

# Introduction:

## Advancing Digital Equity Through Transformative Teaching and Learning

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In the introductory chapter for this volume of cases in digital transformation, author Rebecca Blankenship considers the emerging role of institutions of higher education in providing innovative environments for teaching and learning. She provides a practical foundation for the emergent and evolving need among colleges and universities to embrace digital equity through progressive initiatives that provide diverse and modern learning environments reflective of the needs and expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century students they serve. The author frames her discussion within the contexts of increasing digital literacy among faculty, instituting a culture of innovation and change, as well as considering how initiatives such as the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University's Digital Learning Initiative (DLI) provide realistic solutions for the technology gap between the traditional brick-and-mortar university and the evolving needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students and expectations of the increasingly connected and competitive global workforce.*

## **THE CHALLENGES FACING FACULTY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Higher education faculty face an ongoing challenge in terms of teaching current and future generations of students as the teaching and learning landscape continues to undergo significant changes in what it means to receive an education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There exists a long-standing argument that an underlying reason for this challenge is the ongoing disconnect between P-12 schools and colleges and universities that will eventually serve them as well. Specifically, the disconnect manifests in the frustration among students that faculty are disengaged from the latest trends in terms of personalized learning and current technologies such as apps, smartphones, social media, and the like. Conversely, faculty express equal frustration as entering students come with skill sets too discrete to facilitate progressive academic success at the college and university level. Most notably, faculty cite students' inability to use critical thinking skills to make deeper connections between content and content-based solutions. These disconnects manifest in terms of increases among freshmen failing the first year to students unable to complete their degrees in the typical four-year time frame. There is also apathy on the part of faculty who feel pedagogically restrained as they often deem it necessary to dedicate instructional time to teaching basic technology use (i.e. creating documents, formatting, Internet-searches, presentations, spreadsheets, and the like), problem solving, and critical thinking skills.

These challenges and gaps manifest themselves in three particular areas: 1. A gap in access; 2. A gap in usage; and 3. A gap in digital literacy (Holland, 2019). A significant disparity exists among households in terms of Internet access. This is particularly the case in geographic terms with rural households reporting the least access and usage of the Internet. According to statistics as reported by the Pew Research Center, only 78% of rural residents use the Internet as compared to over 90% usage in suburban and urban areas (Anderson, 2018). Further, via Executive Summary, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) reports that while 81% of P-12 students report needing access to the Internet for their schoolwork, only 61% have access in their home. It can be inferred, then, that lack of access results in a gap in usage compartmentalized again according to geographic location and socioeconomic status (SES). The usage gap presents in terms of students

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