DIGITAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE AT

MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

November 2022

**EQUAL
MEASURE**

Photo from Morehouse College Website

Introduction

This profile describes Morehouse College's recent developments in its building of digital learning infrastructure (DLI). The profile sets the context and evolution of the College's work and documents progress from 2021-2022 in enhancing and accelerating digital learning, with support from a grant provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The College's DLI efforts prioritize building capacity within the College's Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service and bringing the Morehouse College experience online. The profile is not an exhaustive account of the College's DLI work but a compilation of key features of its journey. The Morehouse College community, leaders at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), funders, and other postsecondary partners and supporters can use this profile for reflection and learning as they consider how to enhance collective capacity for digital learning that drives success for HBCU students specifically and equitable student success in higher education more broadly.

Institution description

Morehouse College was founded in Atlanta, Georgia in 1867. At its founding, it adopted a seminary university model and stressed religious instruction. Today, as a liberal arts institution, it serves approximately 2,206 Black men with 150 faculty. The College is guided by the mission, "to develop men with disciplined minds to lead lives of leadership and service by emphasizing the intellectual and character development of its students." Morehouse College promotes excellence among its students and is one of the nation's top producers of African American men with bachelor's degrees in the biological sciences, physics, mathematics, and statistics. Morehouse College has produced Rhodes and Fulbright Scholars, and many students go on to earn doctorate degrees, graduate medical school, and enjoy many other successes.[1]

[1] Source: Morehouse College Website, Facts and Figures

Digital and Online Activities at Morehouse College

Building the Foundation: The Evolution of Morehouse College's Digital Learning Infrastructure

In 2021, Morehouse College named supporting the development of online programs as a strategic theme and key priority in its five-year strategic plan, "Morehouse Beyond Borders." This led to the development of an office for online learning—the Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service (Office of Online Education)—full online degree programs offered through the Morehouse College Online platform.

Morehouse College is known for providing young men with a rich learning experience steeped in African American history and culture. Until the recent launch of the College's online Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration, the Morehouse College experience happened exclusively on campus. In 2021, Morehouse College named supporting the development of online programs as a strategic theme and key priority in its five-year strategic plan, "Morehouse Beyond Borders." This led to the development of an office for online learning—the Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service (Office of Online Education)—and full online degree programs offered through the Morehouse College Online platform.

Prior to 2020, only a few faculty offered online courses in fall and spring, which allowed students to complete courses from the convenience of wherever they were residing. By early 2020, Dr. Martha Madkins, Associate Provost of Online Education, had joined the College, bringing years of experience with online education to launch the online Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration through Morehouse College Online.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Morehouse College students and faculty were forced into remote instruction, and the College accelerated efforts to create online courses. A year later, during the summer of 2021, the Office of Online Education worked with faculty members to gain their consent to design and teach an online course and receive training through 2U, an external service provider.

The Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration officially launched in the fall of 2022 with an enrollment of 220 students, expanding to 330 students in January for the spring semester. In the fall and spring semesters of 2021 and 2022, the Office of Online Education added more student, faculty, and program support positions to their team. The goal was to ensure the quality of online courses and meet the need of the growing online student population for around-the-clock availability and swift support. More recently, the College has sought to strengthen and scale the popular degree program in business administration while building digital learning infrastructure for additional online degrees and greater administrative efficiency of academic and student services.

Morehouse College prioritizes centralized supports for faculty and students. Trainings and other resources related to course design and use of the learning management system (LMS) have improved online course delivery and the overall user experience. As the College continues to build out its DLI, institutional leaders intend to center the student and faculty experience to ensure a quality program. Figure 1 illustrates the core DLI principles and priorities, and a detailed description can be found here.

The College's DLI advancements are guided by three principles and priorities: 1) leadership and vision, 2) coordination and partnership, and 3) centralized supports. Direction from institutional leadership, such as the Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs, and investment in an Associate Provost Online Education position accelerated the advancement of a digital learning infrastructure and set the vision for the future. The Associate Provost coordinated between internal and external partners, such as local library consortium and 2U, to provide the resources necessary for online learners.

Figure 1: Morehouse College DLI Principles & Priorities

LEADERSHIP & VISION

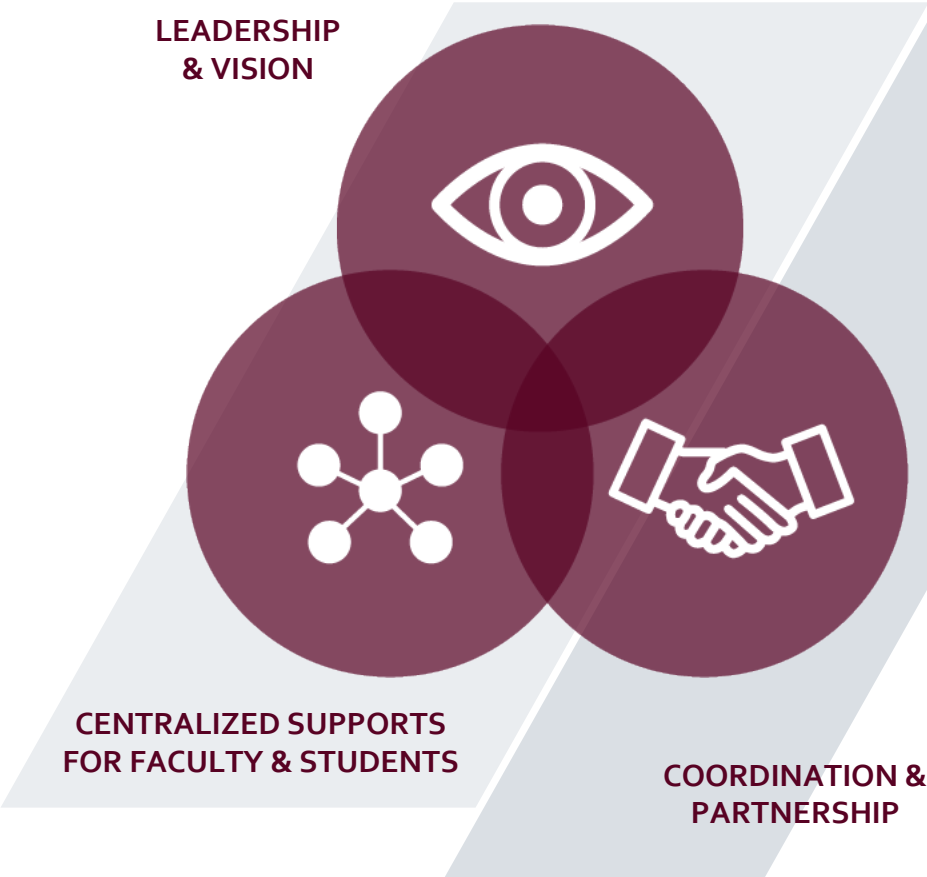CENTRALIZED SUPPORTS FOR FACULTY & STUDENTS

COORDINATION & PARTNERSHIP

Figure 2 below is a summary of the major milestones in the College's recent efforts to enhance its digital learning infrastructure, addressing major events and contextual factors that evolved its DLI to its current form. A detailed timeline is available **here**.

Figure 2: Morehouse College DLI Milestones

2019

Dr. Martha Madkins joins the College to establish online programs.

Pre-2020

Morehouse College uses an online format for a few fall and spring courses.

2020

COVID-19 pandemic hits.

2021

Strategic plan highlights digital learning through the *Morehouse Beyond Borders* strategic theme.

Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration gains institutional approval.

Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service team expands.

Online Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration launches.

2022

Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service team expands again.

The Future

More online programs and supports are offered and automation of administrative processes is expanded.

Human Resources for DLI: Organizational Chart

Figure 3: Internal Organization of the Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service
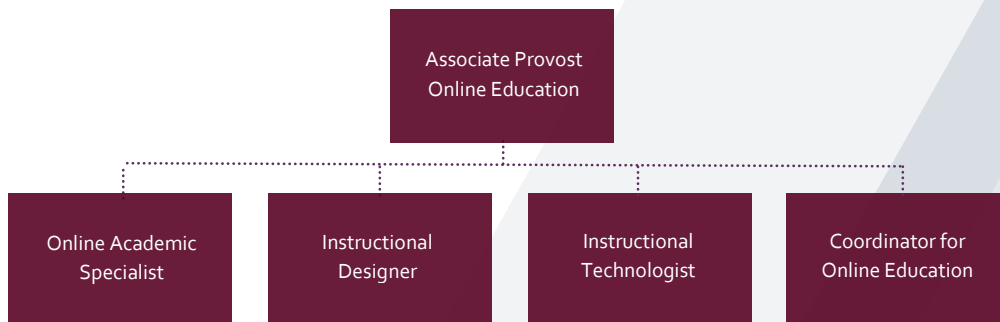
Current Online Programming

The Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration is the primary degree program offered through Morehouse College Online, and the College intends to add more industry-relevant concentrations and majors over time. The program targets the adult returning student who has 15 or more credit hours, including many former Morehouse College students who started but did not finish the traditional program. Faculty and administrators see the increased accessibility of Morehouse College courses through the Morehouse College Online platform as a way to drive more equitable student outcomes, advancing the College's mission to educate Black men and other men who share the values of Morehouse College.

Students enroll in the Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration to advance their careers, often while working full- or part-time jobs. This online program has increased access for nontraditional students to complete their education, potentially leading to more equitable opportunities and outcomes for this priority population. Through the program, students are engaged in critical conversations about race, identity, and culture during coursework and event series such as Crown Forum and the "Morehouse Experience." More information on student and faculty experience is **here**.

Increasing Capacity for Digital and Online Learning at Morehouse College, 2021-2022

Morehouse College's Capacity and Knowledge Sharing grant ran from October 2021-September 2022 and supported the institution's efforts to enhance the College's Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service and the implementation of Morehouse College Online. The College focused on building capacity through staff expansion to support current and prospective students as demand for online programming increased.

The Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service was initially staffed by Dr. Martha Madkins, Associate Provost of Online Education, as well as an instructional designer, an instructional technologist, and an advisor. One additional coordinator was hired using the grant in spring 2022. The coordinator supports course approval and development as well as faculty professional development portfolios as online offerings expand. The funded role increased capacity for responding to calls and emails, resolving student and faculty FAQs, and providing prompt support to online students and faculty required in a digital learning environment.

Morehouse College expressed interest in building capacity around automation for certain processes, such as in the student registration process. Administrators in the Office of Online Education expressed a possibility that automation could increase efficiencies and better workflow to allow faculty to focus on the daily tasks of delivering their courses and allow staff to provide support to students.

Overall, Office of Online Education staff saw the potential for investment in coordination and workflow across this office to deliver a quality online experience for faculty, staff, and students. These advancements supported the Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration, which serves as a template for future online programs—and online programming holistically as the office pursues opportunities to expand and scale.

Using Digital Learning Infrastructure to Support Student Success Through the College's Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service

Morehouse College has focused on consistent connection and quality of the online learning experience for both students and faculty through its DLI work.

The Office of Online Education coordinated the effort through a focus on students and faculty supports and trainings that serve nontraditional students. Additional efforts to implement a culturally competent curriculum through general coursework infused the Morehouse College experience into the online learning structure. Faculty and staff were partners in developing online offerings, providing their first-hand experiences from the virtual classroom. Lessons learned from use of DLI to support student success through the Office of Online Education and bringing the Morehouse College experience online are below.

Using DLI to Support Student Success Through the Office of Online Education

The Office of Online Education supported nontraditional online students through increased flexibility and peer mentorship.

The Office of Online Education has supported enrollment and advising, technology use and troubleshooting, as well as other areas that ensure students have what they need to be successful and stay on track to obtain their degree.

Because online learners tend to be managing full-time jobs and family responsibilities, staff needed to provide "around the clock" support. Staff implemented some automation or streamlining of resources to make it easier for students to access support at times when staff were unavailable. Consistent support required increased capacity within the Office of Online Education. Students valued supplementing the advice of academic advisors with mentorship and guidance from experienced peers as they progressed through the program. Examples of guidance included more information on course rigor and assignments before enrollment and during course completion to better plan their time and achieve balance. Clear, streamlined communication from faculty and program leads about individual courses and the pathway toward graduation was essential as students navigated course selection.

"And it can't be a nine to five office. … Because it's a nontraditional program, you need availability for people who work on a night shift, to be quite honest, because that's when students will most likely be doing their work, and then they're all around the country. … So you need people who have different abilities to work in different time zones."

—FACULTY MEMBER

The Office of Online Education supported faculty with specialized support, training, technologies, and resources to design and deliver a consistent and quality online teaching experience. Faculty have a vital role in online programming as designers and implementers of engaging, high-quality learning experiences. The Office of Online Education paired a coordinator and an instructional designer to support efforts to develop and design new courses for online learning. The instructional designer was vital in translating content from in-person courses to an online experience that facilitated similar conversation, learning, and engagement. In the early phases, 2U provided support for instructional design, and later instructional design was developed by staff in the Office for Online Education, customizing the content to fit the culture of Morehouse College.

Other faculty trainings, such as Quality Matters, increased understanding of the criteria of a quality online course. Faculty appreciated the available teaching supports such as training and feedback loops. Faculty expressed that they would have benefitted from earlier involvement and integration into the design and selection of the learning management system provided by the vendor. They sought more representation and voice in decision making for elements of the program. Faculty reflected that this type of involvement can increase comfort and confidence with using online teaching and learning technologies, thus improving the quality of courses.

"Knowing the online teaching environment, knowing several LMSs and knowing my colleagues, it would've been helpful to have those kind of conversations early on."

—FACULTY MEMBER

Bringing the Morehouse College Experience Online

Incorporating frequent and informal online connection supported closeness, relationship building, and a feeling of brotherhood for online students.

"To me, if they finished their degree online and didn't have the same kinds of conversations that I have with my in-person students about issues dealing with race and politics in the West and so forth, they didn't come through my classroom, right? ... And so I was very conscious of making sure that my Morehouse [College] Online students had the same kinds of conversations and opportunities to talk about those issues."

—FACULTY MEMBER

"So, I feel a part when I sit in a class and hear a professor that looks like my father, looks like my grandfather, and they're able to give me history of the trials that were there that were turned into triumphs. And now we're here to this type of organization. So that alone did cause me to feel a part [of] it."

—STUDENT

Technologies such as a student-managed GroupMe, Microsoft Teams, and extended Zoom time opportunities served as means for students to build relationships and more easily connect about class discussions or other daily life experiences. Both students and faculty saw these as meaningful ways to connect with peers outside of class in a way that suited the online student lifestyle. Students reported that using these technologies made them feel closer to their peers, even in the virtual setting. While these collaborative tools facilitated valuable relationship building and communication, some faculty and administrators expressed a need to clearly define their use. For example, the student-managed GroupMe was used primarily for relationship building. Other technologies, such as Microsoft Teams, were used to distribute resources about the college or program and information about coursework. To ensure streamlined and efficient communications, faculty and staff needed to know which technologies to use for which purposes. Because of the importance of delivering clear information about the program, administrative tasks, and course content, a different platform for those tasks might be more appropriate.

"The online guys have a GroupMe [which is student managed]. Their point was, 'We want to continue what was started in your class, and we want to always be here for one another in ways that we know we aren't in person, but that should not stop us from being here.'" —Faculty member

The Morehouse College experience emerges in the virtual classroom through critical conversations, including dialogue about race, identity, and culture. Both faculty and students shared that they felt vulnerable conversations about race, identity, and society were pivotal to their Morehouse College education. Faculty also view these conversations as a key component of the Morehouse College experience and emphasized the need to bring them to the online classroom to ensure consistent experiences. Interviews with students, including many who had previously attended primarily white institutions, suggested that these experiences with Morehouse-specific courses enhanced students' education and overall college experience.

Responses from a student survey administered by the College showed very positive feedback on online students' experiences in Crown Forum. Students felt connected to the history and culture of the physical campus and saw the examples of Black excellence in the programming as something to strive for. Students considered themselves members of the brotherhood even though they were not at the physical campus. Administrators and faculty continue to explore opportunities for online students to feel connected to campus from their homes, such as identifying resources for a visit for key campus events like Homecoming.

Onward: A DLI Learning Agenda for Morehouse College and Other HBCUs

Morehouse College's recent work on its DLI has focused on building capacity within the College's Office of Online Education and Information Technology Service and bringing the Morehouse College experience online. Based on the lessons learned through its DLI journey, this section presents a series of learning agenda items corresponding with highlights specific to the College and questions for consideration that members of the Morehouse College community and other HBCUs can reflect on. Each HBCU is a unique institution—context matters—yet there are broad areas of inquiry and questions that may resonate with many individuals and teams planning or implementing online programs.

LEARNING AREA	MOREHOUSE COLLEGE HIGHLIGHTS	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
1 **Engage faculty and students:** Involve them as partners in the design and refinement of online programming supports quality improvements	Faculty and student involvement in the DLI development process ensures quality online courses that centers the user experience. Faculty expressed interest in identifying teaching and learning tools and in decision making about course development. Students expressed a need for continuous feedback loops and online student governance structures, such as an established student government association.	How can faculty and students play a role in decision making related to DLI? What does their role look like? How can faculty and students be brought in earlier as core partners in the work?
2 **Provide course design training:** Support faculty and staff to translate content into online courses	Building internal team capacity to operate online programs, especially in instructional design, can increase quality of course delivery. Developing an online academic and social experience that is engaging and encourages student participation requires skills that are different from traditional course design. Morehouse College has already benefited from investing in an instructional designer and trainings for faculty.	What training do faculty need to ensure quality course design? How can instructional designers take on a more active role to ensure engaging course content and consistency across the program?
3 **Invest in communications:** As an element of DLI, effective communication through collaborative platforms can improve experiences for faculty and students	Students and faculty desire streamlined and clear communications about the academic program. Morehouse College has sought to establish clear uses of communications platforms for different types of communications (e.g., relationship building, information about program resources). The College has also sought to develop a "one-stop shop" model to include clear messages about the degree program and other resources in one primary, easy-to-find location.	What tools are useful for supporting effective, consistent communication to faculty and students?
4 **Expand what's available to online students:** Access to a range of resources is necessary for quality learning and cultural experiences	Library and research tools need to be easily accessible to all students. Students wanted more access to resources such as tutoring, writing support, and campus life. Investing in access to a range of resources for a virtual modality will enhance the quality of student experiences.	What resources do online students want or need to have that are not currently built into the program? How can colleges invest in in-person experiences for online students when demand for them is evident?

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