



Can strategic alliances move higher education beyond its “Digital Dunkirk Moment” to build our next-generation learning infrastructure?

I salute the many postsecondary faculty and staff nationwide whose gallant efforts amid the havoc of a global pandemic transitioned millions of students to primarily digital means of learning to complete the spring 2020 semester. Their tremendous—and ongoing—efforts display the dedication typical of higher education professionals. To them, a sincere thank you.

In some sense, American higher education has faced its “Digital Dunkirk Moment” and marshalled a heroic response to an incredibly difficult situation. But the crisis response has revealed the uneven state of our institutional fleet in terms of digital learning readiness. We must now proactively “ready the force” for the possibility of recurring challenges—and to harness opportunities that the future of digital learning presents.

Well before the pandemic, many American higher education institutions lacked both clear visions and plans for developing next-generation digital learning infrastructure. Such infrastructure exists at some U.S. nonprofit postsecondary institutions, but it is unevenly distributed and concentrated in relatively few. Oddly, some of the best iterations are not broadly institutional but siloed in separate divisions, schools and colleges. Many leading models exist outside higher education altogether, including in corporate America, where a competitive perspective that “the fastest learner wins”¹ has fueled significant investment in digital learning capabilities.

Urgent efforts to collaboratively develop next-generation digital learning infrastructure for American higher education are overdue. The pandemic has revealed the pressing need for such infrastructure, as well as its centrality to institutional sustainability, national economic security, and global competitiveness. For institutions currently without deep digital learning capabilities, the problem is not lack of desire or aspiration. Rather, resources, talent and patience are hard to come by and often result in outsourcing for solutions—which can have some immediate benefits but does not typically result in sustainable leaps forward in digital learning leadership.

Developing next-generation digital learning infrastructure more quickly, evenly and efficiently will require vision, resources and collaboration. In my 2015 TIAA Institute paper *Between Collaboration and Merger: Expanding Alliance Strategies in Higher Education*, I argued for a new breed of non-merger alliances to vastly expand the competitiveness of challenged institutions. I asserted that a core area in which like-minded institutions could collaboratively engineer improved infrastructure, capacity and results was in the provision of digital learning.

I spotlighted opportunities for multi-institution alliances, unbound by geography and enabling partner institutions to meet the diverse and changing needs of learners at levels that are difficult to achieve alone. I described institutions building shared utilities, platforms and capabilities that realize cost savings, efficiencies and economies of scale and scope in delivering best-in-class, digitally enabled learning and credentials.



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Developing our next-generation digital learning infrastructure will require vision, resources and new forms of collaboration.

¹ Bersin, J., and Zao-Sanders, M. “Making Learning a Part of Everyday Work.” *Harvard Business Review*, 19 Feb. 2019.

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Such alliances could allow late entrants, non-distinctive institutions, and others to attract top digital learning talent, reduce dependency on costly third-party online program managers, and assert leadership in this arena. Business model changes, expanded institutional reach, and revenue growth can be achieved through unique alliance models that preserve institutional control, identity, independence and governance.

Leaders of higher education, philanthropy, government, technology and business must urgently launch dialogues to explore alliance models to envision and build our next-generation digital learning infrastructure—not because the pandemic will win or because we are forsaking the core experiences of on-campus face-to-face teaching and learning, but so that all learners can achieve a better future.

This is not an argument to create a single next-generation digital learning infrastructure for all institutions to share. Rather, it is a vision for creating numerous, diffuse—and, therefore, more resilient—multi-institution collaboratives.

Independent of institutional mission or type, we must pursue a learning future that is ever more digital, multimodal, flexible, on-demand, learner-centered, data-driven, personalized, accessible, affordable and lifelong. Now is the time, and visionary and collaborative alliances are the path.

We need a national dialogue regarding alliance models for building the next-generation digital learning infrastructure that will enable a better future for all learners.

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