Digital Transformation
for Colleges and Universities

How Governing Boards Shape Strategy for Success

Joe Sallustio, Chris Moloney, and Amy Hilbelink

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Foreword

HIGHER EDUCATION is at an inflection point. Demographic shifts are shrinking traditional student populations. Political headwinds and declining public trust are intensifying. Financial pressures are mounting across institutions of all types. And artificial intelligence promises to fundamentally disrupt how we teach, learn, and operate. These are not temporary challenges—they are structural forces demanding that colleges and universities fundamentally transform their business and educational models if they are to remain affordable, sustainable, and true to their mission as engines of social mobility, economic development, and knowledge creation. Digital transformation is an essential means to achieving that larger transformation. It is a means by which institutions reshape themselves to continue serving students and society in a radically changed landscape.

As president and CEO of Ellucian, I have the privilege of working with more than 3,000 higher education institutions across 50 countries. From this vantage point, I witness firsthand both the tremendous promise and the daunting challenges that digital transformation presents. Ultimately, digital transformation is the reinvention of business processes and outcomes to drive student success—and now dramatically advanced by artificial intelligence. What has become abundantly clear is that successful transformation requires more than visionary campus leadership—it demands engaged, informed governance at the board level.

The conversations I have with college and university presidents and leaders at all levels consistently reveal a critical gap. Although campus leaders recognize the urgency of digital transformation, many struggle to effectively engage their boards in meaningful dialogue about technology strategy, investment priorities, and institutional readiness. Too often, technology discussions at the board level remain superficial or get relegated to IT updates buried in committee reports. This disconnect undermines institutional resilience. In an era when an institution's digital capabilities directly impact student recruitment, retention, success, and ultimately financial sustainability, boards cannot afford to treat technology as someone else's concern. In fact, it is about the broader community of stakeholders putting students first.

This book addresses that gap directly. Joe Sallustio, Chris Moloney, and Amy Hilbelink have created an essential resource that translates the complex landscape of digital transformation into language and frameworks that governing board members can understand and act upon. The authors draw from their extensive experience in higher education leadership, technology

implementation, and governance to provide trustees with the knowledge they need to ask the right questions, evaluate strategic options, and provide effective oversight of their institution's digital future.

What makes this book particularly valuable is its recognition that board members come from diverse professional backgrounds. A trustee who understands digital transformation in healthcare, finance, or manufacturing still needs context-specific guidance for higher education's unique challenges— from serving digital-native students to managing complex academic systems to balancing innovation with tradition. The authors meet board members where they are, providing clear explanations of concepts like student information systems, learning management platforms, and competency-based education, while also addressing the strategic implications that boards must consider.

The timing of this publication could not be more critical. We are standing at a crossroads in higher education. The challenges outlined above have converged to create an environment where standing still is not an option. Institutions that delay digital transformation risk falling behind competitors who are already delivering the seamless, personalized, mobile-first experiences that today's students expect. More importantly, they risk their ability to fulfill their educational mission in a world that increasingly demands digital fluency from all graduates.

At Ellucian, we work with institutions at every stage of digital maturity— from those just beginning their transformation journey to those serving as innovative leaders. What distinguishes successful transformations is not the size of technology budgets or the prestige of institutional brands. Rather, it is the presence of strong governance: boards and presidents working in genuine partnership, asking difficult questions, making informed decisions about resource allocation, and maintaining focus on how technology investments advance student success and institutional mission.

This book provides the roadmap for that partnership. It explains why digital transformation demands board-level attention, how boards should structure themselves to provide effective oversight, what questions trustees should ask of campus leaders, and how different types of institutions face distinct challenges requiring tailored strategies. The authors do not shy away from difficult topics—from the true costs of technology debt to the risks of delaying critical infrastructure investments to the ethical implications of artificial intelligence in education.

I encourage every trustee, every board chair, and every college or university president to read this book carefully and use it as a catalyst for deeper conversations about your institution's digital future. The insights and frameworks presented here will help you move beyond superficial technology updates to strategic discussions about institutional positioning, competitive advantage,

mission fulfillment, and, most importantly, outcomes in an increasingly digital world.

 The institutions that will thrive in the decades ahead will not be those that simply adopt new technologies. They will be the ones that use digital transformation strategically—as a means to fundamentally reimagine their business and educational models in service of enduring mission and purpose. Technology enables them to become: more affordable and accessible to students who need them most; more efficient without losing the human elements that matter; more innovative in how they teach, support, and credential learners; and more sustainable as they navigate unprecedented demographic, financial, and political pressures. Digital transformation, done right, is how colleges and universities preserve and amplify their role as engines of opportunity, knowledge creation, and social good. That is the transformation higher education needs. This book shows how digital technology makes it possible.

Laura Ipsen
President and CEO, Ellucian
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Introduction
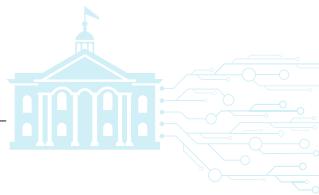
Higher education as an industry is in a state of economic, political, and cultural disruption and stands at a critical inflection point. Although the sector has weathered significant changes throughout its history, today's convergence of technological advancements, shifting student expectations, and evolving market demands has created unprecedented challenges and opportunities for colleges and universities. This manuscript is not intended to convince the reader of those facts—news stories of institutional budget cuts, closures, mergers, bleak credit rating outlooks, and enrollment woes provide ample evidence of that reality. The purpose of this book is to prepare boards and trustees to collaboratively engage and support technological innovation and digital transformation (Dx) efforts at their institutions. We encourage trustees to embrace a strategic mindset and seize the opportunity to engage with senior administrators to remake their institutions' futures.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, Dx is increasingly crucial as an overarching strategic priority for all institutions. Dx is a multidimensional, enterprisewide concept that encompasses the fiduciary, strategic, leadership, and practical implementation aspects of transitioning a college or university from a traditional, analog, place-based set of systems, practices, and policies to internet and cloud-connected ones.

The urgency for achieving Dx is driven by a widening gap between student expectations and institutional realities. Most of today's students are digital natives who expect the same level of technological sophistication and user-centric design in their educational experience that they encounter in other aspects of their daily social and work lives.

Beyond meeting those expectations, Dx fundamentally enhances how students learn and succeed. Digital tools enable personalized learning pathways that adapt to individual student needs, provide real-time feedback that helps students identify and close knowledge gaps quickly, and facilitate collaborative learning experiences that mirror modern workplace environments. These technologies also expand access to educational resources, allowing students to engage with course materials, library databases, and expert support whenever and wherever they learn best. When thoughtfully implemented, digital learning environments can improve retention rates, accelerate time to