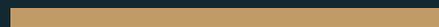# TAKING A PORTFOLIO APPROACH TO MANAGING DIGITAL LEARNING INITIATIVES

Institutions experiment with varied digital learning initiatives to further their objectives. Purposeful portfolio management based on goal setting and resource planning can prevent initiative fatigue and increase success.

TIME FOR CLASS TOOLKIT

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

What challenges inhibit the success of digital learning initiatives?

What are the range of strategic priorities institutions seek to address?

How can you use a portfolio approach to build a digital learning strategy and help manage initiative fatigue at your institution?

KEY INSIGHTS

Time and effort required are the most commonly cited barriers to the successful implementation of digital learning initiatives.

Administrators report using digital learning as a tool to support a broad array of institutional goals. The relative importance of these goals differs across institutional types.

Initiatives should be clearly linked back to specific institutional outcomes and priorities that benefit students, whether that be through teaching and learning goals or productivity and efficiency goals.
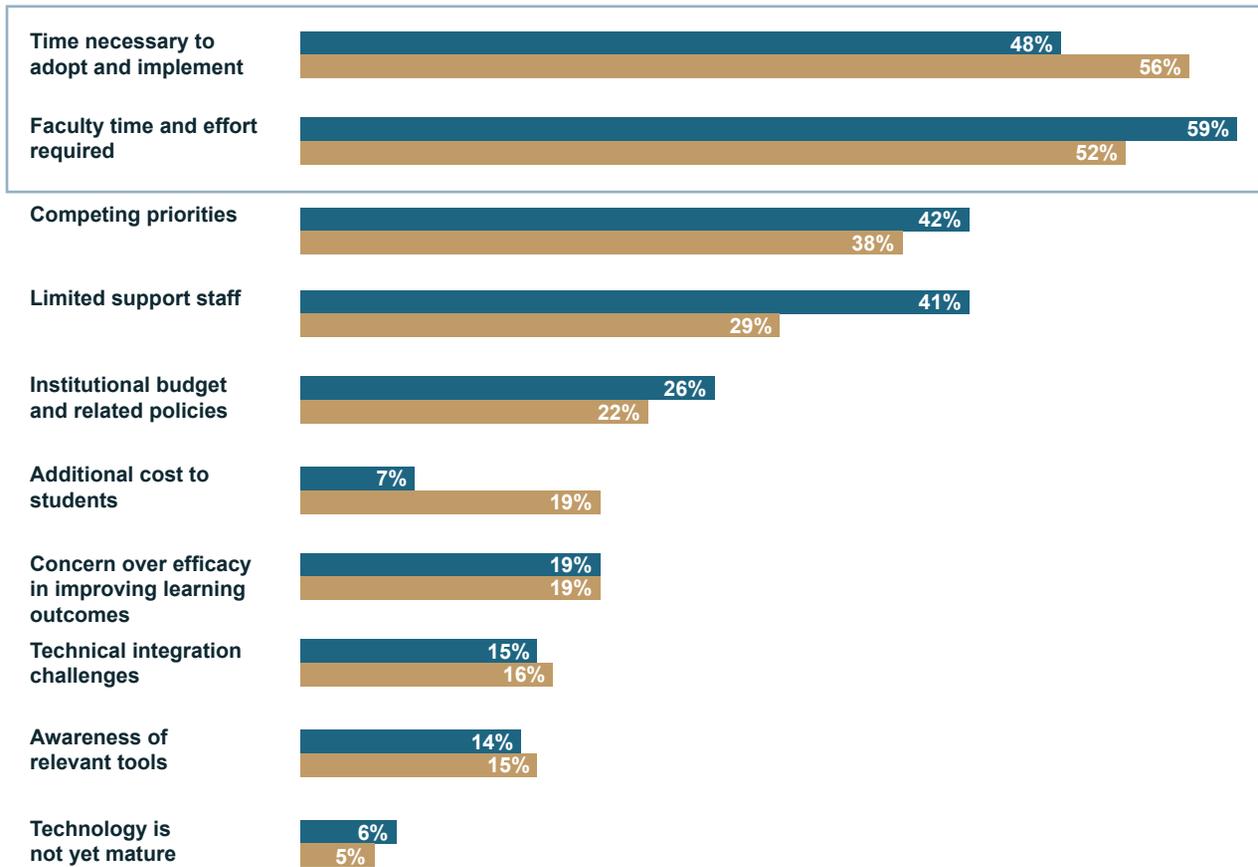
Initiatives should be evaluated based on the time required from primary influencers and stakeholders, whether that be individual or groups of faculty, administrators, or others.

Authored by Tyton PARTNERS & BABSON Survey Research Group

Time and effort are the most commonly cited barriers to the successful implementation of digital learning initiatives.

Unsurprisingly, time and attention are some of the most valuable and finite commodities, but also the critical inputs to success (Figure 1). Carefully and strategically managing faculty, administrator, and staff time to plan and implement new initiatives is critical.

Figure 1: Factors that Inhibit Digital Learning Success[1]

Factor	Administrators	Faculty
Time necessary to adopt and implement	48%	56%
Faculty time and effort required	59%	52%
Competing priorities	42%	38%
Limited support staff	41%	29%
Institutional budget and related policies	26%	22%
Additional cost to students	7%	19%
Concern over efficacy in improving learning outcomes	19%	19%
Technical integration challenges	15%	16%
Awareness of relevant tools	14%	15%
Technology is not yet mature	6%	5%

KEY:

■ Administrators   ■ Faculty

Administrator n = 1,583 Faculty n = 2,357

[1]Question: "What factors have contributed most negatively towards the implementation of digital learning? Select up to three."

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Complicating matters, digital learning is used as a tool to advance a broad array of institutional goals.

Digital learning is seen by more than 50% of administrators as a tool to achieve goals related to access, affordability, growth, and innovation in teaching and learning (Figure 2). This diversity of objectives for digital learning initiatives makes it even more important to ensure that initiatives are carefully planned, built, implemented, and communicated in relation to primary goals.

Teaching- and learning-focused goals such as improving access and flexibility and encouraging faculty experimentation with instruction are clear priorities across institution types. Growing enrollment is the second-highest priority for high-distance four-year institutions. Given your institution type, how do your goals compare?

Figure 2: Administrator-Reported Digital Learning Priorities by Institution Type[2]

	OVERALL	2-year Low-Distance	2-year High-Distance	4-year Public Low-Distance	4-year Public High-Distance	4-year Private Low-Distance	4-year Private High-Distance
Improve access and scheduling flexibility	75%	81%	88%	74%	85%	57%	81%
Grow enrollment	65%	57%	77%	59%	70%	54%	78%
Encourage faculty to implement innovative instructional methods	63%	62%	62%	67%	58%	70%	57%
Reduce cost of course materials to students	51%	62%	63%	50%	55%	39%	49%
Identify new or alternative revenue streams	48%	29%	31%	52%	48%	51%	62%

KEY:

■ Most Frequently Selected   ■ 2nd Most Frequently Selected   ■ 3rd Most Frequently Selected
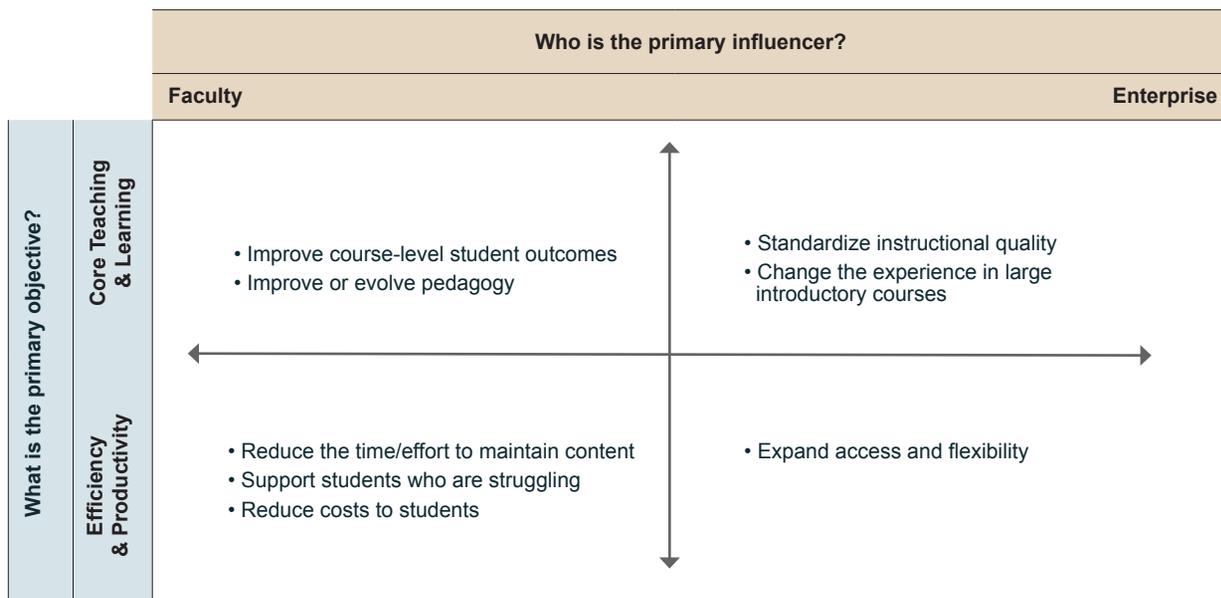
n = 1,551

[2]Segments are defined by the portion of undergraduate students taking at least one course at a distance: low-distance = up to 25%, high-distance = 25%+ [3]Question: "Is digital learning at your institution key to any of the following strategic priorities? Please select all that apply."

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As a first step in prioritizing digital learning initiatives, consider the primary objective you seek to achieve, as well as the primary influencers.

At any given time, there could be digital learning initiatives across these dimensions. Faculty could be experimenting in the classroom with content and pedagogy while they use tools to more efficiently maintain content and provide support to struggling students. Meanwhile, administrators can work across courses, programs, and the institution to standardize instructional quality, change the experience in large introductory courses, or grow and expand access.

Figure 3: Framework for Prioritizing Common Digital Learning Initiative Goals

Who is the primary influencer?	
Faculty	**Enterprise**

What is the primary objective?

Core Teaching & Learning
- Improve course-level student outcomes
- Improve or evolve pedagogy

- Standardize instructional quality
- Change the experience in large introductory courses

Efficiency & Productivity
- Reduce the time/effort to maintain content
- Support students who are struggling
- Reduce costs to students

- Expand access and flexibility

The critical challenge is to ensure that these initiatives are clearly linked to an institutional priority and then appropriately supported and evaluated.
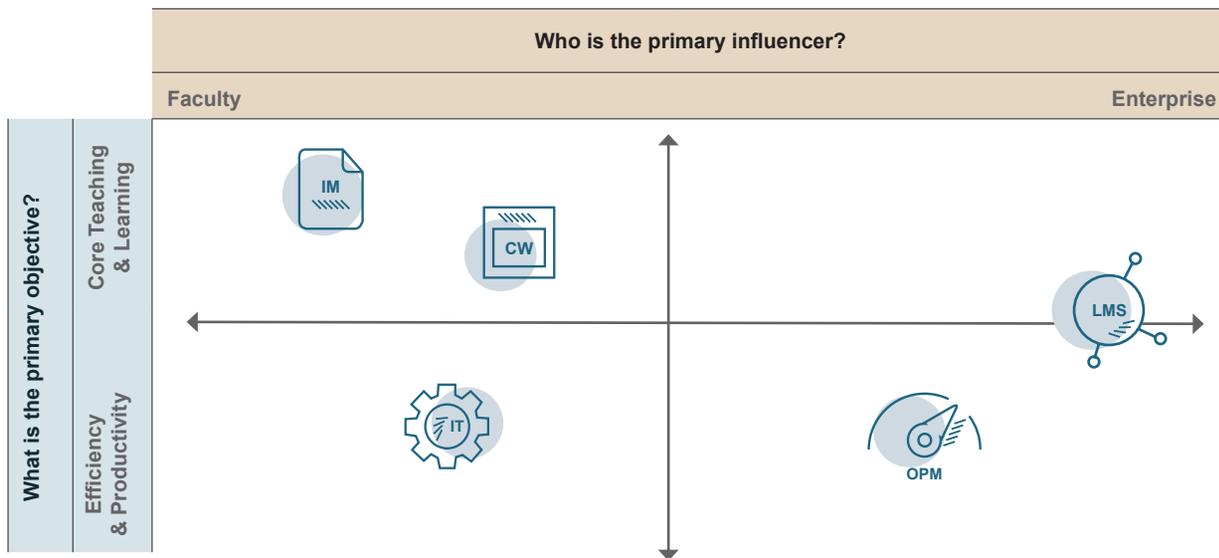
> "There is a new innovation every week. You really need a focused look at what will work in your context. Then pilot some of that and figure out how it works together with other efforts, then you can look at it more."
>
> **Russ Poulin, Senior Director of Policy, Analysis, and Strategic Alliances, WCET**

Understanding where and how digital learning products enable and support change across these dimensions can help map existing efforts and identify new ones.

Categories of products can be mapped to their respective quadrants in terms of who is served and what is accomplished (Figure 4). The briefs in this series support individual and institutional decision-making in regard to courseware in particular—but decisions about courseware and other digital tool adoption must be made in the context of broader digital learning initiatives.

Figure 4: Digital Tools Mapped by Segment

	Category	Definition
IM	**Instructional Material (IM)**	Content (print or digital) used for core or supplemental teaching and learning purposes; includes new, used, rental, and open-source materials. e.g., McGraw-Hill, OpenStax
CW	**Courseware (CW)**	Digital instruction tools that include content and assessment, scoped and sequenced to support an entire course. e.g., Cengage MindTap, ALEKS
IT	**Instructional Tools (IT)**	Supplementary tools that facilitate the process of learning within a course or program. These include assessment, classroom engagement, social learning and collaboration, and experiential and project-based learning tools. e.g., ConnectYard, Piazza, iClicker
OPM	**Online Program Management (OPM)**	Services designed to scale, grow, and drive success of online learning through outsourced management of nonacademic functions. e.g., 2U, Wiley Education Services
LMS	**Learning Management Systems (LMS)**	Software applications and platforms for the administration and delivery of educational programs. e.g., Canvas, Blackboard

The use of digital tools alone does not drive successful outcomes. Success comes from selecting and using tools for the right purpose at the right time.

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. For example, the *Time for Class* survey of over 4,000 faculty and administrators notes that the use of any one tool or combination of tools alone is not correlated with the institution achieving an ideal digital learning environment.[3] Faculty and administrator users of various tools across the digital learning ecosystem—including courseware, open educational resources, and instructional tools—are only slightly more likely to cite their institutions as ideal digital learning environments.

Ensure that digital learning pilot initiatives are carefully selected and tied to a clear evaluation plan and decision timeline.

Initiative portfolio management is the ongoing process of selecting and managing the set of initiatives that are delivering the best returns for your organization. One of the most common traps that institutions fall into is "pilot proliferation," piloting a portfolio of promising initiatives but then failing to rigorously evaluate which ones to continue or discontinue based on results and impact. Just as you would manage your personal portfolio of savings and investments to achieve the best returns, you should approach your human and financial investments in digital learning in a way that makes best use of limited time and resources. The steps laid out in the APLU Courseware Implementation Guide[4] offer guidelines to ensure that pilots follow a step-by-step decision-making process. Separate briefs in this series also provide insight and guidance regarding how to plan for, select, and implement digital learning initiatives and courseware specifically.

The following strategies can help reduce the impact of initiative fatigue on your campus:

√   Connect initiatives to a central institutional goal. Provide clarity and specificity about what each initiative is designed to accomplish and how existing initiatives will drive it.

√   Select and plan for pilot initiatives based on strong connections to institutional strategic priorities. Only embark on those initiatives that will have a significant outcomes upside for the institution.

√   Consider faculty and staff time as one of your most valuable assets, and limit or phase major new initiatives that impact each individual's day-to-day work to those that are critical for student success and outcomes.

See *Time for Class Toolkit* brief *Bridging the Gap Between Digital Learning Strategy & Execution* for more information.

[3]Question: "How would you rate your institution in the following categories related to the use of instructional technology to support teaching and learning, i.e., 'digital learning'?" Row: "My institution is achieving an ideal digital learning environment." Answers: "Strongly Disagree, Neutral, Strongly Agree, Not Applicable" [4]A Guide for Implementing Adaptive Courseware: From Planning Through Scaling, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and Every Learner Everywhere, October 2018. https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/resources

TOOL FOR ACTION
Digital Learning Initiative Planning Worksheet[5]

Planning a digital learning initiative at your campus? Identify the initiative goals, the tool(s) already planned or in use, and how each aligns to your course, program, college, and/or institutional priorities.

Vision
Where will you be in three years as a result of this initiative?

Strategic Priorities			
What are the most important priorities addressed in your existing strategic plan?			
Teaching and Learning	Efficiency	Student Success	Other

What product or tool are you using or considering?
Be comprehensive. Include name, description, purpose, evidence of impact, and strategic priorities addressed by this tool (see above).

What are the initial courses, programs, and/or population of focus? Subsequent?

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Who are the key end users for this tool? Do they have capacity? Individual, department, level? Do thse groups have any other major initiatives underway?			
Faculty?	Administrators?	Staff?	Other?

What support is needed for success? Technology integration or support? Instructional design assistance for course redesign?

What are the specific measurable goals for this initiative?			
Goal 1 (e.g., reduce DFW rates)	Goal 2 (e.g., increase student engagement by X% in course)	Goal 3	Goal 4

What is the timeline for initial evaluation and decision-making on continued investment?

Milestone date for continue/discontinue decision: _____

Key stakeholders consulted:

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[5]Adapted from "Digital Promise EdTech Pilot Framework" for a higher education context. "Edtech Pilot Framework," Digital Promise, [Webpage]. https://edtech.digitalpromise.org

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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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