DIGITAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE AT

HOWARD UNIVERSITY

November 2022

EQUAL
MEASURE

Introduction

This profile describes Howard University's recent developments in its expanding of digital learning infrastructure (DLI). The profile sets the context and evolution of the University's work and documents progress from 2021-2022 to enhance and accelerate digital learning, with support from a grant provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The University's DLI efforts prioritize high-quality teaching and learning experiences through the processes of centralizing DLI initiatives, including the development of new online programs. This is not an exhaustive account of the University's DLI work but rather a compilation of key features of its journey. The Howard University 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

Founded in 1867, Howard University is a private, historically Black research university located in Washington, DC that serves more than 12,000 students from 53 states and territories and 53 nations. Howard is a top producer of African American baccalaureates who earn science and engineering doctoral degrees and has nationally ranked programs in social work, business, and communications. It is internationally regarded for its College of Medicine and School of Law. Moreover, the University is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a cadre of faculty who, through their teaching, research, and service, commit to the development of distinguished, historically aware, and compassionate graduates and to the discovery of social, economic, and environmental solutions in the United States and throughout the world. With an abiding interest in both domestic and international affairs, the University is committed to continuing to produce leaders for America and the global community and closing racial and socioeconomic equity gaps.[1]

[1] Source: Howard University, **https://howard.edu/**

Digital and Online Activities at Howard University

Building the foundation: The Evolution of Howard University's Digital Learning Infrastructure

For many years, online education efforts at Howard University were implemented independently in individual departments and degree programs. More recently, the University has sought to centralize digital and online learning initiatives and align best practices for teaching and learning across the institution.

The University's substantive activities with online learning date back to 2012, when it experimented with in-house development and marketing of programming with the School of Business. More recently, partnerships with online program managers (OPMs) catalyzed their efforts. The *Howard Forward* strategic plan for 2019-2024 called for accelerating the development of additional online programs and courses. The plan set a target that 20% of course offerings would be provided online. Stemming from this strategy was the establishment in 2019 of the Office of Academic Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, signaling a commitment to accelerate partnerships with online providers.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic shed light on opportunities for the University to strengthen its DLI. The unprecedented events amplified the need to support students of color and low-income students as issues of equity and access—such as to devices and learning technology—were further exacerbated by the pandemic. Howard University has always been at the forefront of providing exceptional learning experiences and environments for underrepresented students, yet the emergency transition to remote learning allowed the University to see new opportunities for growth and expansion.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (CETLA) has played a critical role in online programming, providing training and support to faculty on best practices in online course delivery. As demand for online instruction grew, the University assessed the capacity of its tools to meet needs across the campus community. It instituted several technology improvements to meet the moment. Over the last two years, it has bolstered its DLI talent and created the Office of Digital and Online Learning, which is dedicated to online program development and centralization of DLI resources, allowing CETLA to maintain its focus on faculty development.
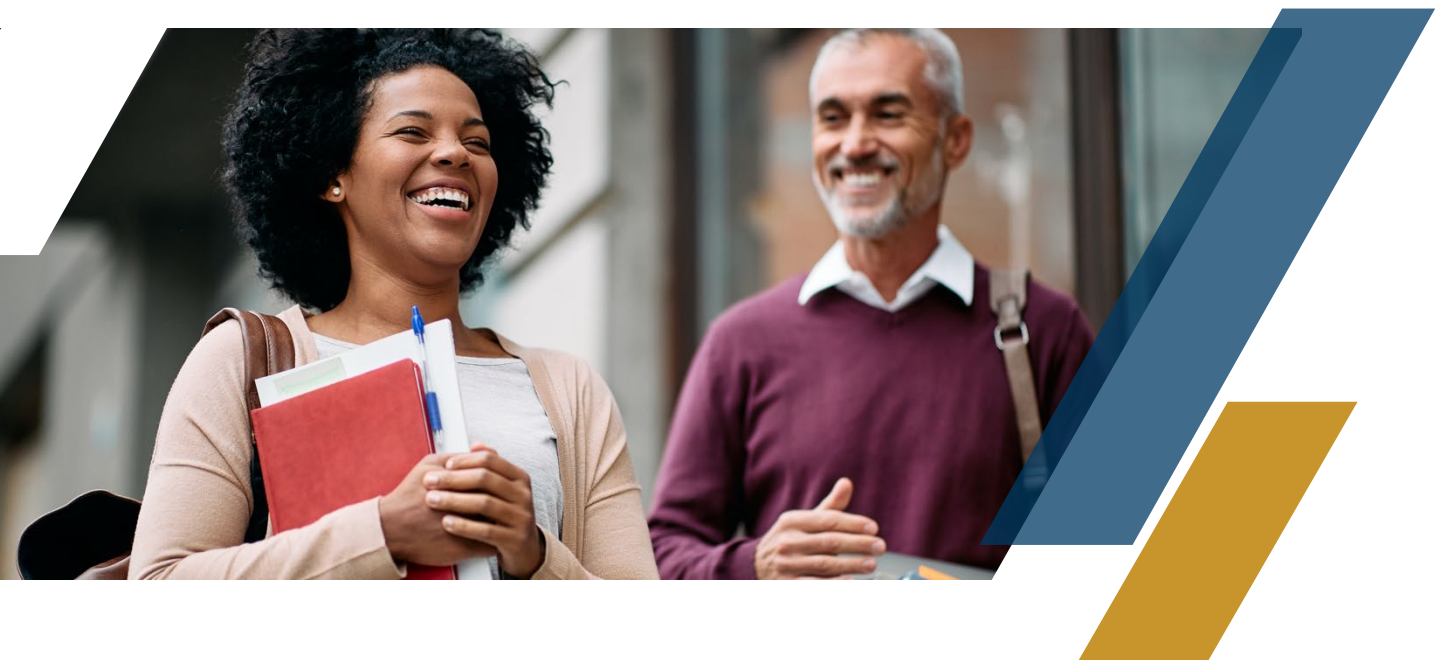
The University's DLI advancements have been supported by three principles and priorities. Leadership and vision have instigated centralization of DLI operations, requiring coordination and partnership across the University. Setting online learning as a strategic priority has caused more resources to be allocated to infrastructure, including relevant technologies and physical spaces that enable high-quality faculty training and course development. Figure 1 illustrates these components, and a detailed description can be found **here**.

Figure 1: Howard University DLI Principles & Priorities

LEADERSHIP & VISION

CENTRALIZATION OF OPERATIONS

COORDINATION & PARTNERSHIP

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

Figure 2: Howard University DLI Milestones

2012-2018

The beginnings: The University initiates its online presence through the School of Business, learning about its internal capacity to deliver.

2018

Online program manager engagement supports the School of Business online program.

2019

The University adopts the Howard Forward strategic plan, which leads to the creation of more online programs.

2020

The COVID-19 pandemic hits. Faculty development through CETLA accelerates. Dr. Morris Thomas joins the University as CETLA Director.

The University establishes the Office of Academic Innovation and Strategic Initiatives. Technology transitions, integrations, and expansions bolster teaching and learning.

2022

The University establishes the Office of Digital and Online Learning, and Dr. Thomas is appointed Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning.

2022

Philanthropic investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation enhances DLI capacity.

The University begins transitioning from Blackboard to the Canvas learning management system.

Human Resources For DLI: Organizational Chart

Implementing digital learning initiatives at the University requires a robust team and ongoing collaboration with schools and departments across the system and with OPMs.

All staff dedicated to digital learning sit in the Office of the Provost. DLI efforts are overseen by an institutional leader who plays the dual roles of Director of CETLA and Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning. **CETLA** staffs eight other positions, as presented in Figure 3 below. In addition to the Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning, the Office of Digital and Online Learning staffs the Coordinator of Digital and Online Learning. While CETLA staff support the Office of Digital and Online Learning, the University intends to increase capacity by hiring additional staff.

The following organization chart presents how Howard University uses human capital to implement DLI.

Figure 3: DLI Organizational Chart for CETLA and the Office of Digital and Online Learning
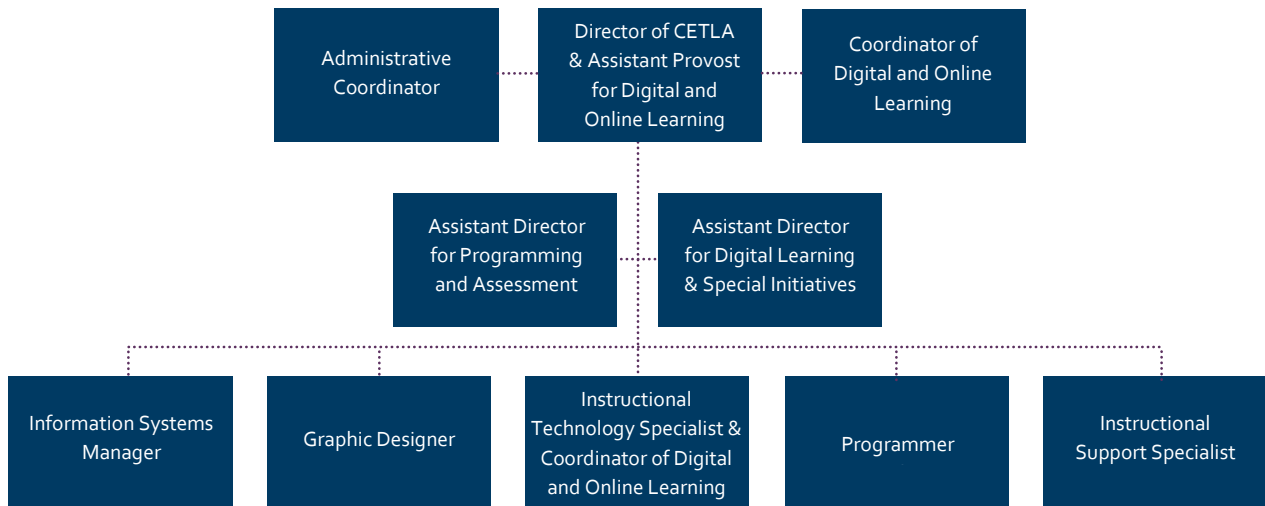
Current Online Programming

Established in 2021, the **Office of Digital and Online Learning** was made possible in part through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Digital Learning Infrastructure Capacity and Knowledge Sharing grant. The office provides oversight for the selection and implementation of digital learning tools and coordinates matters pertaining to online course and degree program development. Its focus on enhancing DLI capacity supports the *Howard Forward* strategic plan, particularly Goal 1 of Strategic Priority #1 to "Enhance Student Success through Transformation and Innovation in Teaching and Learning, enhanced by the use of technology." The newly formed Office of Digital and Online Learning supports the work of converting in-person courses to online courses and training activities to equip faculty for virtual instruction, allowing the implementation of more robust technologically-infused learning experiences across instructional modalities.

The University runs some **online programs** independently, leaning on its "in-house" resources, and others through partnerships with online program managers. OPMs are external vendors who assist institutions with the design and operation of online programs, including marketing, recruitment, student advising, course and platform development, and help desk services for faculty and students. Cost is absorbed throughout the process through a revenue share or fee-for-service model. Of its nine online graduate programs (two doctorate programs and six master's programs), just three involve OPMs, as the University's capacity to build and maintain courses has expanded. The University sees online programming as an impactful and meaningful way to expand access to individuals who would not otherwise be able to gain the "Howard University" experience. This programming reduces cost barriers—Washington, DC has become one of the most expensive places to live in the U.S.—and, in many cases, enables working adults and parents to complete and/or continue their education. Recent developments in online program delivery include:

- *School of Business and Noodle*. Starting in 2020, the Howard University School of Business (HUSB) announced a partnership with Noodle Partners to launch an **Online MBA** (OMBA) and invest in the growth of its online Executive MBA (EMBA).

- During summer 2022, the Office of Digital and Online Learning and HUSB developed two graduate online programs in collaboration with faculty: a Master of Science in Accountancy and a Master of Science in Finance.

- *School of Social Work and 2U*. Starting in January 2022, the University launched a part-time **online Master of Social Work degree** with 2U with the intent to enroll students in a full-time online program in September 2022.

- *Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) with Coursera*. The University and Coursera are collaborating on the course "Linear Algebra for Data Science Using Python," offered during fall 2022 for individuals exploring, pursuing, or advancing careers in data science.

- Among other initiatives on the horizon, the University seeks to reengage former undergraduate students who did not finish their degree requirements—but gained 60 or more credits—in online courses and degree completion programs.

Quality Forward and Quality Matters.

The University's "Quality Forward" initiative focuses on increasing quality assurance in the design and delivery of online courses. A 2021-22 partnership between the Office of Digital and Online Learning, CETLA, and HU-Learn, courses are designed to meet Quality Matters standards and crafted with common tools, including course shells, syllabus templates, and course map templates.

Faculty engage in course re-design with the support of Quality Matters-trained CETLA/Office of Digital and Online Learning team members. This standardization approach in the design of online courses and in faculty development has become institutionalized as part of the University's goal to centralize DLI efforts. Quality Forward supports *Howard Forward* Strategic Priority 1: "Enhance academic excellence by supporting faculty, research and student development, academic rigor and retention through strategic recruitment and continuous improvement of academic programs."

Increasing Capacity for Digital and Online Learning at Howard University, 2021-2022

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) Capacity and Knowledge Sharing grant to Howard University ran from October 2021 through September 2022 and focused on supporting the centralization of several existing digital learning initiatives through the creation of the Office of Digital and Online Learning. Grant activities included: 1) the development of physical digital learning spaces, including the Green Screen Suite, Digital Learning Recording Studio, and Digital Learning Hub, available for faculty training and access to digital learning tools; 2) digital learning hardware and software; 3) faculty training to adopt and use online courseware; and 4) the hiring of personnel to support grant-related activities.

During the grant period, the University developed physical spaces to carry out the functions of the centralized Office of Digital and Online Learning. These spaces provide the necessary elements for developing rich and culturally relevant multimedia content for courses across modalities (online, HyFlex, hybrid, blended, and face-to-face) and hands-on faculty development to support delivery. Content development efforts align with the *Howard Forward* strategic plan to enhance excellence in teaching, learning, student access and success, in part through investments in the latest technology to benefit tens of thousands of current and future undergraduate and graduate students, including those who would experience financial hardship living on-campus or in the vicinity of the University. Figure 4 below shows how grant-funded activities have fed into important digital learning outputs during 2021-22.

Figure 4: Grant components enhancing DLI

INPUTS:	HAVE SUPPORTED OUTPUTS:
• Physical spaces for generating multimedia content and for faculty training: Green Screen Suite, Digital Learning Hub, Digital Learning Recording Studio • New Office of Digital and Online Learning personnel	• Part-time online Master of Social Work degree with 2U • 25 re-designed online core/general education courses (Quality Forward Initiative) • Office of Digital and Online Learning website • Self-paced tutorials and professional development offerings • Digitally enhanced virtual tour of the newly created spaces

Centralizing DLI Efforts Through the Office of Digital and Online Learning and Socializing the New Office into the University

The University viewed centralization as necessary to building digital learning infrastructure that enables quality. This process, administrators believe, is especially important for resource-limited institutions, which they include themselves among. Streamlined DLI requires offices to work well together and avoid duplicating resources. Another important factor prompting centralization was the principle of quality—that through centralizing the work, the Office of Digital and Online Learning could craft consistent, standardized processes toward best practices for online course delivery. The strategic plan and COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand for centralization.

"It's been a very balkanized approach, and different schools and programs were doing it differently, some with more success than others and some schools who had made no effort to develop online programs. Having a centralized office that has oversight and responsibility for aiding all of the schools—developing online programs, having some consistency and expectations for what should be included and expected, the type of quality we're looking for while also continuing to develop the University's internal capacity to implement online programs—has been critical for creating a unified strategy and a cohesive process for moving, not just individual programs, but really the University forward."

—HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

Establishing the Green Screen Suite, Digital Learning Recording Studio, and Digital Learning Hub has contributed to centralization of faculty development resources, increasing capacity to leverage technology for online teaching and learning. Equipment and courseware for these spaces allow the Office of Digital and Online Learning to carry out its functions because these multimedia assets are necessary for building online courses and providing training. The University used a significant portion of the BMGF grant for supplies and supplemented with existing campus resources. New part-time staff, including a multimedia production specialist, was necessary to activate these resources.

- **Green Screen Suite and Digital Learning Recording Studio:** Provide equipment for developing multimedia content, including self-paced and asynchronous faculty training course videos, such as learning management system essentials as the University transitions from Blackboard to Canvas, and best practices for facilitating learning in the digital learning environment (Figure 5).

- **Digital Learning Hub:** Offers space where faculty receive interactive training and professional development and explore and experiment with various courseware and learning tools (e.g., whiteboard capability, Mac and PC computers) for course re-design and to deliver online courses (Figure 6).
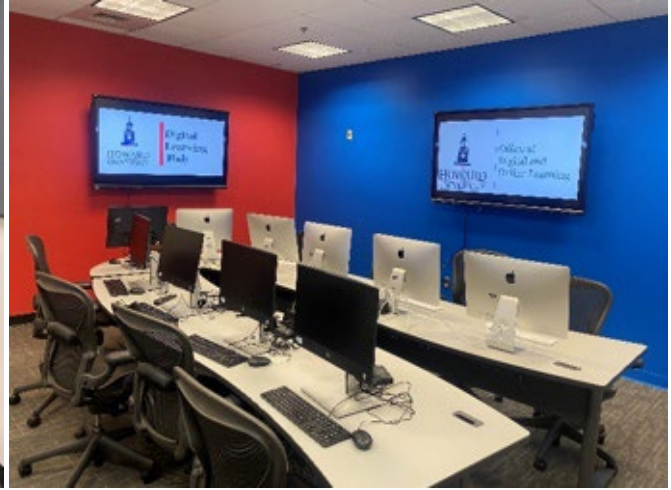
Figure 5: Green Screen Suite

Figure 6: Digital Learning Hub

Howard University leadership has played a key role in socializing the Office of Digital and Online Learning by focusing on how centralization efforts support faculty. University leaders have elevated the importance of online learning through establishing the Office of Digital and Online Learning. Dr. Morris Thomas, Assistant Provost for Digital and Online Learning and Director of CETLA, has spearheaded the effort to showcase the Green Screen Suite, Digital Learning Recording Studio, and Digital Learning Hub to faculty and to bring faculty to these spaces for training and technology access.

This has required an intentional communication effort, with his team frequently sitting in on faculty meetings to exchange information about online programming and providing points of contact to faculty as they navigate instructional technology. The knowledge and expertise about online instruction as well as "the intimate work," or soft skills that the Office of Digital and Online Learning staff offers, promote buy-in and engagement among faculty to the office.

Designing a Roadmap for the Development of a New Online Program

The University has increased its capacity for designing, launching, and operating online programs, both independently run and OPM-facilitated. Between 2021 and 2022, coordination across the Office of Digital and Online Learning, 2U, and the School of Social Work allowed the development and launch of an online master's program in social work (MSW). This section is a deep dive on the University's lessons from the development of this and other online programs. Understanding all the infrastructure components to developing an online program and accounting for them before you start is key to efficiency and success.

"I think there has to be strong leadership from president and provost, key cabinet members. And then, of course, faculty leadership, whether it be the senate or however that's done ... [Then] you can move things ... What that does is it sends a message of 'It's important'... [Faculty] have to believe that that work means something to the institution ... That's why I think that office is so important."

—HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

The **"development phase" is an intensive and iterative process—whether done in house or "full-service" with an OPM—and requires a coordinated effort.** Like in-person programming, it requires varied expertise and collaboration across a range of teams: marketing and recruitment, admissions, enrollment, technology, advising, library, tutoring, health resources, finance, procurement, general counsel, and others within the institution and/or from the OPM. Integrating these pieces in a coherent way calls for strong project management, including the procurement, coordination, and activation of resources, in order to launch the program. Howard University administrators recommend reaching out to the offices and individuals that you will need to be engaged with early on.

"First and foremost, I would just say, get all of the parties that need to be involved. If that means establishing an online learning committee if there's not a division, then maybe that's what that looks like. And then establish a very streamlined plan for how the program development is going to be carried out … communication and that collaboration is a huge part of this process."

—HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

"Whether you're going to work solely with the Office of Digital and Online Learning [or a service provider], the idea is to have faculty at the core of that building."

—HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

- **Time commitment.** Due to the intensive and iterative nature of the process, staff and faculty should be aware of the time commitment needed and consider if they have sufficient human capital to support the process. During the planning process, administrators can identify staff, whether current or prospective, who can dedicate time to the process. Needing additional staff capacity, the School of Social Work sought to fill a coordinator position. One factor influencing time commitment is determination of whether to build all the courses for the program before launch or build the first "wave," launch the program, and then build subsequent waves of courses.

- **Course conversion and development.** A substantial amount of time is needed for getting courses online, such as conversion of flagship on-campus courses to online courses and the series of meetings to support this. One administrator estimated that this component required as much as 40 hours per faculty member. Typically, faculty need to have 15 weeks of lesson plans complete in the online platform before class starts, including readings and assignments. Embedded tasks are recording lectures, identifying synchronous and asynchronous components of the courses, and designing an approach for fieldwork or clinical placements if the program requires students to complete an experiential component.

- **Communicating with faculty and staff.** Individuals who will be responsible for the success of the program appreciate transparent communication during the development phase. This includes keeping them apprised of program developments but also leveraging new or existing committees representing faculty and staff perspectives. For example, the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Committee was instituted by the Provost to advise the University and CETLA on digital learning initiatives and includes a faculty member or representative from each school and a student government representative. In conjunction with administrators, faculty can help to protect the brand of the institution when an external service provider is involved; for example, by ensuring external messaging appropriately represents the institution. One administrator reflected they did not want to use the concept of Howard University being "top ranked among HBCUs," as suggested by the provider, because that "goes against our family relationships," and they were not interested in creating internal competition among HBCUs.

Addressing how faculty and students will be supported is a major component of program development. Staff and faculty need training and technology support to engage with online tools. The University provides faculty orientation to teaching platforms and to tools like Poll Everywhere and Grammarly, which it purchased through the BMGF grant for the online Master of Business program. CETLA has employed Quality Matters to promote best practices for teaching online. Faculty often need technical support during their courses, especially in the beginning. They can lean on graduate assistants and peer buddy systems, but an accessible and reliable helpdesk service is an additional asset.

Similarly, students need access to responsive modes of communication as they enroll and enter their programs. The MSW program presents a new student orientation video to help students get acclimated. Program designers and operators must guard against assumptions related to how well-equipped students are. They can ensure that students have the devices and internet access that they need. Despite many being relatively young, students may not be digital natives or experience ease in teaching themselves how to use virtual learning tools. Training and support on technology must extend to students as well, not just faculty, especially when new tools are introduced.

Bringing the "Howard experience" online can happen in multiple ways. The University wants all its students to feel connected to their professors, classmates, and the institution, regardless of learning modality. Administrators and faculty are exploring ways to promote connection. For example, in conjunction with 2U, the MSW program is building the "Howard Hallway" to simulate being on campus and "bumping into" someone and striking up a conversation. The dean of the School of Social Work also initiated a "Dean's coffee hour." Students can get the Howard experience through interacting with faculty and classmates and being involved in school and campus-wide online gatherings like symposia. Different programs will have different styles of bringing the Howard experience to students, based on the culture of the school in which they are housed. Program designers can reflect on the unique cultural aspects that they want to include and how to virtually translate them. Many students may be interested in visiting campus for an in-person event, such as graduation, but logistics and cost must be resolved if that option is created for students. At the same time, not all students will have interest in or the bandwidth for deep engagement with the cultural aspects of a Howard education. For example, nontraditional students working full time and raising children may want to limit their engagement in non-academic activities.

> "You have to keep your character and culture if you are dealing with an outside OPM … We have to spend time with them on understanding that I am not trying to replicate the [predominantly white institution's program]. This is the Howard program, and there are some things you need to know about Howard."
>
> —HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

> "We felt like it was necessary for us to maintain a synchronous component so that our students do have that opportunity to connect with their instructor and classmates. And that's usually once a week for about an hour and a half per class."
>
> —HOWARD UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVE

Onward: A DLI Learning Agenda for Howard University and Other HBCUs

Howard University's recent work to build its DLI has focused on centralization of DLI operations and building new online graduate programs. Based on the lessons learned through its DLI journey, this section presents a series of learning agenda items corresponding with highlights specific to the University and questions for consideration that members of the Howard University 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	HOWARD UNIVERSITY HIGHLIGHTS	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
1 Assess the fundamentals: Working from a solid foundation	The University has achieved the groundwork for expanding online programming. This foundation is based on having elements like a learning management system, single sign-on, a process for developing quality programs, strong project management, and systems integration. It is growing its human resources for DLI.	What is our starting place? Which foundational DLI elements do we still need to build? What resources do we need to ensure we have basic infrastructure? What knowledge and expertise may be missing?
2 Invest in talent: Equipping faculty to be online learning champions	CETLA is responsible for overall faculty development. The Office of Digital and Online Learning is dedicated to online course and program development and related training. The University continues to expand the reach and capacity of these offices to meet increasing demand for online programs.	How is our institution supporting faculty to effectively deliver online programming? How can support become more accessible and responsive? What are our practices for developing quality online courses and programs?
3 Achieve and maintain quality: A guiding principle for the University's DLI efforts	The *Howard Forward* strategic plan has played an influential role in the University prioritizing expansion and quality in online learning.	What principle(s) guide our institution's DLI efforts? Do strategic priorities promote enhancing DLI?
4 Stay agile: Implementing continuous improvement, including with bringing the Howard experience online	The University has committed to continuous improvement via its Quality Forward initiative and through engaging members of the campus community in feedback loops and refinement processes. Administrators and faculty are considering how to strengthen cultural experiences for online students.	How do we capture feedback from online teaching and learning experiences? What do faculty and students want to see more and less of? How can we create a more fulfilling experience, with special attention to nontraditional students?
5 Ensure they know who you are: Working with external service providers	The University has worked with multiple OPMs to build online programs. During this process, administrators and faculty have been assertive about their needs and interests, such as cultivating a sense of community and cultural tradition.	What are non-negotiable elements of how we show up for faculty, students, and the public when we partner with an external provider?

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