

# THE LAUNCH PAD FOR A STUDENT-CENTRIC FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

By Laura Zimmerman

The private sector is rife with examples of large corporations making strategic pivots to keep up with (or get ahead of) industry disruption.

When Jeff Bezos founded Amazon in the early 1990s, the company sold books online. A couple decades later, the e-commerce behemoth sells everything online—and is crossing over to the brick-and-mortar space. Netflix followed a similar transformation path, evolving from a DVD rental service to a leading provider of streaming third-party and original content.

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The ability to make these dramatic, sometimes risky leaps is the result of multiple factors falling into place, from leadership teams to funding. But increasingly, the common denominator between successful evolutions is agile, cloud technology.

As college and university leaders seek creative ways to bridge their institutions into the future and serve new, diverse audiences, embracing cloud systems should be part of the conversation.

## A Path to Reaching New Student Populations

The shift from managing costly, legacy on-premise infrastructure to hosting software and services in the cloud has proved to be a critical turning point for multiple industries.

Cloud platforms have democratized the internet for retailers, sparking an e-commerce revolution that lets brands reach consumers regardless of location or store footprint. In healthcare, these systems are the springboard for launching telehealth and other virtual initiatives (which in turn improve access to care, mitigate costs and elevate the consumer experience).

This technology presents higher education institutions with a comparable opportunity to improve accessibility for a new pool of learners, including:

- **Adult learners:** As more high school graduates forgo the cost of a traditional degree in favor of full-time employment, certificates and skill-specific boot camps, adult learners are emerging as a key target for higher education institutions. Enrollment for students 25-34 years-old is projected to rise 16 percent

through 2025, compared to 13 percent for 18-24-year-olds. For adult students balancing full or part-time jobs with family care and other responsibilities, online programs present a more realistic option than being on campus multiple days per week.

- **International students:** Serving global communities is an integral component to many higher education institutions' missions. However, research shows that less than 1 percent of distance learners are international. And after a period of continued growth, new international student enrollment at U.S. institutions is plateauing (and in some instances, declining). Investing in robust virtual programs is one way to maintain a global presence even as on-campus demographics change.
- **Rural students:** Compared to U.S. urban and suburban high school students, rural high school graduates continue to be least likely to enroll immediately in postsecondary education. There is no silver bullet solution to the rural access challenge, however, improved virtual and hybrid learning platforms can be an effective step toward meeting these students where they are.

## A Strong Foundation for Higher Education Accessibility and Innovation

Improving student accessibility and driving new revenue via online learning is only one example of cloud technology's potential in higher education. Migrating portions of your institution's IT environment to the cloud provides the flexibility to pursue greater academic and operational innovations, such as:

- **Personalized learning:** Just as health systems are embarking on precision medicine efforts to tailor preventive treatments and care

delivery at an individual level, higher education institutions are exploring the possibility of personalized learning experiences. Any form of personalization, be it customized communications to guide study habits or online courses that adapt to an individual student's competency level, requires robust analytics. Cloud-based learning management systems and student information systems simplify not only the heavy lift of collecting this data in real time, but also the step of scaling personalization across broad student populations.

- **Cross-institution collaboration:** No institution is alone in the race to elevate the academic and student experience (while managing costs and maintaining revenue). With the help of cloud platforms, colleges and universities are joining forces to solve some of the higher education sector's most pressing challenges. The Unizin Consortium, for example, is a group of 25 institutions collaborating to promote more accessible, affordable and student-centric digital education. In April 2018, Unizin announced plans to build a data platform using Google Cloud, which will let member institutions securely share, integrate and analyze learning data. This interoperability will be critical to making industrywide progress in virtual learning.

The majority of higher education institutions have begun, or at least discussed, transitioning to the cloud. Beyond serving as a conduit to operational efficiencies and lower IT costs, cloud systems also provide a foundation for meaningful innovation.

Faced with funding challenges, evolving student populations and rising expectations for the learning experience, higher education leaders should prepare to change accordingly. Creating a future-proof institution takes vision, thoughtful planning and time. Adding cloud into the equation can ensure you get there faster.

## Key Takeaways

As you work to create a more accessible, student-centric institution, it's important to:

### Think differently.

Consider cloud technology as a strategic enabler, not just a cost-cutting tool.

### Plan differently.

Assess how cloud systems can help your institution reach underserved, critical student populations.

### Act differently.

Leverage cloud technology as a launch pad for transformative initiatives that shape the future of higher education.



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