



DIGITAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE AT

# PAUL QUINN COLLEGE

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**EQUAL**  
MEASURE



Photo by Roberto Hernandez

## Introduction

This profile describes Paul Quinn College's ("Paul Quinn") recent developments in its building of digital learning infrastructure (DLI) to accommodate the needs of traditional and adult/nontraditional students in ways that increase enrollment without compromising college affordability. It sets the context and evolution of Paul Quinn's work and documents the progress the institution has made from 2021-2022 to enhance and accelerate digital learning, with support from a grant provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This is not an exhaustive account of Paul Quinn's DLI work but rather a compilation of key features of its journey. The Paul Quinn 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

Paul Quinn College, founded in 1872, is a small, private, faith-based, historically Black liberal arts college in Dallas, Texas that has become a model

for urban higher education by focusing on academic rigor, experiential learning, and entrepreneurship.

Paul Quinn's small physical campus (147 acres) and student body size (approx. 1,000 students) enable the DLI work to be nimble and reach beyond the campus. There are fewer than 50 staff members and just seven full-time associate professors. Many other professors and lecturers, especially in the specialized Honors College, serve as adjunct faculty.

Since 2007, Paul Quinn President Michael J. Sorrell has steered Paul Quinn to be an anchor institution in its community despite its small size, partnering with employers and positioning itself as a community resource. Beginning in the fall of 2015, Paul Quinn College adopted a new student financial structure called the "New Urban College Model," which, among other characteristics, reduced student tuition and fees, enabling students to graduate with less than \$10,000 of student loan debt. The centerpiece of the New Urban College Model is Paul Quinn's decision to become the country's only "urban work college," where students intern with businesses and organizations as part of their academic program. The "work college's" vision is to "transform ability into action and potential into achievement by encouraging all students to embrace the ideals of disciplined work, servant leadership, and initiative in preparation for lives of financial freedom, community engagement, and outstanding character."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Source: <https://pqc-edu.squarespace.com/whoweare>

# Digital and Online Activities at Paul Quinn College

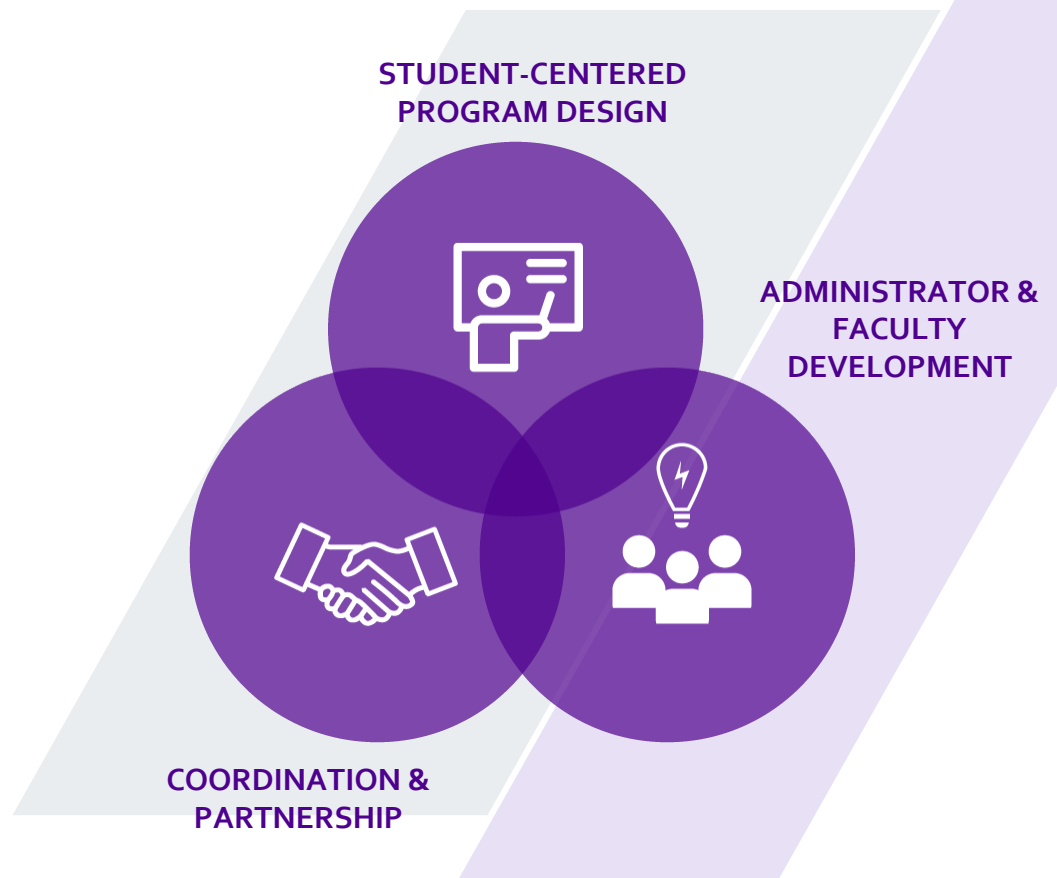
## Building the Foundation: The Evolution of Paul Quinn’s Digital Learning Infrastructure

**Over the past seven years, Paul Quinn College has designed, piloted, and implemented an online learning program to accommodate the needs of traditional and adult students stemming from its vision of “active learning online for social impact.”**

Paul Quinn’s Honors College Urban Scholars Program, in partnership with Minerva University, builds on longstanding opportunities to recruit and engage students through structured coursework and advising, devised by faculty committed to online and hybrid learning approaches.

Paul Quinn’s DLI advancements have been grounded in three principles and priorities. At the core of Paul Quinn’s DLI model is student-centered program design, which accommodates a variety of learner goals and circumstances, reinforced by “intrusive advising.” Faculty and administrators hone their practice of digital teaching through training, peer support, and collaborative problem solving. To foster constructive feedback that can improve its digital learning platforms and courses, Paul Quinn encourages open communication among administrators, faculty, and students. Strategic partnerships with Minerva University (technology and pedagogy) and the Student Resource Center and Guild (student recruitment) focus on tailored solutions that boost Paul Quinn’s capacity to achieve its vision. Figure 1 illustrates these components, and a detailed description can be found [here](#).

Figure 1: Paul Quinn College DLI Principles & Priorities



“Digital learning is not just about the platform but the broader process and culture in which tools exist.”

—PAUL QUINN ADMINISTRATOR

As mentioned above, in 2015, Paul Quinn’s leaders established the New Urban College Model, which influenced strategies for recruiting, retaining, and graduating students, followed by job placements. For the next five years, leaders experimented with online and hybrid learning strategies to maintain the quality and flexibility of the Corporate Work Program. Paul Quinn leaders spent time determining best strategies for coursework using only an hour and a half of real-time instruction per course. This strategic choice considered both emerging research on hybrid learning and the increased need for flexible course delivery for students. They tried “off-the-shelf” products that did not meet the specialized student and faculty needs, and recognized that a customized, bottom-up approach to co-designing with third-party vendors was a more suitable path to building more digital learning programs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, Paul Quinn leaders and faculty felt prepared to pivot to a fully online learning environment. The previous years of experimenting with online models had built a solid foundation of technological infrastructure and confidence and familiarity with the process in faculty members and students. Paul Quinn’s DLI experience supported a smooth rollout of the Urban Scholars Program, using Minerva University’s customized Forum digital learning platform that engages students in interactive and dynamic methods of teaching and learning.

Figure 2 below is a summary of the major milestones in Paul Quinn’s recent efforts to enhance its digital learning infrastructure, addressing major events and contextual factors enabling its DLI to evolve to its current form. A detailed timeline is provided [here](#).

**Figure 2: DLI Timeline**

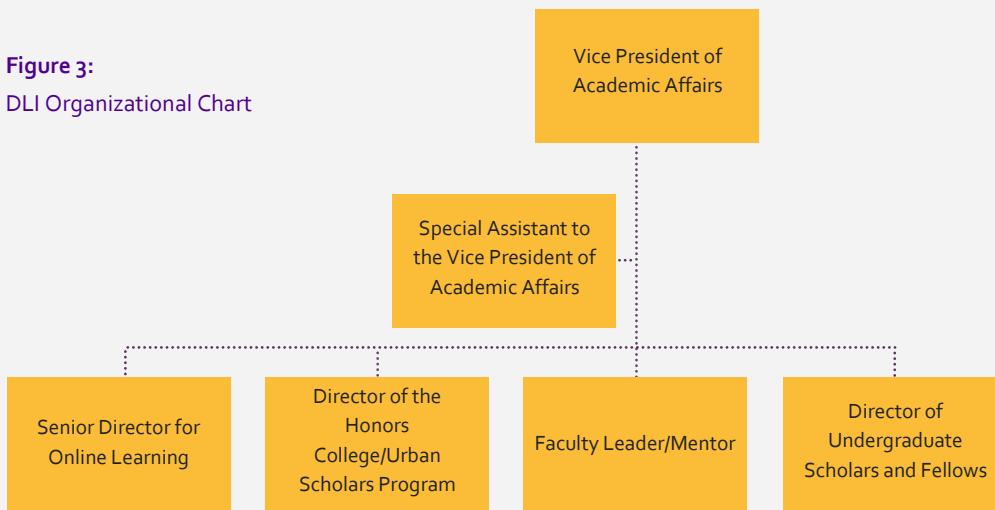
<b>2015</b>	<b>2017-2019</b>	<b>2020-2021</b>	<b>2021-2022</b>	<b>2022</b>
Paul Quinn becomes the country’s only “urban work college,” laying the foundation towards innovative program structures with greater reach.	Paul Quinn leaders experiment with online and hybrid learning strategies to maintain the quality and flexibility of its Corporate Work Program.	<p>The <b>Urban Scholars Program (“USP”)</b>, in partnership with Minerva University, creates a narrow set of degree offerings with a cross-curricular focus on social impact.</p> <p>The rollout of the USP coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, at which time Paul Quinn pivots to being fully remote for the academic year.</p> <p><b>Paul Quinn partners with Guild Education</b> to offer a program menu to corporations for their employees to attend Paul Quinn virtually.</p> <p>During summer 2021, Paul Quinn partners with <b>Student Resource Center</b> to recruit union workers from the AFL-CIO and UAW to attend virtually from select cities.</p>	Paul Quinn College is awarded the DLI Capacity and Knowledge Sharing grant by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in support of its digital learning infrastructure efforts.	Paul Quinn hires two new directors to manage different facets of the online learning programs.

## Human Resources For DLI: Organizational Chart

**Paul Quinn College has a small core of senior staff members who manage the online programs.**

The Vice President of Academic Affairs and a Special Assistant oversee the online learning strategy, operations, and pedagogy. With the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funding, institutional leaders are planning to expand capacity and hire a director for all online learning and one specifically for the Urban Scholars Program. They also collaborate with a small number of faculty and a Director of Undergraduate Scholars and Fellows to support the academic instruction and student services. The following organization chart, Figure 3, presents how Paul Quinn uses human capital to implement DLI.

**Figure 3:**  
DLI Organizational Chart



## Current Online Programming

**Online learning is foundational for how Paul Quinn College reaches and teaches students on and off campus.** Paul Quinn is structured to accommodate a variety of student learning needs and personal circumstances to deliver high-quality, flexible programming. The number of students taking online classes has increased dramatically since 2019. When fully online courses were available in 2019, only one student was enrolled in a fully online psychology program. Heading into the 2022-2023 school year, 817 out of 996 students take online classes (68% of the student body) across three online degree programs: Bachelors in 1) Business Administration, 2) Liberal Arts, and 3) Legal Studies and Criminology. First-year students and Corporate Work Program students are required to spend time on campus to build community and contribute to the vibrancy of the College, even if they still take classes online from their residences.



*Photo by Paul Quinn College*

**The Urban Scholars Program, a partnership between Paul Quinn College and Minerva University, serves as a template for expanding online programs.** Launched in 2020, it is a full-time, year-round degree program situated in the Honors College, which is administered by the Office of Academic Affairs. The program is designed so that students earn a bachelor's degree and gain relevant work experience in just 36 months. The foundational course of study is a double major bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Public Policy, which emphasizes corporate social responsibility and policy advocacy toward equitable business practices. It is delivered via Forum, Minerva University's customized virtual learning platform. Students must have a minimum 3.5 GPA to apply. Those who accept the invitation to participate in the Honors College follow a tightly scheduled series of courses, especially in their general core requirements, to develop their ability to write, speak, think critically, and master digital spaces at an exceptionally high level.

**Through piloting the Urban Scholars Program, administrators have worked to achieve balance between quality and access.** As a small school where half the students receive Pell Grants, administrators are conscious of Forum's cost and avoid charging students more in tuition. Instead, Paul Quinn supports students financially with scholarships to level out the cost, boosting affordability. Student enrollment started at five and grew to 50 during the 2021-2022 school year. Forum has become a more viable strategy when enrollment has increased.

After piloting the Urban Scholars Program in 2020-21 with Minerva University, Paul Quinn leaders recognized that programming could expand to adult learners who had other means of paying tuition, such as through employers. Their programming needed to encompass modalities conducive to the needs of adult learners, including a dynamic digital platform and course schedules for adult learners with family and job obligations. Paul Quinn focused on creating a narrow set of degree offerings, like a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and in Business Administration with a cross-curricular focus on social impact. Funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation allowed Minerva University to work with Paul Quinn in a consultative capacity to design a process for expanding the full Honors College and to hire two new directors to manage the recruitment and enrollment of online students. These resources allowed Paul Quinn to strategize partnerships and pipelines to recruit and admit more Black and Latinx students living inside and outside Texas and working in full- and part-time jobs. Paul Quinn partners with the Student Resource Center to recruit students from prominent unions, like the AFL-CIO and UAW, and with Guild Education to recruit current employees of major corporations, like Chipotle, Lowe's, and Waste Management. Paul Quinn's ambitious vision of active learning online for social impact attracts a diverse and expansive adult learner population whose needs and aspirations overlap with Paul Quinn's mission—to support underserved populations and build a strong pipeline of graduates who can excel in their careers.

**80%**  
of all students  
who enrolled in  
an online

**52%**  
of online  
students are Pell  
grant recipients

**100%**  
of faculty who  
taught an online  
course

**70%**  
of online-only  
students

**3**  
fully online  
degree programs



Photo by Paul Quinn College

The following figure outlines the different types of online programs available to Paul Quinn students:

Figure 4: Types of Digital Learning Programs

DIGITAL LEARNING PROGRAMS	STUDENT POPULATIONS	LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM	FEATURES
<b>Fully online courses</b>	Students taking designated online courses	Canvas	A mix of traditional and honors classes, along with certifications like Java and Python
<b>Hybrid</b>	All students in Corporate Work Program	Canvas	Students are on campus 2 days/week and online 2 days/week
<b>Urban Scholars Program, in partnership with Minerva University</b>	Honors students	Forum (developed by Minerva)	Real-time ability for faculty to provide feedback on student work, even in breakouts
<b>Adult learners, in partnership with Student Resource Center and Guild</b>	Adult learners completing bachelor's degrees SRC students from UAW and AFL-CIO Guild students from corporate partners	Canvas	2 classes during 7-week period for 6 sessions per year



## Increasing Capacity for Digital and Online Learning at Paul Quinn College, 2021-2022

Paul Quinn College's Capacity and Knowledge Sharing grant through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) ran from October 2021 through September 2022. Grant activities included 1) the design, implementation, and scaling of the Urban Scholars Program within the Honors College, and 2) building a faculty culture that supports a quality online learning experience through faculty learning communities. The Vice President for Academic Affairs oversaw the grant implementation to pilot and advance digital learning strategies, first through the partnership with Minerva University, then through expansion with online offerings to adult learners and workers. The digital learning strategy reflects Paul Quinn's social mission to offer high-quality teaching and program experiences that prepare students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed for today's workforce.

### **The Urban Scholars Program, in the Honors College and in Partnership with Minerva University: Design, Implementation, and Scaling at Paul Quinn**

**Minerva University's digital platform Forum demonstrated possibilities for innovative online learning that accommodates faculty and students' diverse teaching and learning needs.** Several faculty members and a student representative lauded the Minerva platform Forum for being accessible, innovative, and engaging. Forum redefined online teaching for Paul Quinn faculty with the introduction of user-friendly lesson templates, rubrics for assessments, and features to move around and monitor student engagement during breakout groups. With its flexible interactive features, it provided a more synergistic experience for students and faculty to use classroom time for critical thinking and debates, and real-time collaboration.

**Paul Quinn's digital learning infrastructure is growing and therefore needs more staff to recruit students and manage online programs.** In 2022, Paul Quinn is hiring two staff members to support digital learning efforts since the programs are growing and need specialized attention to student recruitment, enrollment, and ongoing support. The 2022-23 academic year will involve evaluating its impact on recruitment and retention of students, and with building a supportive faculty culture. Paul Quinn leaders have been active in hiring two directors: one for the Urban Scholars Program and one for the full array of online programs offered, which include degree programs for nontraditional students as well as professionals pursuing digital certifications (i.e., Java, Python). A current Urban Scholars faculty member will start overseeing faculty training, assessment rubric development, and the Quality Matters online accreditation processes (see organizational chart above).

**Administrators and faculty intend to pair students' online learning with in-person experiences that maintain Paul Quinn's experiential culture.** Amidst the positive reception for Paul Quinn's digital learning programs, administrators, faculty, and students still support hybrid experiences to strengthen the student professional learning track. Like all programs at Paul Quinn, the Urban Scholars Program is designed for students to take classes online while also engaging in the Corporate Work Program for three days each week. The plan for the 2022-23 academic year is for students to live on campus, even if they take online courses, to build social capital and deepen learning, which administrators at Paul Quinn and Minerva agree cannot be replicated fully online.

"Unfortunately, too often the student experience is what gets lost in the mix of all of these initiatives that happen at institutional levels. And that these programs and goals and objectives, and all of that, look great publicly, but aren't making any difference on a student level. So if you were to ask me, what's the best possible outcome? It would be that students reap the most benefit from it, right? And that is what allows us to be a differentiator is that we can genuinely, wholeheartedly, definitively say we're building a better student experience for our population of students."

—PAUL QUINN FACULTY MEMBER

## Faculty Culture that Enables a Quality Online Learning Experience

“When all classes are set up the same where the students can log onto campus and see the different modules set up weekly where they know, ‘Okay, this is the chunk of work I have to do this week.’ And when everything looks the same, I think it just makes everything a lot simpler for the students. For me, I make all work available the entire semester. So, if you want to work forward, go ahead, do that, I know things come up. But I always allow that opportunity just so if anything does come up or they have a little extra brief time, they can work forward or they anticipate something may happen they won’t fall behind.”

—PAUL QUINN FACULTY MEMBER

“It takes intrusive engagement and advising. Every faculty member who is teaching a course turns into an advisor, a friend, a mentor, a faculty member, someone who’s calling the student at 8:00 p.m. at night to check on them. If you’re going to engage in digital learning, you can’t put curriculum on [the digital platform] and hope for the best. It takes a very, very intrusive, engaged approach.”

—PAUL QUINN FACULTY MEMBER

**Training and professional development that builds faculty capacity to teach online has increased faculty buy-in, engagement, and faculty with digital learning platforms.** Paul Quinn administrators and faculty conveyed that buy-in to digital learning platforms is critical to strengthening the digital learning culture and experience for faculty and students alike. Providing training and mentoring opportunities that build faculty confidence and capacity contribute to buy-in. Faculty can be trained by Minerva University to become more comfortable with Forum. Internal Paul Quinn training and peer mentorship, like the proposed Faculty Learning Communities, may provide faculty with supports and opportunities to build their skills and comfort level with digital learning platforms. Some faculty at Paul Quinn view their small faculty size as conducive to connecting easily with each other to learn and grow in the digital learning space. Minerva values ongoing feedback from faculty and students on the usability of the platform to deliver the optimum learning experience. As a Minerva University representative explained, a powerful goal of digital learning is to foster a sense of community between faculty and students, especially in the context of HBCUs, where students and faculty tend to have closer bonds.

**To build confidence and comfort with the digital learning platforms, faculty desire a balance of standardization and customization to deliver quality online instruction.** Using existing templates, syllabi, rubrics, and other tools that they can then customize for their courses has been helpful as faculty ease into the digital learning space. Standard practices also benefit students as they help faculty to level expectations for assignments, class activities, and grading. Within the common parameters of the digital platform, faculty appreciate the tools to customize levels of engagement, like polls and breakout groups for discussion.

**Supporting students is a foundational element of Paul Quinn culture that influences quality online learning experiences.** Faculty conveyed they are committed to supporting and tracking student engagement online and offline. They expressed deep passion and commitment for supporting and mentoring students to succeed academically and professionally. The digital platforms are foundational tools for teaching and learning, but attention to individual students is still paramount to meeting their immediate learning needs and providing support that will lead to graduation and obtaining good jobs. Faculty advisors ensure that students have the right hardware and internet connectivity to log on, which takes time upfront before classes begin. Paul Quinn’s faculty maintain a student-centered learning approach, whatever it takes.

## Onward: A DLI Learning Agenda for Paul Quinn College and Other HBCUs

Paul Quinn College’s recent work to build its DLI has focused on student-centered program design, administrative and faculty development, and coordination and partnership. Based on the lessons learned through its DLI journey, this section presents a series of learning agenda items corresponding with highlights specific to Paul Quinn and questions for consideration that members of the Paul Quinn 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 digital learning programs. The “starting place” for others may be much different.

LEARNING AREA	PAUL QUINN HIGHLIGHTS	QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION
<b>1</b> <b>DLI must fit the institution’s mission and capacity.</b>	Online programs provide students flexibility for working and supporting families while pursuing degrees at Paul Quinn College. Paul Quinn’s small size and unique model of an urban work college are conducive to implementing online programs that attract nontraditional students.	Why do you want, or need, a digital learning infrastructure? Who do you currently and prospectively want to serve? How will digital learning advance your institution’s mission and vision?
<b>2</b> <b>Train and empower faculty to support digital learning.</b>	Administrators have identified faculty champions to lead colleagues in learning and using digital learning tools. Some standardization is necessary for quality assurance and consistency across classes, with room for creative teaching and learning approaches.	Who among your faculty are already digital learning champions? Who can you develop as digital learning leaders? What platforms align with faculty teaching styles and learning approaches?
<b>3</b> <b>Strategize with partners to increase recruitment and enrollment.</b>	To boost capacity, Paul Quinn built a solid foundation with Minerva University, using its platform so that faculty could easily navigate. It further developed relationships with the Student Resource Center and Guild Education to recruit adult students outside of Texas.	Which partners offer viable opportunities and supports to build a pipeline of students? What financial model is appropriate for maintaining the partnerships, based on what students must pay and what will keep the institution viable?
<b>4</b> <b>Maintain student-centered academic and social supports.</b>	Paul Quinn administrators and faculty emphasized the need to be “intrusive” to connect with students regularly to ensure they have the resources to succeed academically within a digital learning environment.	Are your staff and faculty committed to supporting students regularly? What systems that hinder student success can be transformed? How can you build capacity to be student-centered?

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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