Digital modernization in higher education: Five planning pillars

Building a strong foundation for success with new technology

The technology that runs a college or university powers virtually every experience on campus, from prospective students applying to attend the institution to current students enrolling in classes to advisors checking on a student's academic progress. Tracking and reporting on enrollment, forecasting revenue, measuring community impact, managing research spending, and more. Technology enables that, too.

Higher education institutions need to ensure that their systems are reliable, efficient, and scalable to keep pace with increasing data demands, student experience expectations, and the need for more capacity for faculty and staff. Cloud-based systems, such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms, student information systems (SIS), customer relationship management (CRM) systems, and enterprise research administration (ERA) platforms, are foundational to the pursuit of these goals.

Before embarking on a digital modernization project, institutions will benefit from extensive planning, anticipating the people and processes involved with the change. By starting this process early, even if the implementation date is years away, colleges and universities can be more intentional, defining where digital capabilities will be rooted in the future, ensuring a smooth transition, and maximizing the benefits of the new technology. Here are three reasons why this early planning is crucial, along with five readiness pillars to explore.

IN BRIEF

- Digital modernization is crucial for higher education institutions to keep pace with data demands and student service expectations.

- Beginning the planning process early, even if the implementation date is years away, can help colleges and universities maximize the benefits of a new technology implementation.

- Successful digital modernization requires readiness in five areas: project, functional, technical, data, and organizational. These pillars can help institutions paint and address their bigger picture for long-term success.

"Today and into the future, technology is our people's key enabler and point of connectivity."

Reasons for digital modernization planning

New technology can be costly and challenging to implement. A decision not to proactively plan — given the rapid state of technological advancement — is a decision in and of itself. Planning is the initial and most critical phase of any digital modernization project for several reasons.

- **Optimizing your investment.** Planning allows you to take full advantage of the new technology's value proposition and make every dollar count.

- **Identifying success factors.** Planning helps ensure that challenges unrelated to technology, such as those related to organizational structure or other operational practices, do not persist after the new technology is implemented, thereby mitigating future risks.

- **Promoting on-time and on-budget completion.** Planning helps you meet deadlines and avoid unnecessary expenses, promoting a more financially viable digital modernization journey.

Five readiness pillars to guide planning

The first step in the planning process is determining if core components are in place to support digital modernization. This requires a holistic approach to understanding the institution's current digital landscape, future needs, and the benefits it hopes to realize. These include improved data reporting and analysis to support better decision making and empowering people to focus on strategic and mission-centric efforts.

Huron has identified five pillars for readiness that can guide an institution toward successful implementation.

- **Project readiness:** Determining the team, roles, and project decision making and management practices that need to be in place.

- **Functional readiness.** Identifying the business practices and policy considerations that may need to be reevaluated or adjusted.

- **Technical readiness.** Aligning the technical infrastructure, including integration-related platforms, security concerns, and user experience principles.

- **Data readiness.** Establishing and adopting practices related to data governance, reporting roles and responsibilities, data management tools, and how the institution treats data as an asset.

- **Organizational readiness.** Aligning the organizational structure to a future state best positioned to take advantage of the technology and corresponding change leadership and change management strategies that take organizational culture and employee perspectives into account.

Exploring these pillars can help colleges and universities paint and address their bigger picture, which includes building a solid foundation to support all the elements needed for digital modernization, including the rapidly advancing capabilities and conversations related to generative AI. In doing so, institutions often find that simply "installing" a new system is not the end goal.

Why is this so important? New technology cannot conduct research, advise students, or make decisions on its own. Colleges and universities are people-centric — filled with, run by, and designed for students, faculty, and staff. Today and into the future, technology is our people's key enabler and point of connectivity. Considerations about how to incorporate and sustain the new systems must be intentional for long-term success.

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