiatives.

Public Safety / Campus Police

Provides security, emergency response, and law enforcement services.

Legal Affairs / General Counsel

Offers legal guidance on institutional policies, contracts, risk management, and compliance.

Procurement / Purchasing

Oversees vendor contracts, purchasing processes, and inventory management.

Environmental Health and Safety (EHS)

Ensures compliance with safety regulations and manages emergency preparedness.

Communications & Advancement

Marketing & Communications

Manages branding, public relations, media relations, and digital marketing.

Alumni Relations

Engages alumni through events, newsletters, and fundraising initiatives.

Development / Advancement / Fundraising

Cultivates donor relationships and oversees institutional fundraising efforts.

Appendix B: Levels of Digital Learning

In the scenario for external stakeholders, you are encouraged to think about ways different "levels" of digital learning could be used at your institution. We asked ChatGPT to help us brainstorm a guick list of levels of digital learning. You could use this list in a few ways. First, you could develop a list that describes the levels of digital learning at your institution. Second, you could use this list as a brainstorming aid to help you think about new ways to solve challenges you're facing.

Digital Correspondence Learning

Pre-recorded video lectures, automated assessments, and downloadable materials with minimal instructor interaction or peer engagement. Often consumed independently and asynchronously.

Content Distribution via LMS

Faculty post PDFs, slides, and readings in a learning management system (LMS) with minimal interaction or structured activities. Students are expected to review materials on their own time.

Asynchronous Online Courses

Structured courses with instructor-designed modules, discussion boards, and deadlines. No real-time meetings, but includes interaction through feedback, forums, and announcements.

Synchronous Online Courses

Courses delivered via live video sessions at scheduled times (e.g., Zoom), enabling real-time interaction between faculty and students, often supplemented with LMS materials.

Blended/Hybrid Courses

Combines face-to-face sessions with significant online components. At least 30-50% of the learning occurs online, often replacing seat time with digital activities.

HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible) Courses

Students choose on a class-by-class basis whether to attend in person, synchronously online, or asynchronously online. Requires robust technology and flexible instructional design.

Technology-Enhanced In-Person Courses

Traditional face-to-face classes that incorporate digital tools such as polling apps, digital simulations, AI tutors, or collaborative platforms like Padlet or Miro to enhance engagement.

Al-Augmented Learning Experiences

Courses that use generative AI, chatbots, or adaptive platforms to personalize learning, give realtime feedback, or simulate complex scenarios. Requires digital literacy to be used effectively.

► Immersive Digital Learning (XR/AR/VR)

Learning environments that use virtual or augmented reality to simulate real-world tasks or environments, often used in labs, simulations, and experiential learning contexts.

► Fully Online Programs with Integrated Support

Entire degrees or certificates offered online with structured onboarding, embedded academic support (e.g., tutoring, writing centers), and proactive student services built into the design.

