

Facing the “Build or Buy” Question in Digital Learning

When implementing digital learning, institutions have the option of turning to a wide variety of third-party educational technology products and services or developing products and services in-house. Navigating the “build or buy” decision and predicting the impacts of that decision over time can be overwhelming, especially for institutions new to digital learning.

In the decision to build or buy, there is no right answer, and the institutions featured in “Making Digital Learning Work,” a 2018 report produced by Arizona State University and Boston Consulting Group, employ a range of approaches. On one end of the spectrum is the University of Central Florida, which invests significantly in internal capacity to create and sustain its online-learning offerings. On the other end of the spectrum is Arizona State University, which reports using over [130 third-party](#) tools in its online courses. Both of these institutions are leaders in digital learning and serve tens of thousands of students annually in online courses and programs. UCF invests relatively more in faculty support, instructional design and instructional content creation to support its digital learning programs, whereas ASU invests relatively more in fees and subscriptions with third-party products and services. In both cases, these strategies have enabled successful scaling that works for each institution.

To help with the decision to build or buy a digital learning solution (whether a digital learning product, a customization of a product or course design services), this guide presents a handful of important considerations for your institution. We recommend that these considerations be explored by the individual with decision-making power, with input from colleagues in different units at the institution, like information technology, academics and finance. The result of the exploration is not likely to be a clear “yes” or “no” to either build or buy, but it should help decision-makers move toward a better understanding of the risks and benefits of both options.

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