



Building and Leading Fully Online Campuses: Strategy and Data in Practice

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Abstract

Many institutions have expanded online course offerings, yet far fewer have built fully functioning online campuses with clear governance, consistent quality, and measurable outcomes. This paper presents a practitioner framework grounded in the author's experience establishing online operations across four institutional contexts: Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, Ana G. Méndez Virtual Campus, TCC Connect Campus, and Lone Star College–Online. The framework centers on three areas of focus—governance and operating model, scalable stakeholder engagement, and data-informed strategy—and is enabled by a continuous improvement cadence that translates metrics into decisions and accountability.

Keywords

Leadership, strategic planning, online campus, practitioner framework, continuous improvement

Introduction

Across U.S. higher education, the development of fully functioning online campuses—units with their own governance authority, operational infrastructure, and sustained accountability for student outcomes—remains uncommon. Successive CHLOE reports document that while online enrollments have grown substantially, operational maturity remains unevenly distributed across the sector (Garrett et al., 2022; Garrett et al., 2023). Research on time-to-degree completion reinforces the urgency: Complete College America (2011) demonstrated that time itself is a central barrier to degree completion, and Witteveen and Attewell (2021) found that delayed time-to-degree significantly reduces post-college earnings. Fully online campuses, when designed with intentional scheduling and accelerated pathways, represent a promising structural response to these barriers. This paper addresses that gap from a practitioner-scholarship standpoint, distinguishing planned, purpose-built online campuses from the emergency remote teaching that characterized many institutions' pandemic response (Hodges et al., 2020).

The methodological tradition informing this work is Boyer's (1990) scholarship of application. The claims advanced here are derived from structured reflection on institutional evidence—enrollment data, success metrics, and operational outcomes—collected across four campus-building experiences spanning fifteen years. The author occupied a leadership role in each institution, which provides depth but also limits perspective to that of the decision-maker. The framework is offered as a transferable model subject to further empirical examination.

Area of Focus One: Governance and Operating Model

The most consequential decision in building an online campus is structural: Will it operate as a centralized entity with its own governance authority, or as a distributed coordination through existing departments? This choice shapes every downstream decision about staffing, curriculum, advising, and budget.

At Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, the author merged the university's eCampus and Academic Technology operations into a single Office of Academic Technology—a newly created unit reporting to the Provost. This consolidation required building a departmental structure, budget framework, and governance infrastructure from the ground up. The Academic Technology Advisory Committee became the vehicle for cross-functional alignment. Between Spring 2008 and Spring 2011, online enrollment grew by 57%, faculty participation increased by 42%, and course offerings grew by 37%. A full LMS migration completed in six months—transferring 2,200 students without service interruption—validated the consolidated model's operational capacity (Morales, 2020).

At Ana G. Méndez Virtual Campus in Puerto Rico—established in 2009 as the institution's first fully virtual university focused on graduate degrees—the author built a fully online operation from the ground up within a private, MSCHE-accredited system, offering competency-based graduate programs through a dual-language instructional model. The governance lessons from Lock Haven proved directly transferable, even as the regulatory, cultural, and linguistic context demanded substantial adaptation.

At TCC Connect Campus, established in 2014 as the first fully online campus in Texas, the centralized model created a standalone entity with distinct accountability structures (Morales, 2023; 2024). At LSC-Online, launched in 2022 within the Lone Star College System, the campus operates within a multi-campus system requiring continuous alignment with system-level policies while preserving operational coherence.

Area of Focus Two: Scalable Stakeholder Engagement

Building a high-performing online campus requires sustained engagement with faculty governance bodies, academic departments, student services, and workforce partners. Faculty engagement is both the highest-leverage and most frequently underinvested dimension: online instructors report lower institutional affiliation and less access to professional development than ground-based counterparts (Baran & Correia, 2014; Richardson et al., 2016).

At Ana G. Méndez, the author introduced a faculty coaching initiative as a deliberate strategy to improve assessment, retention, and faculty performance (Morales, 2019). This model—which operationalized the Community of Inquiry framework's teaching presence (Garrison et al.,

1999)—proved sufficiently effective to become a core component at TCC Connect, where it was integrated into a structured ten-step quality assurance process (Kirkpatrick & Morales, 2024). Research confirms that structured interventions that increase instructor presence significantly improve student retention (Rosser-Majors et al., 2022). Online enrollment at the Virtual Campus grew 75% in AY 2011–2012, validating the institutional capacity built to serve it. Stakeholder engagement must also be designed to scale; frameworks such as Quality Matters provide structured standards that maintain rigor as enrollment grows (Quality Matters, 2022).

Area of Focus Three: Data-Informed Strategy

The distinction between a data-rich institution and a data-informed one is not semantic. A data-informed online campus is one where outcome gaps are identified at the course level within a semester, and every intervention is traceable to a data signal that triggered it. The minimum viable KPIs include course success rates, term-to-term retention, and early-course momentum indicators—each owned by a designated decision-maker with authority to act.

At TCC Connect, eLearning enrollments grew 37% from Fall 2021 to Fall 2024 while success rates followed a dip-and-recovery trajectory: from 71.7% in Fall 2020 to 77.9% in Fall 2021 and Fall 2022 as enrollment surged, then recovering to 78.2% by Fall 2024—with retention steady at 89–90% throughout (Table 1) (TCCD, 2026). Quality was temporarily stressed by growth, and the continuous improvement cadence provided the mechanism for recovery. Wintermester sections consistently achieved 86.6–88.9% success rates, and monthly-start courses improved from 77.0% to 83.1%—scheduling formats that directly address the time-to-degree barriers documented by Complete College America (2011) and Witteveen and Attewell (2021). Non-punitive data use is essential: when data is positioned as a shared diagnostic rather than an evaluative instrument, faculty participation in quality improvement increases.

Table 1. TCC Connect Campus eLearning Enrollment, Success Rates, and Retention (Fall Terms)

Semester	Enrollments	Success Rate	Retention Rate
Fall 2021	24,430	77.9%	90%
Fall 2022	27,483	77.9%	89%
Fall 2023	29,059	78.1%	90%
Fall 2024	33,518	78.2%	90%

A Continuous Improvement Cadence

The three areas of focus require a continuous improvement cadence—a structured cycle in which governance decisions are revisited, stakeholder relationships are strengthened, and data findings are converted into interventions on a predictable schedule. Kotter’s (2007) emphasis on building short-term wins into organizational change is especially applicable: online campus leaders who establish measurable improvement milestones in the first year create the momentum necessary for longer-term transformation.

An Emerging Dimension: Artificial Intelligence Across the Three Areas of Focus

Generative AI has introduced a dimension to online campus leadership that spans all three areas of focus. Alier et al. (2024) characterize this trajectory as a shift from deceptive to disruptive—

AI capabilities have reached a threshold that challenges assumptions about instruction, assessment, and academic integrity. Regarding governance, AI requires new policies on acceptable use, tool evaluation protocols, and clear decision authority. Regarding stakeholder engagement, the author's experience suggests a framework organized around four faculty roles: AI as an instructional tool, a thought partner, a designer, and a consultant. Regarding data strategy, AI introduces new analytical capabilities alongside risks—such as algorithmic bias, opacity, and the temptation to automate decisions that require human judgment (Alblooshi, S. (2026). For online campuses, where the student experience is entirely technology-mediated, a proactive and transparent approach to AI integration is essential (Morales, 2025). A 2021 survey of 600 faculty and 800 students at U.S. colleges found a 19 percent increase in learning technology adoption since the pandemic, with institutions that aligned governance structures and measured outcomes systematically achieving stronger returns on technology investment (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

What Transfers and What Does Not

The three areas of focus are logically transferable: governance creates authority, stakeholder engagement creates ownership, and data-informed strategy creates accountability. What does not transfer is the specific form each takes. Two community colleges in Texas, a private graduate university in Puerto Rico, and a public university in Pennsylvania require governance structures, faculty engagement models, and data systems reflecting their distinct accreditation environments, labor contexts, and student populations. Online campuses fail not for lack of technology but for lack of intentional leadership design.

Across all four campus-building contexts, a consistent finding is that student persistence—not just initial enrollment—is the metric most sensitive to governance and support infrastructure. Online students who experience coherent advising pathways, consistent faculty presence, and timely intervention are significantly more likely to complete than those in loosely coordinated models (Rosser-Majors et al., 2022). This finding underscores that governance structure is not merely an administrative concern: the choice between centralized and distributed models directly determines whether students encounter a coherent support ecosystem or a fragmented one. Institutions that replicate course offerings without replicating the surrounding support infrastructure consistently underperform on retention. The transferable lesson is not the specific organizational chart but the principle that accountability for student outcomes must be structurally located somewhere—and made visible through data.

Conclusions

This paper presents a practitioner-grounded framework for building and leading fully online campuses, organized around governance, stakeholder engagement, and data-informed strategy, supported by a continuous improvement cadence. The framework is grounded in fifteen years of institutional evidence across four online campus operations. The field needs frameworks that bridge scholarly literature with the operational realities of leading online campuses at scale. Future work should examine how this framework applies in international contexts, particularly as institutions across Europe, Latin America, and Asia develop online campus infrastructure consistent with regional digital education goals.

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