



5 WAYS

TO SUPPORT MORE
EFFECTIVE ONLINE TEACHING
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics has reported double-digit percentages of students enrolled exclusively in online learning since at least the fall semester of 2017—49% of students at private for-profit institutions, 19% of students at private nonprofit institutions, and 11% of students at public institutions.¹ But even though online learning in higher education has been in heavy rotation for a long time now, COVID-19 heralds a fundamental shift in how students learn and how instructors teach—and not always for the better.

“It doesn’t take a whole lot of imagination to replicate a lecture in an online format,” says Dr. Christopher Sessums, Academic Affairs Director at D2L. “But learning to truly teach online—replicating the classroom engagement, interaction, and communication with students—presents challenges that many instructors have never had to deal with before. There’s no universal handbook for creating engaging, high-level course content online, even though that’s exactly what instructors need to be successful in the era of online learning.”

“When training for a career in higher education, faculty members focus on their area of expertise, publishing and research. They’re not always given insights into how people learn or taught to teach the adult learner. COVID-19 has interrupted the traditional model of education, requiring instructors to make a mental shift and focus on their personal connection to students and the strengths students bring to each subject area.”

— Dr. Josh Kim, Director of Online Programs and Strategy at Dartmouth College’s Center for Advancement of Learning

Of course, it was already not an easy time to operate in higher education. Multiple challenges have begun to threaten the long-held value of higher education institutions, such as increased competition for students, financial pressure, and expectations for experience, technology, and outcomes. But the most urgent task is supporting faculty to make the leap to online learning. It's the only way institutions can ensure that the most fundamental element of higher education—the connection and communication between instructors and students—remains intact.

Surrounded by an overwhelming amount of change, institutions are forced to face the central challenge that will make or break institutional success in higher education today: empowering instructors to deliver a cutting-edge educational experience in a digital format.

Supporting instructors is the paramount responsibility of higher education administration today. It's the most effective path to influencing a student's educational experience and overall student success, and there are five important best practices to pursue:

A New Decade of Unique Challenges Facing Higher Education



Competition for students

The rise of new learning models and online education options challenges higher education's position as the de facto next step for students.



Financial pressure

Students of all backgrounds are re-evaluating the affordability and return on investment of an online or blended learning experience.



Evolving workplace

Ongoing advancements in technology and automation are redefining job roles and skills needed, leading to a disconnect between what students learn in higher education and what they need to know for the workforce.



Rising student expectations

Students increasingly expect mobile-friendly, personalized and highly supportive experiences with their institution of choice, putting an added burden on institutions to support these expectations.



Advancements in technology

Along with rising expectations for the overall higher education experience, students also bring with them expectations for sophisticated, consumer-based technology – a need that few institutions are prepared to meet today without support.

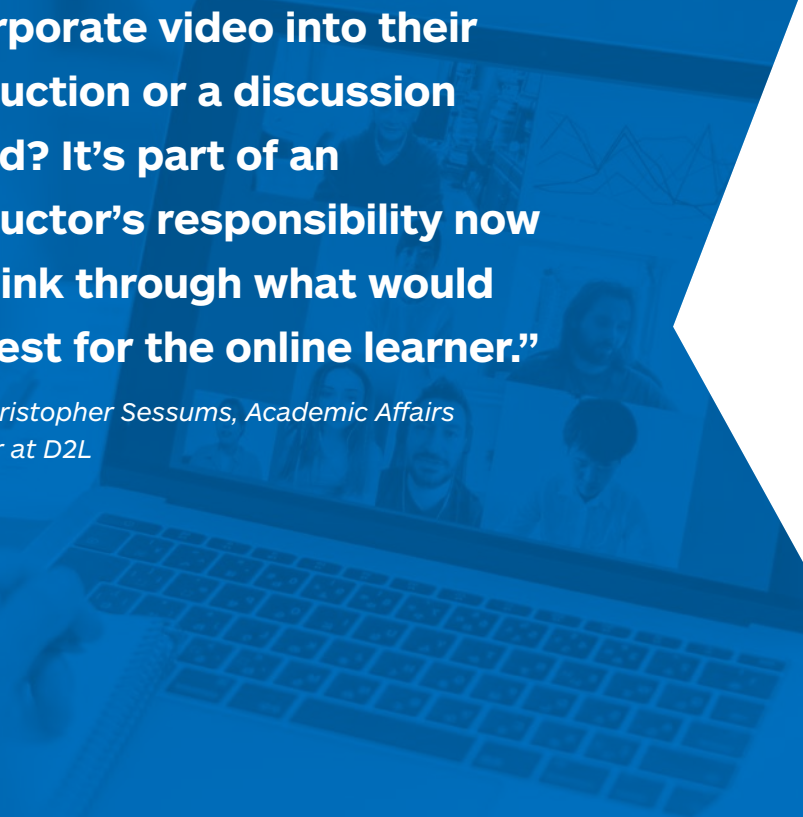
1 Lead with the teaching philosophy, not the technology

Because the tangible process of moving instruction online relies so much on choosing the right educational partner and platform, it's natural to start the transition with technology in mind. But an instructor's success in online teaching starts long before the right platform has been identified—it starts with a return to the roots of teaching, and embracing a philosophy of iterative improvement and creative problem solving.

Administrators seeking to support the development of effective online courses need to start with course content. Only then, when the purpose of the course is clear and in alignment with the instructors teaching philosophy, can administrators effectively help instructors rethink and re-organize course content to bring that content to life in a digital medium.

“A lot of supporting faculty's transition online is getting to the bottom of the purpose of each lesson,” said Dr. Selom Assignon, Director of Instructional Design with Online Learning, City Colleges of Chicago.





“Online teaching offers instructors an opportunity to re-think and re-imagine how they teach, and the platform comes next to enable the right levels of engagement and support. How could they incorporate video into their instruction or a discussion board? It’s part of an instructor’s responsibility now to think through what would be best for the online learner.”

— *Dr. Christopher Sessums, Academic Affairs
Director at D2L*

“A professor might say that they usually have a guest speaker come in to speak. And we can do that online—but we’ll push back and ask what is the end result they’re looking for. And we can run through all of the options we need to achieve that goal, which may or may not look like how they taught this subject matter in-person.”

For the Center of Distance Learning at City Colleges of Chicago, leading with teaching philosophy looks like a two-part process of online instruction for instructors. First, instructors take a brief series of courses that provide an introduction to online learning, rubrics, and the college’s online learning platform, Brightspace. Then, instructors have the opportunity to consult with distance learning specialists to replicate their courses in a way that will best meet the needs of the online student.

[Click here](#) to learn how D2L’s Brightspace helped a seven-college system college build a unique and customized online learning program.

2 Make it easy to access evidence-based principles of online learning

The path to professorship is not always lined with teaching practicums and classroom experience. Instead, it focuses on mastery of an instructor's area of study. This is a strong advantage for research institutions and advancing the body of knowledge in a given subject area, but it can create challenges in a remote teaching environment where "sage on the stage" lectures are especially ineffective.

"Online teaching and adult learning best practices weren't invented for COVID-19; educational psychologists have been researching what works and what doesn't for decades now," says Sessums. "The distribution and dissemination of that data, however, is often limited among instructors.

If administrators can organize and bring that information to light, they have the opportunity to create institutional best practices that have wide-reaching impact."

In a situation where faculty are especially open to support and feedback, administrators have the opportunity to organize and distribute evidence-based principles of online learning and adult education instruction to help educators be as effective as possible. Consider monitoring evidence-based teaching practices from institutions like OneHE² and the National Communication³ Association, then sharing a monthly or quarterly update with your instructional staff.

[Click here](#) to learn how D2L's Brightspace helped the University of Dallas successfully navigate COVID-19 to limit academic disruption for students.

"A rapid pivot to remote teaching has catalyzed a dynamic conversation around teaching and learning. Whole departments are engaging in workshops, training, and consultations from instructional designers and academic support specialists—departments that might have used those services occasionally before but not nearly as intensively."

— Dr. Josh Kim, Director of Digital Learning Initiatives at Dartmouth College's Center for the Advancement of Learning

3 Use leadership buy-in to positively influence faculty perceptions of online learning

Successful change management starts with executive buy-in. But when it comes to assisting instructors in the shift from in-person instruction to indefinite blended learning, support from leadership, administration, and instructors themselves is foundational to making progress as an institution because it has an impact on how stakeholders experience the shift.

“Executive sponsorship is critical in the adoption of new ideas and innovation, and the situation with COVID-19 is no different,” says Sessums. “Institutional leadership must be all-in, or else they put the professional development team at the risk of being a police officer rather than a tour guide. It’s the difference between the faculty feeling this is something done to them, versus something done for them—which makes all the difference.”

To gain or make the most of executive sponsorship, Sessums recommends you consider how you would answer the following questions about online learning within your institution today:



- **How will this make things better?**

If faculty and staff are not dissatisfied with their current methods of instruction, getting them to change will be more challenging. What relative advantage does your solution provide, and what will be gained and lost in adopting a new innovation?

- **How easy will this be to use?**

The easier it is to adopt a solution, and the less friction it causes faculty members, the better. Make it clear how a solution will reduce complexity for users.

- **How likely are we to succeed?**

Faculty and staff—and executive leaders, for that matter—are more likely to invest in things if they can see evidence of success, such as examples and case studies of similar institutions achieving their goals. Consider how you can provide strong evidence of success in adopting your solution.

- **How much support will we have?**

Especially in today's high-pressure circumstances, few instructors want to add more to their plates. But for the adoption of a new solution to be successful, you need the institutional capacity to support the transition. Take a proactive look at whether or not you can handle the transition alone, or how your vendor will be able to help carry the load.

[Click here](#) to learn more about how D2L's Brightspace helped Metropolitan University of Monterrey move 4,500 courses online in less than a week and achieve rapid platform adoption with daily staff training sessions.



4 Organize communities of practice for informal self-evaluation

As important as executive buy-in is, peer buy-in ranks highly, too, which is why it can be so helpful to bring communities of practice together around faculty champions—the handful of instructors who have eagerly embraced remote teaching best practices, and who can influence their peers to engage with new training.

“The more we made the process faculty-driven, the easier it was to convince teaching staff to engage,” said Assignon. “Our faculty champions understood the significance of the change taking place,

and the importance of learning how to use the LMS technology. For example, they could communicate the inefficiency of trying to manage the workload via individual email exchanges with students much better than we could—and with much better results.”

Prepare your faculty members to reflect on their remote teaching experience by organizing informal communities of practice where they can discuss their experiences. In these groups, instructors can meet a few times per semester to have conversations with their peers in real-time, and embrace their natural orientation to iterative improvement.

“A community of practice, a critical friends group, a working group—whatever you call it, instructors derive tons of value from sitting down informally with colleagues to discuss what is and is not working.”

— Dr. Christopher Sessums, Academic Affairs Director at D2L

Benefits of Modern Online Learning Technology

5 Choose technology that supports individual as well as institutional success

Building an intentional path from in-person instruction to online teaching starts with instructor preparation, strategic planning, and careful evaluation of student needs. But it's also heavily influenced by an institution's delivery method and technology of choice. Select a platform and partner that can deliver benefits to all of the most crucial stakeholders in higher education—students, faculty, and administration.

[Click here](#) to learn more about how D2L's Brightspace helped Wageningen University's teaching staff shape more compelling, interactive learning experiences and enable more self-directed education among students.

STUDENTS:

SUPPORT ALL STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR POTENTIAL

- Allow students to learn from anywhere, at their pace, and on any device
- Engage students with personalized feedback to support their growth and development
- Provide clear progress indicators to keep learners on track and on-task
- Leverage tools to prepare students with the skills they need to get a job and for life

FACULTY:

MAKE IT EASY FOR FACULTY TO REACH EVERY LEARNER

- Let faculty teach the way they want to teach (with the tools they love)
- Save faculty time by allowing them to achieve greater impact
- Make it easy for faculty to personalize learning experiences
- Design to allow faculty to easily transform their physical classroom experience into a high-quality online learning experience

ADMINISTRATION:

REACH YOUR GOALS WITH A PARTNER THAT PROVIDES WORRY-FREE TECHNOLOGY

- Easily create learning initiatives that support your strategy and goals
- Support one hub for learning that supports credit, non-credit, and professional development
- Rely on worry-free technology with 99.9% uptime, offered fully on mobile
- Confidently move towards the future of learning with research-driven, non-disruptive educational products

“Having the right technology in place allowed us to maintain academic continuity through the rapid pivot of COVID-19, which wouldn’t have been the case five years ago. This is especially important for students that have been disproportionately affected by the move to remote teaching. Higher education is a critical engine of opportunity in society—if we’re not doing our part to bridge that divide, we’re failing our most vulnerable students.”

— Dr. Josh Kim, Director of Online Programs and Strategy at Dartmouth College’s Center for the Advancement of Learning

Keeping Pace with the Evolving Future of Online Learning

Highly qualified and accomplished faculty, professors, and instructors have always been a significant value driver for higher education institutions. But to ensure they continue to make an effective contribution to student success as institutions move online, administrators will need to support them in bringing their best and boldest instruction into a virtual format—a process that requires technology, time, and resources as they learn a new model of delivery, and a new approach to the future of online learning.

Sources

- 1 “Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2017; and Financial Statistics and Academic Libraries, Fiscal Year 2017,” National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019021REV.pdf>
- 2 “About OneHE,” OneHE, <https://onehe.org/about#our-story>
- 3 “Online Learning Experiences,” National Communication Association, <https://www.natcom.org/academic-professional-resources/teaching-and-learning/classroom/online-learning-resources>



D2L

DESIRE2LEARN

D2L is the software leader that makes learning experiences better. The company's cloud-based platform is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, organizations can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is a world leader in learning analytics: Its platform predicts learner performance so that organizations can take action in real time to keep learners on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, schools, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.

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