Shaping Tomorrow's Campus:

The Impact of Digital Transformation on Higher Ed

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With technology reshaping industries and lives every day, higher education is also experiencing a transformative moment. Campuses worldwide are reinventing the learning landscape by embracing online learning tools, leveraging data-driven insights on student success, and exploring AI-driven solutions for curriculum development and administration.

In this vibrant educational ecosystem, students are increasingly valuing the integration of online courses and skills certifications alongside their traditional in-classroom education. A significant 77% of online learners report substantial career benefits such as new jobs, promotions, or enhanced career skills after engaging in digital studies.[1]

"Digital transformation offers the opportunity to innovate in the tools and processes we use to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of our learning content, services, and experiences for our learners," says Brooke Elliott, executive associate dean and EY Professor in the Gies College of Business at the University of Illinois. "With cutting-edge technologies and wide-reaching platforms, we can focus on enabling access, personalizing the learning experience, engaging with learners in new and different ways, and using data to drive decisions on the learning and support we provide."

49%
of workers say they're worried AI will replace their jobs[2]

69%
of online learners say they've gained skills to apply in their career[3]

90%
of students believe professional certificates enhance their employability[4]

Embracing a Blended Curriculum to Meet Student Needs

Students today prioritize programs that are affordable and flexible and that prepare them for a career. Embracing blended learning is one way higher education institutions are evolving their curricula to drive value.

Micro-credentials and digital certifications, in particular, are gaining traction. In North America and Europe, micro-credentials—short, focused credentials for in-demand skills—are among the most popular digital course offerings.[5] India's National Education Policy recognizes multiple modes of learning, encompassing blended and online learning; universities can allocate up to 40% of credits through online courses. In other regions, including the Middle East, new initiatives such as the Credit Bearing Micro-Credentials (CBMC) Policy are encouraging their use to address skill gaps.[6]

Skill-based micro-credentials can be structured modularly—integrated into existing curricula or offered as standalone programs. At the University of Szeged in Hungary, students have access to Coursera's entire portfolio of Professional Certificates either as electives for course credit or as a voluntary, not-for-credit option. Hawai'i Pacific University, meanwhile, offers certificates as an alternative to traditional internships, in addition to offering them as part of its MBA and undergraduate business programs.[7]

At the University of North Texas (UNT), 67% of students are enrolled in at least one online class. "The key to a successful blended learning strategy is to think holistically about how online courses and certification programs can be used to enhance in-person instruction," says Adam Fein, the chief digital officer and vice president for digital strategy and innovation at UNT.

That mindset is also helping the university rethink its traditional approach to granting degrees. "We need to unbundle the degree," Fein says, "and offer courses in a more flexible, à la carte way. There's a lot of value in a bachelor's degree, but that doesn't mean we have to do it all at once."

Blended learning is an essential aspect of modern higher education, he says. "We need to meet the learner where they are."

Tips for Digital Transformation Within Your Institution

Higher education institutions understand the value of digital transformation, but change often comes gradually. In many cases, blended learning trends have so far been characterized by "a change in perspective, but not in action," says Samar Farah, senior skills transformation consultant for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa at Coursera. "Institutions recognize the importance of embracing all things digital, but they're still just figuring out how and to what extent to do that."

As higher education leaders recognize the gap between understanding the need for digital transformation and its practical implementation, the following strategies offer a clear path to bridge this divide and accelerate the pace of digital evolution:

Appoint a digital transformation leader.

While the exact makeup of leaders varies by institution, decision-makers should name a point person for digital transformation. "Find a mobilizer who's thinking about how to purposefully use these tools and resources," Farah says.

With the support of senior leadership, this point person should bring together the faculty leaders of different academic departments and programs to collaborate on the next steps for digital transformation.

Empower faculty. Invest in professional development that builds faculty confidence in delivering blended learning. Make sure training reinforces these models' ability to complement, not replace, existing curricula with the new skills and knowledge students need for career readiness in their field or discipline.

"Faculty must be empowered to provide their own perspective and have a choice in determining how it fits into their curriculum," says Amrita Thakur, senior director of product management at Coursera.

UNT's Fein agrees. "We don't just mandate things. That doesn't work on a college campus; you can't just tell faculty what to do," he says. "Instead, we work with them to build something together."

Schools can build engagement by having faculty members take part in micro-credential programs alongside students. At IMS Ghaziabad, a highly ranked business school in India, over 90% of faculty proactively completed certifications before offering them to students.[8]

Faculty buy-in is critical to digital transformation and ensuring student success. One Australian study found subject-level teachers "the most significant, effective and relevant support mechanism" in digital settings.[9]

Success Stories

University of Illinois' Gies College of Business

The University of Illinois partnered with Coursera in 2016 to develop and launch a new online learning program.

That decision was "a pivotal moment in our digital transformation," says Brooke Elliott, executive associate dean and EY Professor in the university's Gies College of Business.[10]

A central part of this effort was introducing a new online MBA that prioritized affordability, flexibility, and quality, "disrupting the global online MBA market," Elliott says.

The "hugely successful" Gies College program has expanded more than 40x, from 115 degree-seeking learners in 2016 to more than 4,900 in 2023. The school has added two other online master's degree programs, along with 13 graduate certificates that let learners stack modules to meet their educational goals.

"Coursera provides a platform that can be used to access millions of learners around the world," Elliott says. "This type of access encourages Gies to enhance our reputation through the highest-quality content."

For example, Gies Chief Disruption Officer and Professor Robert Brunner partnered with Coursera to create an online course focused on emerging technologies.

The innovative course not only teaches *about* emerging technologies but is also being developed *using* emerging technologies. It leverages generative AI to support course research and drafting scripts, and Midjourney AI for image generation. It also features video and learning activities that model how other faculty could augment their teaching.

Expand data-driven decision-making. Look at labor market data to identify emerging skills and areas of focus. Take advantage of learning platforms' ability to track student engagement at the institution, program, class, and course level. This can create feedback loops for continuous improvement of instructional design and delivery. Consider partnering with other universities or consortiums to share research and trade insights.

Help students apply the skills acquired. This can best be accomplished through entrepreneurship and nontraditional programming. Student-led communities of interest around programs of study or activities such as entrepreneurial projects or hackathons can accelerate skills development by "helping students understand what kinds of skills they want to build and facilitating more practice opportunities," Thakur says. This kind of programming can also help students discover career paths they may be unfamiliar with, and give them a better understanding of what they want to do.

Invest in the underlying technology infrastructure. Online learning relies on a foundation of data. While some institutions around the world have robust learning management systems (LMS) and customer relationship management systems (CRM) in place, many have not yet digitized critical elements of student information, according to Thakur.

To address these needs, Thakur recommends digitizing student information—including that housed in older record-keeping systems—and creating or expanding the underlying data infrastructure that connects the systems campus-wide to enable digital services across student experiences.

Educational leaders also need to focus on wraparound support beyond online learning. Blended learning is more likely to drive student success when combined with additional digital services. The most influential factors in student achievement are not limited to instruction and curricula, but also include "access to technology, support in using and understanding technology, usability, design, technology choice, sense of community, and types of assessment measures."[11]

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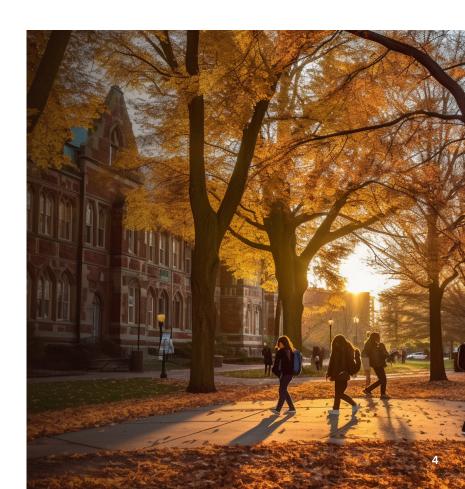## Coursera provides a platform that can be used to access millions of learners around the world.

Brooke Elliott
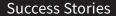Executive Associate Dean and EY Professor,
Gies College of Business, University of Illinois

Partner with industry and government in new ways. This is critical to identify industry-wide and regional labor trends and address the needs of the local and global companies that will hire your students. Deeper relationships can also unlock corporate and government resources to help build programs that help students transition into careers.

Track outcomes beyond graduation. Make sure institutional decisions are informed by key performance indicators that go beyond traditional measures of student retention and course completion. Tracking student outcomes in the labor market after they complete their programs of study—including measures such as certificate ratings, job placements, starting salaries, and career advancements—can help show ROI in digital learning.

University of North Texas

For the University of North Texas (UNT), fully embracing digital learning has made higher education more accessible in several ways.[12]

As the third-largest university in Texas, UNT serves 47,000 learners and prides itself on the diversity of its student body. To stay true to its mission, "the institution focuses on making classes accessible to all learners regardless of ability," says Adam Fein, the university's chief digital officer and vice president

for digital strategy and innovation. UNT uses multimodal learning to engage students, whether they may have vision loss or social anxiety. By partnering with Coursera, Fein says the university can make sure the same quality of education is maintained for their largest digital classrooms.

"The digital manifestation of this, for example, is including alternative text on every image in every course so a screen reader can read it," Fein

says. "That is part of creating an inclusive digital environment."

The university also values its credential courses as an opportunity for students and alumni to easily access additional education, which helps them pivot in their careers or update the information they learned as an undergraduate student. "More people can access certifications for reasonable prices across the world," Fein says. "Coursera has helped usher in a new era of credentials."

Continuing the Journey of Digital Transformation

By embracing digital learning, addressing longstanding institutional silos, and using data-driven models and technologies such as AI, institutions can offer more personalized education, support, coaching, and feedback, helping more students meet their goals.

Accelerating digital transformation will require institution-wide alignment on the importance of fostering new models to address gaps in the skills students need. "If the institution does not invest in change management," Farah says, "you won't have real transformative change."

Farah points back to the University of Szeged. It's a nearly 500-year-old institution that has leveraged Coursera's online learning platform to enhance faculty curricula and the overall learning experience. But the institution

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Adam Fein
Chief Digital Officer and Vice President for Digital Strategy, University of North Texas

also uses Coursera to offer students skill-building and onboarding courses before they even start classes, among many other uses. And soon, the institution will expand digital learning to alumni with micro-credentials and other lifelong learning opportunities long after they graduate.[13]

It's a prime example of the value of taking an institution-wide approach to digital learning, Farah says. "They're thinking strategically across the board."

Endnotes

1 Global Skills Report 2023 (Coursera, 2023)
2 Will AI Fix Work? (Microsoft, May 9, 2023)
3 Learner Outcomes Report 2023 (Coursera, 2023)
4 Job Skills of 2023 Report (Coursera, 2023)
5 Advancing Higher Education with Industry Micro-Credentials (Coursera, 2023)
6 Credit Bearing Micro-Credentials (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education, 2023)
7 The Professional Certificates Playbook (Coursera, 2023)
8 ibid.
9 Supporting Engagement and Retention of Online and Blended-learning Students: A Qualitative Study from an Australian University (National Library of Medicine's National Center for Biotechnology Information, January 11, 2023)
10 University of Illinois data and insights submission to Coursera (November 2023)
11 Engagement in Online Learning: Student Attitudes and Behavior During COVID-19 (Frontiers in Education, May 9, 2022)
12 University of North Texas data and insights interview with Coursera (November 2023)
13 The Professional Certificates Playbook (Coursera, 2023)

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Coursera was launched in 2012 by two Stanford Computer Science professors, Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller, with a mission to provide universal access to worldclass learning. It is now one of the largest online learning platforms in the world, with 136 million registered learners as of September 30, 2023. Coursera partners with over 300 leading university and industry partners to offer a broad catalog of content and credentials, including courses, Specializations, Professional Certificates, Guided Projects, and bachelor's and master's degrees. Institutions around the world use Coursera to upskill and reskill their employees, citizens, and students in fields such as data science, technology, and business. Coursera became a Delaware public benefit corporation and a B Corp in February 2021.

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