



Digital Literacy in Higher Education: **Now More than Ever**

Best practices for enhancing digital literacy to increase student engagement and improve career prospects in an unprecedented time.

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Higher education is in a period of unprecedented disruption.

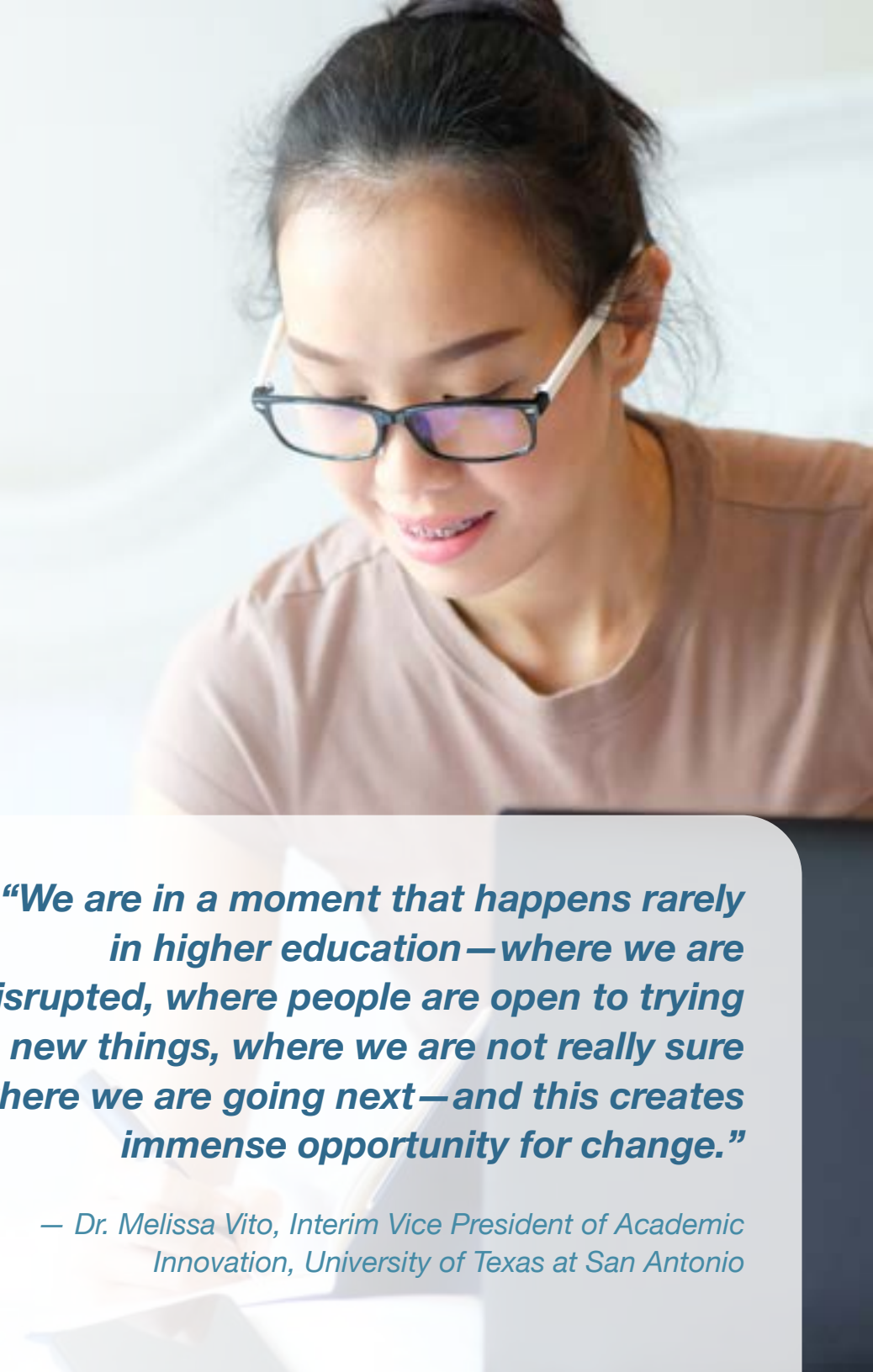
One of the only certainties? Digital literacy has never been more essential.

The debate over the importance of teaching digital literacy in higher education has been going on for years, but as of summer 2020, the debate is over. COVID-19 has changed everything.

After the outbreak shuttered college and university campuses in the spring, schools began trying to chart a difficult course into an uncertain future. Some schools are conducting all instruction in the 2020–2021 school year online. Some are proceeding with distance learning for at least the first term. And others have students on campus for a hybrid of online and in-person, socially distanced learning.

However individual schools decide to move forward, the pandemic has shown that teaching digital literacy has never been more critical for higher education. Why?

The first reason is that, as online learning becomes an integral part of the new normal, colleges and universities need to find more effective ways to engage students across distances to ensure that they achieve the same educational outcomes they did with in-person learning. The second reason is that the economic fallout of the pandemic means today's students will need to learn new skills to better distinguish themselves in a job market that offers fewer opportunities.



“We are in a moment that happens rarely in higher education—where we are disrupted, where people are open to trying new things, where we are not really sure where we are going next—and this creates immense opportunity for change.”

— Dr. Melissa Vito, Interim Vice President of Academic Innovation, University of Texas at San Antonio

The background of the slide is an abstract watercolor-style illustration in various shades of blue. It features soft, blended colors and some darker, more defined shapes that suggest a hand holding a pen, with ink-like splatters and strokes. The overall effect is artistic and modern.

Colleges and universities have put digital transformation on the fast track.

By fully committing to digital literacy, they can address the key challenges of this unprecedented time.

From the moment colleges and universities sent students home in spring 2020, faculty and students had to make a quick pivot to teaching and learning with digital tools. Lecture halls, classrooms, and labs were replaced by video conferencing apps like Zoom and Skype, learning management systems like Canvas and Blackboard, and online learning communities like Skillshare and Coursera.

However, digital literacy goes far beyond knowing how to use those utilitarian types of tools. Digital literacy is the power to use digital tools to solve problems, produce innovative projects, enhance communication, and prepare for the challenges of an increasingly digital world. ([Read the Educause brief.](#)) Digitally literate students can use digital creation tools like image and video editors, web and mobile design apps, and character animators to become persuasive communicators. They can take what they learn in their courses and create narratives and visualizations that demonstrate their knowledge and deepen their understanding.

By committing to developing their students' digital literacy, schools can address two of their most immediate challenges: decreasing student engagement due to distance learning, and a decreasing number of post-college job opportunities.

Driving engagement by integrating digital literacy

Whether in traditional classroom settings or virtual environments, colleges and universities work hard to engage students in their learning. However, distance learning has a number of drawbacks that can diminish student engagement:

- The lack of in-person interaction with professors and classmates can be isolating, and it can make collaboration less spontaneous and learning more difficult.
- It's harder for professors to give immediate feedback and engage in real-time dialogue with students.
- Internet connectivity issues can crop up, interrupting and delaying learning.
- Students can struggle to feel motivated as they passively watch livestreamed lectures and click through presentation decks day after day.
- Not all students have access to the fundamental technologies they need to fully participate in distance learning: reliable Wi-Fi, adequate computers or tablets, and relevant software applications.

Given these issues, a significant number of students are taking a gap year or a leave of absence during the 2020–2021 school year to avoid online learning altogether.

81%

In the sudden, forced shift to remote learning, 81% of university presidents said their biggest concern is keeping students engaged.

Inside Higher Ed, March 2020

33%

Around 1/3 of high school seniors will cancel, wait, or defer college decisions if classes go completely online in the fall.

Carnegie-Dartlett Study May 2020

By incorporating digital literacy into the curricula across disciplines, schools have the power to make distance learning more active, engaging, and meaningful.

As digital natives, Gen Z students are already adept at creating digital media, whether they're making memes for Twitter, enhancing photos for Instagram, or creating videos for TikTok. So when faculty ask students to use digital content-creation tools like Adobe Creative Cloud as part of their distance learning curriculum, students tend to embrace the chance to build on their digital skills and show off their learning in creative, expressive ways.

In a September 2020 Adobe survey,

98% of college admissions decision makers

said creative skills and soft skills were very or somewhat important to student success.

[The Deciding Factor: The Case for a More Holistic Measure of Student Success](#)

“We immediately saw the excitement across campus when we provided access to Adobe Creative Cloud. Students quickly embraced it and started experimenting with all sorts of new ideas.”

*Cory Stokes, Digital Learning Officer
University of Utah
[Read the story.](#)*

“By introducing [Creative Cloud] tools to them, not only do I get to empower them to tell their own stories, it’s actually made their research and their writing more meaningful to them. They research better and they write better, because they now have this purpose.”

*Dr. Eddie Webb, Director, New Media Lab
Mesa Community College*

With Creative Cloud, professors can assign digital projects across all types of courses and subjects. Students can create video essays for literature courses, podcasts for sociology courses, digital magazines for political science courses, interactive lab reports for science classes, animations to explain concepts for math classes, and so much more.

Here are a few examples of real-world creative projects that have enhanced learning and driven student engagement:



“How a Firework Works”
by Valentina Arismendi
University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill



“The Pink Tax”
created by students
Winston-Salem State
University



“Digital MD”
by Vincent Fu
University of Colorado School
of Medicine



Digital literacy can improve student engagement even beyond academics.

Students who know how to use creative digital tools can communicate, inform, and persuade more effectively. Those skills give them opportunities to get involved in causes they care about, make meaningful contributions, generate creative solutions, and accelerate their personal growth.

In just one example, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student Valentina Arismendi went from learning to create a digital portfolio in her first-year writing class to being awarded the university's Burch Fellowship when she created digital content capturing the stories of [Venezuelan immigrants](#) living in Los Angeles. See how she did it.



Improving career prospects with digital literacy

The pandemic has plunged the global economy into recession, and there's a lot of uncertainty about when it will end. With 10.2% unemployment in the US as of July 2020, today's college graduates will find themselves competing with more experienced workers for fewer job opportunities.

Even when the economy recovers, these students' careers and livelihoods may not. The Strada Education Network recently reported that college graduates who are underemployed in their first job are likely to still be underemployed up to 10 years later.

“The first job out of college is a high-stakes decision with major long-term implications, particularly for women,” says Michelle Weise, PhD, chief innovation officer for Strada Institute for the Future of Work and senior vice president of workforce strategies for Strada Education Network. According to Weiss, this finding highlights “just how important it is to position graduates well in that first job, so they can make a successful transition to the world of work.” ([Read the article.](#))

Research has found that US college students who graduated during a recession earned

10% less the first year after they completed their studies

than would otherwise be expected, and the negative effects lasted over the next seven years.

[\(Read more.\)](#)



Once again, digital literacy can be a key part of the solution. [Bloom's Digital Taxonomy](#) states that the act of creating requires a higher order of thinking than activities like remembering, understanding, and applying. When students create digital media like images, infographics, and videos for their college classes, they gain a deeper understanding of the content and retain it longer. They think more critically, develop better solutions to problems, and communicate in more innovative ways.

Students with digital skills and the soft skills that come with them—including creativity, creative problem solving, critical thinking, and collaboration—are in a better position to land good first jobs when they get out of college.

“By strategically investing in the technology tools that promote digital literacy, institutions can significantly increase development of the evolving soft skills students need to be competitive in the job market,” says Melissa Vito, interim vice president of academic innovation at the University of Texas at San Antonio. ([Read the article.](#))

“Digital literacy is the currency of employment today. There are a lot of things you can do in college to give you a good foundation, but solid digital skills and being confident in a digital world are what will help students get their first job out of college.”

*Cory Stokes, Digital Learning Officer
University of Utah*

[Read the story.](#)

“Auburn was the first SEC school to become an Adobe Creative Campus, which was a big deal for us. Digital literacy gives our students an important advantage as they prepare to enter the workforce.”

*Chelsy Hooper, Instructional Technology Specialist
Auburn University*

[Read the story.](#)

“As the first HBCU to become an Adobe Creative Campus, we’re giving students tools they may not have access to—closing the digital gap and making them more competitive as they enter the workforce.”

Wanda White, Director of the Center for Innovative and Transformative Instruction (CITI)

Winston-Salem State University
[Read the story.](#)

Along with developing the soft skills that hiring managers value, digitally literate students can demonstrate an ability to quickly adapt to changing technologies and learn to use them creatively and independently. Regardless of career or industry, every graduate needs to be willing and able to learn and make the most of new digital tools:

- Scientists, engineers, and data analysts need to communicate complex information in visually compelling ways.
- Entrepreneurs need to be able to pivot their businesses to align with new trends in digital transformation.
- Journalists, authors, and educators need the skills to publish content online in a variety of formats.

Also important for employers is the fact that, in the process of developing digital literacy, students learn digital citizenship—the responsible and appropriate use of technology in digital spaces. Digital citizenship is considered so critical that it’s mandated in many global educational standards. For example, the ISTE Student Standards and AACU value rubrics require students to be knowledgeable about copyright law, online ethics, privacy, and security.

Finally, digitally literate students have another advantage when applying for jobs. They can share digital portfolios of professional-quality work to demonstrate their skills, show off their personal brands, and express their unique viewpoints.

“Adobe Creative Cloud tools encourage students to tell their stories, share entrepreneurial ideas, find investors and supporters, and sharpen their ideas. ... We spend a lot of time talking with businesspeople in Utah, and ... they want people in a wide range of fields. Graduates who are digitally literate. Who can use creative tools. Who can communicate effectively with others.”

*Ruth Watkins, President
University of Utah
[Read the story.](#)*

“Digital literacy education helps students develop not just their personal voice but also their professional voice, and this demonstrates to them and to their potential employers that their ideas are worth sharing.”

*Todd Taylor
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Professor
and Adobe Pedagogical Evangelist*

Explore best practices for enhancing distance learning with digital literacy.

Help improve student engagement and career prospects by following these guidelines.

Digital literacy is most impactful when it's integrated across the curriculum—in every subject, discipline, and department—for every student at every level of education. In addition to improving student engagement and career prospects, digital literacy can drive better learning outcomes, improve retention, and raise the graduation rate.

Put creative tools in the hands of your students—wherever they are.

With remote learning, students can't access creative software in computer labs or via classroom workstations, so they need access on their personal computers and mobile devices. Adobe offers [affordable licensing options](#) including student packs and institution-wide options that put Creative Cloud tools at students' fingertips even when they're doing their work from home.

Integrate digital literacy across all disciplines.

Adobe makes it easy for faculty to incorporate digital assignments into their curricula with Creative Cloud. Faculty can find cross-discipline distance-learning use cases, lesson plans, rubrics, and examples of student work as well as professional development workshops on the [Adobe Education Exchange](#), which now features [resources designed for distance learning](#).

Let your students take the lead.

Educators can be digital media novices and still assign digital projects. As [Dr. Eddie Webb of Mesa Community College says](#), “Your students know how to use these tools, so you can feel comfortable not being the ‘sage on the stage’ in this one area and letting your students reap the educational benefits of being able to teach and lead.”

Push your students to create digital work that's meant to be shared.

Plan for all student work to be shared in video conferencing sessions or posted to a central hub for everyone in class—or your whole department or school—to experience. This will encourage students to really consider the needs of their audiences as they're creating and make their best effort to communicate in visually compelling and interactive ways.

Make it easy for faculty and students to pick up new techniques.

Adobe offers hundreds of [tutorials](#) for everyone at every experience level, right inside Creative Cloud apps. And students can find inspiration and tutorials designed just for them in the [Make It Center](#) and on [YouTube](#). They can create [Zoom backgrounds](#) with Adobe Photoshop, [class presentations](#) and [virtual resumes](#) with Adobe Spark, and [marketing portfolios](#) with Adobe Portfolio.

Consider becoming an Adobe Creative Campus.

If your institution is committed to transforming teaching and learning with digital literacy, you may have the opportunity to become an [Adobe Creative Campus](#). You'll join other innovative schools that offer Creative Cloud to their broad student body through enterprise license agreements. You'll also have the opportunity to collaborate on digital literacy initiatives, hear from industry thought leaders, share resources and learnings with each other, accelerate digital literacy initiatives school-wide, and participate in week-long faculty development workshops.

Learn more about how Adobe can help your institution improve student engagement and career prospects during challenging times with digital literacy education.

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