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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN DIGITAL LEARNING STRATEGY & EXECUTION



When it comes to digital learning, planning is critical. To set institutional initiatives up for success, strategic plans should be accompanied by intentional sessions on goal-setting and professional development.

TIME FOR CLASS TOOLKIT

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

What is the strategy-to-execution gap for digital learning?

What are high-performing institutions doing to achieve a positive digital learning environment?

How can institutions accelerate progress?



KEY INSIGHTS

Although an increasing number of higher education administrators report that their institutions view digital learning as important for achieving strategic goals, few believe their institutions have actually achieved an ideal digital learning environment. The difference between these two attitudes is the strategy-to-execution gap.

Institutions that set clear, measurable, public objectives for digital learning are more likely to be high-performing, as measured by the percent of faculty reporting their institution is achieving an ideal digital learning environment.

High-performing institutions set aside sufficient technical resources and double down on professional development for faculty.

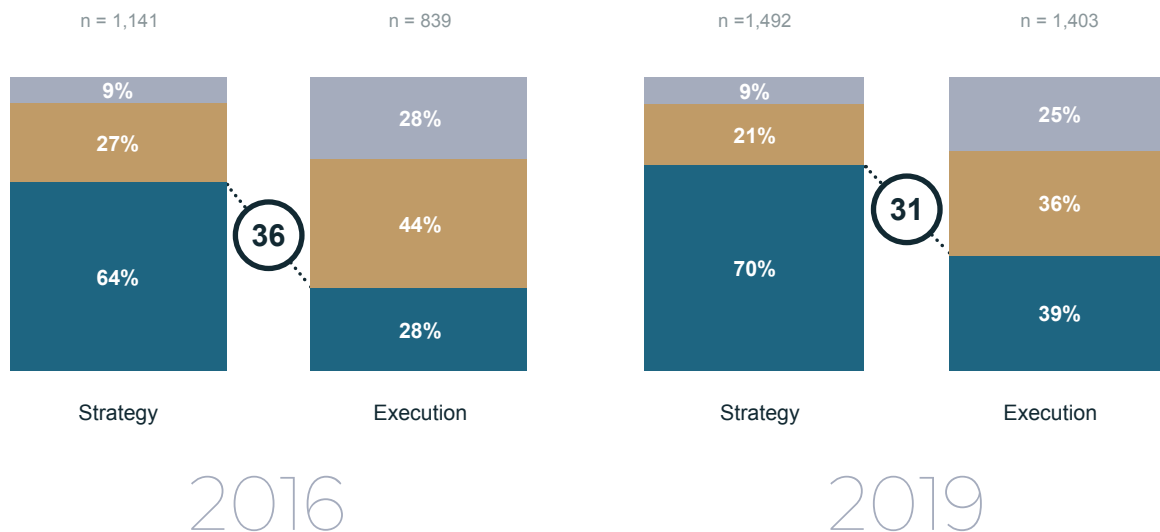


Institutions struggle to achieve ideal digital learning environments.

In the *Time for Class (T4C)* surveys administered in 2016 and 2019, a majority of university administrators (64% and 70%, respectively) indicate that digital learning is strategic for their institution's goals. At many of these institutions, digital learning is explicitly included in, or even core to, their stated strategic plans.

That said, few of these administrators believe that their respective institutions have executed the necessary initiatives to create an ideal digital learning environment. The percentage gap between those institutions rating digital learning as strategic, set beside the percentage achieving ideal digital learning environments, can be seen as digital learning work left to do—or the strategy-to-execution gap (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Strategy-to-Execution Gap, 2016 and 2019¹



KEY:

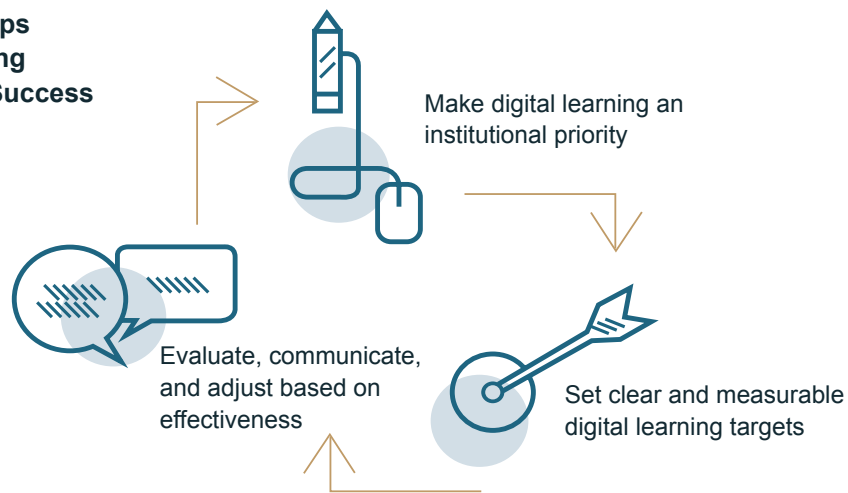
■ Agree
 ■ Neutral
 ■ Disagree

¹ Strategy graph question: "My institution views digital learning as strategic for achieving our goals"; execution graph question: "My institution is achieving an ideal digital learning environment."

Institutions that set clear, measurable, public objectives for digital learning are more likely to be high-performing.²

At high-performing institutions, there are clear themes in both administrator and faculty responses to questions about digital learning support. From these themes, best practices can be identified (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Key Steps for Digital Learning Implementation Success



1 Make digital learning an institutional priority. Administrators at high-performing institutions are nearly 3x more likely to cite digital learning as core to their strategic plan, rather than included or merely mentioned.³

2 Set clear and measurable learning targets. Administrators in high-performing environments are 2.5x more likely to have measurable goals and outcomes in place for their digital learning programs compared to respondents whose institutions are still developing.⁴ For best results, the strategic plan must be tightly connected to the operational plan. Notably, objectives cited by administrators at high-performing institutions tend to be student-focused—they are at least 20% more likely than respondents at developing schools to cite the following objectives for digital learning initiatives⁵:

- Improving access and scheduling flexibility for students
- Increasing diversity of our student body
- Increasing retention and rates of course completion
 - Reducing cost of course materials to students

3 Evaluate, communicate, and adjust based on effectiveness. In support of their goals, administrators at high-performing institutions are more than 2x as likely as those at developing institutions to have a process in place to assess their programs' effectiveness.⁶

²Institutions whose respondents agree with the statement "My institution is achieving an ideal digital learning environment" are considered high-performing for the purposes of this brief. Institutions whose respondents disagree are considered developing. ³Question: "What role does digital learning play in your institution's strategic plan?" ⁴Question: "Which of the following would you use to describe your institution. Please select all that apply." Answer: "We have goals and defined measurable outcomes for digital learning." ⁵Question: "Is digital learning at your institution key to any of the following strategic priorities? Please select all that apply." ⁶Question: "Which of the following would you use to describe your institution? Please select all that apply." Answer: "We have a process for evaluating the effectiveness of digital learning technology based on learning outcomes."

High-performing institutions back their institutional commitments with sufficient resources.

Inadequate budgets create roadblocks on the path to ideal digital learning environments. Only 15% of faculty respondents at high-performing institutions report that their institutional budgets are barriers to success,⁷ compared with 31% of those at developing institutions. Administrator responses show the same trend, with only 21% of respondents at high-performing institutions citing budgets as a barrier compared with 32% of respondents at developing institutions.

Ongoing investment in technology resources is particularly important. Administrators at high-performing institutions pay close attention to the state of their IT resources. 68% of administrators at high-performing schools say their institutions “maintain and continuously assess [their] digital learning technology infrastructure,” while only 28% of administrators at developing schools claim the same.⁸

High-performing institutions double down on professional development.

By far the most striking contrast between respondents at high-performing institutions relative to other institutions is the focus on professional development for their faculty. Administrators at high-performing institutions are 6x as likely to report that digital learning professional development has been implemented effectively and at scale as those at developing schools (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Professional Development Implementation Status⁹



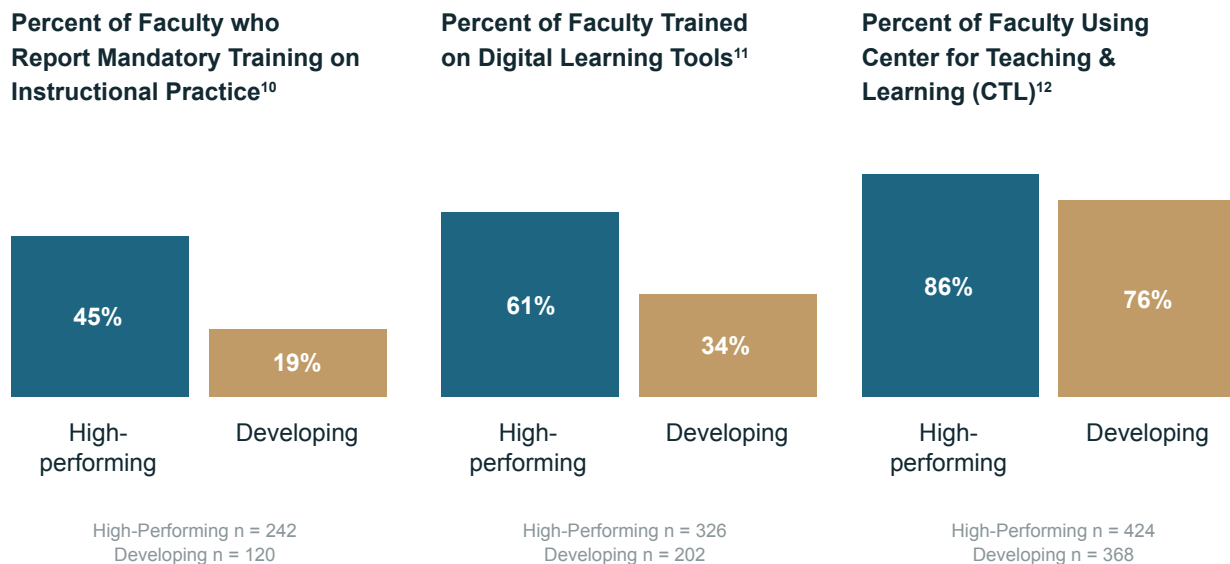
High-Performing n = 454 Developing n = 142

KEY:

■ Effectively & at scale ■ In progress

⁷Question: “What factors if any have contributed most negatively towards the implementation of digital learning? Please select up to three.”

⁸Question: “Which of the following would you use to describe your institution? Please select all that apply.” Answer: “We maintain and continuously assess our digital learning technology infrastructure.” ⁹Question: “To what extent is digital learning professional development (PD) implemented at your institution?”

Figure 4: Training Differences By Institution Performance

There are observable differences in faculty training between high-performing and developing institutions (Figure 4). Nearly half of faculty at high-performing schools cite training as mandated by their institution. Faculty at high-performing institutions are 27% more likely to be trained on digital learning tools. Faculty at high-performing schools are 10% more likely to have engaged with their Center for Teaching & Learning.

Institutions should be strategic and pick digital tools aligned with their goals and objectives.

While many digital learning resources can be used to support progress towards an ideal environment, there is not one specific tool that can solve all problems or achieve all goals for all institutions. Current faculty users of various tools across the digital learning ecosystem—including courseware, Open Educational Resources (OER), and instructional tools (e.g., social learning platforms, classroom engagement applications, and assessment resources)—are only slightly more likely to cite their institutions as high-performing. Separate briefs in this series provide insight and guidance for digital tool selection, with a focus on courseware.

¹⁰Question: "Does your institution require faculty to participate in professional development on their instructional practice for digital learning?"

¹¹Question: "Which of the following professional development topics for digital learning have you engaged with at your current institution? Please select all that apply." ¹²Question: "Does your institution have a center for teaching and learning?" Answer: "Yes, and I have engaged with it."³

TOOL FOR ACTION

Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA)¹³

There is a clear and important connection between planning for and resourcing investments in digital learning and achieving results. One important first step to take as you ensure you bridge the digital learning strategy-to-execution gap is to assess the current capacity of your digital learning plan and infrastructure.

The ITA is a broad, multitopic self-assessment tool and accompanying process composed of nine elements that allow institutions to compare their own practices. The ITA can help institutions identify strengths and opportunities for improvement through reflective conversations around the results. These “consensus conversations” and subsequent prioritizations set the stage for institutions to act and for students to succeed. The ITA is intended to support a broader institutional transformation process as described below:

- 1 **Prepare.** Institution leaders review, analyze, and consider digital learning initiatives and goals, understanding that considerable change may be needed.
- 2 **Reflect.** Institution leaders gather information and people to complete the ITA and reflect on goals, progress, and plans.
- 3 **Prioritize.** Leaders review assessment results, relevant digital learning data, and other concurrent strategic initiatives; discuss alternatives; and prioritize to initiate or proceed with plans to address gaps.
- 4 **Act.** Leaders make changes and investments in people, processes, and technology to address gaps.
- 5 **Monitor.** Leaders monitor progress against goals, adapt as necessary, and support changes made with leadership and resources.

¹³The Institutional Transformation Assessment (ITA) is an inquiry and learning tool that has two components: an online self-assessment (based on field-created content), and a group discussion (i.e., the consensus conversation). The goal of the ITA is to help institutions better understand their strengths and areas for improvement to prioritize transformation efforts.

Review the categories and indicators of the ITA. For those areas where you have one or more “no” responses, start a dialogue with key stakeholders and begin the planning and goal-setting processes.

Category	Indicator	Implementation in Progress	Are We Achieving This? (Y/N)	Is This Present in Department-Level Planning? (Y/N)	Is This Part of Institution-Wide Strategic Plan? (Y/N)
Strategic Planning	The institution has a strategic plan with accountable goals and objectives related to the continuous improvement of teaching and learning across all learning environments.	The institution has established a strategic plan with accountable goals and objectives related to continuously improving teaching and learning across all learning environments (face-to-face, hybrid, and online).			
Academic Planning	Through academic planning, the institution sets accountable goals and objectives for the implementation of digital learning tools as part of its effort to continuously improve teaching and learning and to promote the closing of equity gaps in learner outcomes, particularly in foundational courses.	The institution has an academic master plan establishing accountable goals and objectives for the implementation of digital learning tools as part of a continuous improvement effort for teaching and learning and promoting the closing of equity gaps in learner outcomes in the majority of foundational courses.			
Learner Support	The institution has processes and resources to support access, readiness, and engagement for all learner populations across all learning environments, particularly in foundational courses.	Processes and resources are implemented to support access, readiness, and engagement for all learner populations across all learning environments to promote equitable outcomes across all learner populations in the majority of foundational courses.			
Inclusive Teaching Practices	The institution supports the understanding of students' lived experiences and incorporates this into culturally relevant pedagogy and inclusive teaching practices.	Staff, faculty, and administrators build upon their understanding of their student populations' aspirations, lived experiences, and life contexts through implementation of instructional approaches that have been shown to reduce equity gaps. Processes to solicit, analyze, and apply meaningful student feedback from all demographics have become integrated within the institution's operating practices. They intentionally and systemically integrate this understanding and feedback into their goals for inclusive teaching practices, digital learning, and the way they measure outcomes.			

Category	Indicator	Implementation in Progress	Are We Achieving This? (Y/N)	Is This Present in Department-Level Planning? (Y/N)	Is This Part of Institution-Wide Strategic Plan? (Y/N)
Faculty Support	The institution supports faculty and instructor engagement, and professional development around teaching in all learning environments, with a focus on equitable teaching practices.	Planning is implemented and resources allocated for support, engagement, and professional development for faculty and instructors teaching across all learning environments. Equitable teaching practices are observed. Digital tools are leveraged to promote equitable outcomes across all learner populations in the majority of foundational courses.			
Technology Support	The institution provides hardware and software resources in support of teaching and learning.	There is sufficient and ongoing hardware and software resources implemented effectively in the support of teaching and learning in the majority of foundational courses.			
Instructional Design	The institution implements course development and instructional design processes that incorporate a variety of high-quality digital tools in the support of learning objectives and competencies, learner engagement and high impact practices.	Course development and instructional design processes are being systematically undertaken across the majority of foundational courses/departments to incorporate a variety of high-quality digital tools in the support of learning objectives and competencies, the promotion of learner engagement, and high impact practices.			
Individualized Learning	The institution effectively leverages high-quality digital learning tools which provide for individualized and engaging learning opportunities in the achievement of stated learning objectives or competencies across all learning environments.	Policies and practices are being systematically undertaken across the majority of foundational courses/departments to support the use of high-quality digital learning tools which provide for individualized and engaging learning opportunities, including the use of analytics.			
Learner Interaction	The institution effectively leverages the use of high-quality digital learning tools that enhance opportunities for learner interaction to support the achievement of learning objectives and/or competencies across all learning environments.	Policies and practices are being systematically undertaken across the majority of foundational courses/departments to support the use of high-quality digital learning tools and analytics that provide opportunities for interaction that support the achievement of stated learning objectives or competencies across all learning environments.			
Accessibility and Usability	The institution meets recognized accessibility standards in its use of digital tools across all modalities (desktop/tablet/phone).	Policies and processes are in place for continuous monitoring to make sure the institution meets recognized accessibility standards and provides for usability of all digital tools across all learning environments.			
Continuous Improvement	The institution measures the effectiveness of high-quality digital learning tools to support teaching and learning in all learning environments using rubrics, frameworks, assessments, and standard practices and works to continuously improve its digital learning tools.	Policies and practices are being systematically undertaken across the majority of foundational courses/departments for continuous improvement in the effectiveness of high-quality digital learning tools to support teaching and learning in all environments using rubrics, frameworks, assessments, and standard practices.			



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information, visit [Every Learner Everywhere Resources](#) or the [Tyton Partners Library](#).



ABOUT

Time for Class is a comprehensive longitudinal survey of 4,000+ higher education faculty and administrators, fielded since 2014 by [Tyton Partners](#) and the [Babson Survey Research Group](#) and underwritten by the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). Results inform a comprehensive fact base focused particularly on the postsecondary digital courseware landscape, in the service of making this diverse and complex market easier to navigate for institutions and education professionals.



Tyton Partners is the leading provider of investment banking and strategy consulting services to the education sector and leverages its deep transactional and advisory experience to support a range of clients, including companies, foundations, institutions, and investors.

For more information, visit www.tytonpartners.com.



The Babson Survey Research Group is a survey design, implementation, and analysis organization. Founded in 2005, the organization has worked on a number of large surveys including an annual survey of online education that includes all colleges and universities in the United States.

For more information, visit www.onlinelearningsurvey.com.



Every Learner Everywhere is a network of 12 partner organizations focused on providing a comprehensive, coordinated approach to help colleges and universities take advantage of the rapidly evolving digital learning landscape.

For more information, visit www.everylearnereverywhere.com.

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We also would like to thank the 4,000+ survey respondents across 1,300+ institutions for their input and their daily work to advance the field's knowledge of digital tools and courseware in higher education.

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