

CASE STUDY

American University Selects Higher Digital to Stay Competitive in Rapidly Evolving World of Higher Ed

University Makes a (SEA)Change to Improve Online Giving and Education



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

The success story:

An Agile Approach to Digital Transformation

AU is a private university situated in the heart of Washington D.C., with over 14,000 students enrolled in more than 170 programs, and with thousands of new students onboarded each year. It also has over 128,000 alumni all over the world.

According to CIO David Swartz, the university needs to be at the leading edge of technology to stay competitive. “We are already seeing that with higher education, there will be winners and losers,” he said.

You can’t transform a sweeping, sprawling institution like a university in one fell swoop, though. To achieve its digital transformation objectives, AU decided to start with one particular area—in this case, growing its endowment—before spreading its efforts to other parts of the university. And it decided to do so in an agile manner, as opposed to a traditional waterfall approach.

“Higher Digital brought us up to speed at the university with how to do agile, which is a different approach to doing very significant projects on a rapid development cycle,” Swartz said. “We’re rolling out this capability virtually every month.”

AU adopted Higher Digital’s Simplified Enterprise Agile™ framework, also known as (SEA)Change. With (SEA)Change, Higher Digital provides organizations with the training, coaching, and team optimization necessary to implement a true and effective digital transformation program.

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Customer

American University (AU)

Challenges

AU needed the ability to rapidly deploy its digital transformation initiatives in order to meet the ambitious goals outlined in a new strategic plan.

Results

- ✓ Higher Digital instituted a new agile process that let AU roll out new projects on a continuous basis, while keeping users—from faculty to students to donors—at the center of everything.
- ✓ Higher Digital helped transform the people and processes behind these new technologies as well, increasing buy-in from key stakeholders, leadership and functional business units and ensures that development is in line with the university’s top priorities.

“Higher Digital is thoughtful about what it takes to be successful. It’s not just technology. You need to consider all of the other elements of the organization and get their buy-in to change. Higher Digital helped us accomplish that objective.”

David Swartz
Chief Information Officer
American University

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Higher Digital leverages existing processes and administrative tools to make the transformation as efficient as possible, and tailors its approach to resonate with even the most skeptical members of a leadership team. Their focus is on delivering measurable results that drive progress and help organizations achieve their KPIs.

With (SEA)Change, Higher Digital helped AU create, implement, and train a new product management organization comprised of eight full-time staff. Their responsibility is to work with business stakeholders to better understand digital challenges and own and manage the product roadmap for different divisions within the university.

AU was also an early adopter of (SEA)Results®, Higher Digital's easy-to-use software-as-a-service platform that helps organizations achieve true digital transformation. (SEA)Results leads higher education institutions through a step-by-step process that includes a digital transformation assessment, planning and prioritization, and ongoing measurement.

"There's a lot of different things that Higher Digital is helping us on, all under the overarching goal of what we would call 'digital transformation,'" Swartz said. "Digital transformation is not a simple process but includes many dimensions. It's about the ability to use technology, but also to recognize that people and processes play an important role in further advancing our strategic goals and objectives."



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Making education as smooth as online shopping

A true digital transformation is about both the backend, like relationship management databases, and the front end, like user experience. Increasingly, students and faculty alike expect their university experience to be as simple as shopping on Amazon—click and go.

"Universities have to modernize the way that we interface with our customers—the students," Swartz said.

Kamalika Sandell, AU's Associate CIO of Enterprise Systems, agreed. She pointed to online giving as a prime example.

"If you want to give online, it's a complicated eight-step process. It's not simple. And while we're not expecting a \$10 million gift online, smaller donations ranging from \$10 to \$1,000 should definitely be coming through. So why can't we allow these gifts to be completed in a simplified one step process?" she said.

Higher Digital has helped AU start thinking in a way that bakes user experience right into all designs. Higher Digital is also helping AU with benchmarking: comparing itself to market leaders to understand how its transformation stacks up—particularly with regard to online learning.

Gaining momentum within the institution

Sometimes, convincing people who work at a university to undergo a digital transformation can be the biggest challenge. "Universities have built themselves up over the last 100 years. And many of the processes, structures, organizations, and functions remain the same," Swartz said.

But the success experienced by the endowment team has received the attention of other divisions within the university. "Our endowment project was very substantial in scope. The success of that program has led us to extend our transformation efforts to other divisions, including HR, which has seen significant results in only a few short months," Swartz said. "Our next capital campaign will include databases for relationship management, a mobile platform, reporting prospect management—a whole number of different areas."

Added Swartz: "We believe that future higher education, particularly life-long learning, is all going to be in the online space. While we've been in that space for seven years, there's a lot that we need to do if we're going to really become a market leader. Higher Digital is helping us to understand where we are and what we need to work on in this new and emerging area."

