Faculty Guide: Implementing the Digital Master Plan for Student Success

Prologue

In 2019, FHSU renewed its contract with Blackboard after careful consideration of alternative learning management systems. The recommendation, by a 24-member LMS Committee that included faculty, students, and staff, acknowledged our unique needs and recognized the challenges of system-wide changes during a period of significant institutional transformation. Part of that decision was to transition from Blackboard's original Learn platform to Learn Ultra, which Blackboard introduced in 2015.

By introducing the Ultra Experience, Blackboard was responding to market conditions, including increased competition from Canvas, Moodle, and Brightspace, the rise of smartphones and the need for a mobile-friendly interface, the demand for a more intuitive user experience, and a focus on accessibility and inclusivity.

The transition to Blackboard Ultra represents an important strategic shift in how we deliver online education at FHSU. While Blackboard initially positioned Ultra as a straightforward platform upgrade, we've come to recognize it as an opportunity to fundamentally enhance course design and student engagement.

The 2021 merger between Blackboard and Anthology has accelerated Ultra's development, with triple the development resources now dedicated to the platform. This has resulted in faster innovation cycles and regular feature releases that expand Ultra's capabilities for supporting student success.

Rather than viewing Ultra as simply a new version of our existing LMS, we're approaching it as a catalyst for course redesign that aligns with [FHSU's strategic goals](). Ultra's mobile-first architecture and streamlined interface enable new approaches to:

- Student engagement through intuitive navigation and collaboration tools
- Assessment and feedback through integrated rubrics and multimedia options
- Content organization that supports clear learning pathways
- Analytics that provide actionable insights into student progress

Introduction

The [FHSU Digital Master Plan]() originated from the realization during the pandemic that there was a quality gap between on-campus and online learning experiences. While the complete plan provides a comprehensive framework for improving online education at FHSU, this faculty guide focuses specifically on how you can leverage the plan's recommendations to enhance student success in your courses.

This guide is not a summary or defense of the Digital Master Plan. Rather, it is a practical resource to help you implement evidence-based practices that improve student outcomes. As we transition to Blackboard Ultra and enhance our digital teaching capabilities, this guide connects you with specific tools, strategies, and support systems aligned with the plan's student success initiatives.

While Blackboard Ultra provides the necessary structure and functionality for effective online course delivery, it is important to emphasize that technology alone cannot create meaningful learning experiences. The heart of every successful course lies in the unique expertise, creativity, and disciplinary knowledge that FHSU faculty bring to their teaching. Ultra simply provides the framework through which you can share your expertise and engage students in ways that weren't previously possible. Your experience in guiding student learning, fostering critical thinking, and inspiring intellectual curiosity remains the foundation of educational excellence at FHSU.

This guide demonstrates how Ultra's integrated platform supports key recommendations that impact teaching and learning:

1. Using actionable data through native analytics
2. Creating course design consistency via intuitive templates
3. Building student connections through structured engagement opportunities
4. Developing digital teaching competence with comprehensive, targeted support and resources
5. Establishing clear communication through unified channels

By approaching the Digital Master Plan through Ultra's capabilities, we create an environment where innovation in digital teaching directly contributes to student success. The DigCompEdu framework provides structure for developing the competencies needed to fully leverage these capabilities.

Guide Organization

The guide presents the Digital Master Plan recommendations as follows:

1. Communication foundations
2. Digital competency development
3. Course design implementation
4. Learning community building
5. Data-informed teaching

This sequence creates a clear pathway from developing digital teaching skills to implementing them effectively through Ultra's integrated platform.

Ways in Which Faculty Can Engage with the Digital Master Plan

1. **Building Success Through Clear Communication**

Faculty expertise in guiding student learning is essential for effective communication in digital environments. Your experience in clarifying complex concepts, engaging students in discourse, and fostering critical thinking provides the foundation for successful online communication strategies.

While the Digital Master Plan emphasizes comprehensive communication planning, your role is to adapt these principles to support student learning in your discipline. This guide helps you leverage communication tools and strategies that align with your teaching goals and disciplinary needs. Success depends not on mastering every communication channel, but on selecting and using tools that enhance your ability to guide student learning effectively.

2. Developing Digital Teaching Excellence

Your teaching expertise and disciplinary knowledge are the foundation of student success, whether in physical or digital classrooms. Digital tools simply provide new ways to share your expertise and engage students in learning.

When faculty share stories about successful classroom activities - a dynamic discussion, an enlightening demonstration, or a powerful collaborative project - they often conclude these can't be replicated online. However, your teaching creativity combined with Ultra's capabilities can create equally engaging digital experiences. The [DigCompEdu framework](#) helps translate your teaching expertise into effective online strategies by:

- Building on your existing pedagogical strengths
- Suggesting digital approaches that align with your teaching style
- Providing structure for expanding your digital teaching repertoire
- Supporting continuous improvement in ways that respect your expertise

Faculty can begin their development journey by completing the [DigCompEdu Check-In self-assessment tool](#), which helps identify current competency levels and areas for growth. TILT supports this development through targeted workshops, microlessons, and individual consultations aligned with specific competency areas.

3. **Understanding Consistency in Course Design-** Aligned with Strategic Plan Student Success Goal 2.3

Blackboard Ultra provides a framework that supports your teaching goals while reducing technical barriers for students. Rather than imposing rigid standardization, Ultra offers flexible tools that let you:

- Organize content in ways that reflect your teaching approach
- Create clear learning pathways that guide students through complex material
- Design assessments that maintain academic rigor
- Foster meaningful engagement that builds on your expertise

For Students:

- Consistent navigation lets them focus on your content
- Clear organization supports deeper engagement with course material
- Predictable patterns for accessing materials and submitting work

- Mobile-friendly access to your expertise anytime, anywhere

The new AI Design Assistant in Ultra exemplifies how technology can enhance rather than replace faculty expertise. This tool serves as a collaborative partner in course design, helping you:

- Transform your teaching ideas into effective online learning experiences
- Generate starter content that you can customize to your needs
- Create varied learning activities that align with your objectives
- Develop rubrics that reflect your assessment priorities

The AI assistant respects your academic judgment while reducing the technical burden of course creation. You maintain complete control over course content and design decisions, using the assistant's suggestions as a starting point for applying your expertise.

This recommendation focuses on creating predictable frameworks that allow students to focus their energy on learning content rather than repeatedly figuring out how to navigate different course structures. The goal isn't standardization - it's optimization of the learning experience.

Streamlining Our Teaching and Learning Ecosystem: A Pedagogy-First Approach

Faculty have consistently expressed that managing multiple technology tools takes time away from what matters most - teaching and supporting student learning. Ultra addresses this concern by integrating essential teaching functions into a single, intuitive interface that supports rather than complicates your teaching practice.

Instead of requiring you to master multiple platforms, Ultra provides integrated tools for:

- Sharing your expertise through varied content formats
- Engaging students in meaningful discussion
- Providing substantive feedback on student work
- Creating collaborative learning opportunities
- Organizing course materials effectively

This streamlined approach maintains your pedagogical flexibility while reducing technical overhead. You can focus on sharing your disciplinary knowledge and guiding student learning rather than managing multiple systems.

We will preserve specialized tools that you have come to rely on and that serve unique instructional needs in your discipline. However, by leveraging Ultra's expanding capabilities, we can significantly simplify our overall technology ecosystem. This allows you to focus on what you do best - teaching students and sharing your expertise.

4. Building Connected Learning Communities - Aligned with Strategic Plan Student Success Goal 2.2

Your expertise in fostering intellectual discourse and guiding student development is crucial for creating effective online learning communities.

Faculty play essential roles in:

- Designing meaningful interactions that deepen learning
- Creating collaborative opportunities that build professional skills
- Developing effective online mentoring approaches
- Using proactive strategies to support student engagement

Program-based communities extend your influence beyond individual courses, creating professional networks that enhance student persistence and development.

5. Leveraging Data for Student Success - Aligned with Strategic Plan Student Success Goal 2.1

Ultra's analytics support your teaching expertise by providing insights that inform your decisions about student support. Rather than replacing faculty judgment, these tools enhance your ability to:

- Identify students who may need additional guidance
- Recognize patterns in student engagement
- Assess the effectiveness of learning activities
- Make data-informed adjustments to teaching strategies

The platform's grade center analytics help ensure assessment practices align with your learning objectives while maintaining academic standards.

Call for Faculty Champions

The success of our Blackboard Ultra transition and broader student success initiatives depends on faculty leadership that bridges disciplinary expertise with digital innovation. Champions will guide implementation across five key areas that directly impact student learning: Strategic Communications, Digital Teaching Excellence, Course Design Implementation, Learning Community Development, and Data Informed Teaching Strategies.

For complete details about each champion role, including specific responsibilities and the full application process, please refer to the Call for Digital Teaching Champions document available on the TILT TigerLearn Blog. Join us in ensuring every FHSU student benefits from the powerful combination of faculty expertise and effective digital teaching practices.