A high-angle, top-down photograph of a woman with long braids, wearing a patterned dress, sitting at a white desk. She is looking down at a notebook and writing with a pen. On the desk, there is an open textbook, a laptop, a smartphone, and a colorful pencil case. The desk is set against a green wall with a white horizontal stripe. The floor is a light green color.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM EVALUATION

The Higher Education LMS Evaluation Guide

A practical framework for choosing a learning platform that faculty adopt, students trust, and your institution can scale.

Built for higher education leaders, IT, instructional designers, and faculty committees running a platform evaluation.

What is inside this guide

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What it covers

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Laying the groundwork

Choosing a learning management system is one of the most consequential technology decisions a higher education institution makes. The platform you select shapes how faculty teach, how students learn, and how your institution measures success for years after the contract is signed.

An LMS does more than hold syllabi and collect assignments. It links your student information system, identity provider, library systems, accessibility tools, and analytics into one environment that thousands of people depend on every day. When it runs well, faculty and students barely think about it. When it does not, the friction shows up in every course.

Artificial intelligence has changed what institutions need from that environment. AI now shapes how students' study, how faculty design assessments, and how administrators plan. In the 2026 Time for Class study, administrators became the most active daily AI users for the first time, ahead of students. For an evaluation committee,

the question is no longer whether a platform supports AI. It is whether AI is designed into the teaching and learning experience or bolted on after the fact. A platform where AI is part of the core workflow behaves differently from one where it sits in a separate tool that faculty must seek out.

In addition, learners today are very different than they were ten years ago, with different expectations and needs. They're used to seamless, engaging digital experiences and expect the same quality in their learning experience. While educators seek tools that make it easier to create great learning experiences, not add additional work or complexity.

This guide gives you a structured way to evaluate platforms against the things that determine success: faculty adoption, student experience, accessibility, integrations, security, governance, and the partnership behind the product. It walks through four phases, from planning to final selection, and includes ready-to-use instruments in the appendix.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



Work through the four phases in order. Each one produces an output the next phase depends on.



Adapt the requirement categories and scoring weights to your institution. The templates are a starting point, not a fixed standard.



Involve the people who will live with the decision: faculty, students, IT, instructional designers, the registrar, and accessibility staff.

What the 2026 data tells us

Before you write a single requirement, ground your evaluation in how higher education continues to evolve. The 2026 Time for Class study, produced by Tyton Partners in collaboration with D2L, surveyed more than 300 administrators and over 1,500 instructors across more than 250 institutions. It is one of the most comprehensive ongoing looks at digital learning in higher education.

43%

of faculty use AI daily

Administrators are now the most active daily AI users, at 43 percent, ahead of students at 32 percent. It is the first time admins have led since tracking began in 2023.

What to evaluate: Whether AI reaches every role. Look for AI that administrators, faculty, and students can all use inside their normal workflows, not a faculty-only add-on.

55%

of faculty flag cheating as top challenge

Faculty who cite preventing student cheating as a top challenge rose from 36 percent in 2024 to 55 percent in 2026. Yet students who use AI daily report less workload anxiety, and career preparation is the main reason they use it.

What to evaluate: How the platform supports authentic, process-based assessment: project work, drafts, reflections, and evidence of student thinking, not proctoring alone.

26%

of students report experiencing real-world projects

61 percent of faculty say they assign real-world projects. Only 26 percent of students say they have experienced one. While students who do participate in real-world projects are more likely to say college is preparing them for a career at 76 percent versus 68 percent.

What to evaluate: Tools for experiential and project-based learning, plus analytics that show whether students are engaged, so intent and experience do not drift apart.

40%

of students rank workload anxiety as number one challenge

Students rank their challenges differently than the people designing for them. Faculty rank ineffective study skills first at 68 percent. Students rank workload anxiety first at 40 percent, followed by heavy course load at 32 percent.

What to evaluate: Analytics that surface real student experience and early signals of struggle, so support reaches students before a deadline, not after a failing grade.

32%

institutions have a formal AI policy

Institutions with a formal AI policy grew from 3 percent in 2023 to 32 percent in 2026. But one in two faculty doubt their policy is effective. Faculty split into Integrators at 24 percent, Defenders at 23 percent, and Status Quo at 54 percent.

What to evaluate: Whether the platform and the partner behind it help you move policy from a document into daily practice, with the governance, training, and change support that adoption requires.

The thread that runs through all five

Institutions are responding to AI, but many are responding to symptoms rather than underlying causes. The platforms that help most are the ones where AI, accessibility, and analytics are part of the core design, so faculty meet them in the flow of teaching. When faculty adoption stalls, it is usually friction that gets in the way more than reluctance. Reducing that friction is much of what your evaluation should determine.

Let's get started by looking at timing and breaking the evaluation down to four phases. A thorough evaluation usually runs four to eight weeks: one to two weeks to gather requirements, one to two weeks for demos, two to three weeks for hands-on trials, and about a week to decide. Start with five to eight platforms based on your requirements, narrow to three to five for demos, and shortlist two to three for hands-on trials.

Phase 1

Plan

Define needs, assemble stakeholders, and agree on what success looks like.

Start with outcomes, not features

Before you look at any platform, clarify what success looks like for your institution. Name the outcomes you are trying to improve, whether that is student engagement, retention, accessibility, time to degree, or faculty workload. When a requirement traces back to an outcome, it is easy to defend, and a feature that does not earn its place is easy to set aside.

The strongest outcomes are rarely produced by a single feature. They come from the platform and the partner behind it working together. Trust isn't a feature. It's designed into every aspect of the platform and the partnership behind it. Use the table below as a starting point: name the outcome you want, then ask the questions that reveal whether a vendor can deliver it, so you can weigh both the product and the partnership in the same decision.

Outcome you want

Questions to ask each vendor

An LMS that is a durable investment you can build on for years

What evidence can you provide of your financial stability and sustained product investment, so we can be confident the platform will continue to evolve over time?

Secure AI functionality

How does AI, security, privacy, and accessibility get designed into your platform? How much control do administrators keep over how AI is used?

Faculty adoption that still holds a year after launch

Will we have a named customer success manager, strategic guidance, and change management support that move a policy from document into daily practice?

A migration that preserves what faculty have built

Is migration a flat-fee package with bulk course tools and a dedicated project manager who owns the plan from kickoff through go-live?

Measurable gains in engagement and learning

Are course design, learner experience, and learning science built into one unified platform, or stitched together from separate tools?

Assemble the right stakeholders

A higher education LMS sits at the center of an ecosystem, and each group interacts with it differently. Bring the following voices in early so their requirements are part of the evaluation rather than a late objection:

- Faculty, including both heavy and light technology users, so adoption reality is represented.
- Students whose day-to-day experience often differ from what faculty assume.
- IT and identity teams, who own integrations, security, and single sign-on.
- Instructional designers, who build courses and support faculty.
- Accessibility and disability services staff.
- The registrar and academic administration, who own records and compliance.

Set your success metrics

Decide now how you will know the new platform is working a year after launch. Tie at least one metric to faculty adoption and one to student experience. The 2026 data is a useful prompt here: if faculty and students disagree about the top student challenge, your metrics should capture the student view, not only the institutional one.

Phase 1 output

A short-written brief: target outcomes, the stakeholder list, weighted priority categories, and the success metrics you will measure after launch.



Phase 2

Build your requirements

Turn priorities into a structured, scoreable RFP.

Translate your priorities into clear requirements grouped by category. Keep the language specific enough to score. “Strong analytics” is hard to compare; “surfaces students at risk of failing by week three” is not. The categories below cover what matters most for a higher education evaluation in 2026.

Requirement category

What to specify

Teaching and course design	Authoring, content reuse, rubrics, group work, project-based and experiential learning.
Assessment and integrity	Authentic assessment, originality and process tools, secure assessment options, flexible grading.
AI capabilities	Where AI lives in the workflow, what data it uses, transparency, and faculty control over it.
Native tools versus third-party add-ons	Which core capabilities are built into the platform versus added through third-party tools that carry separate contracts, logins, support paths, and risk.
Data and analytics	Data ownership and portability, reporting, early-alert signals, engagement insight, and the ability to act on data rather than only view it.
Accessibility	WCAG conformance, built-in accessibility checking, and the student accommodations experience.
Integrations and architecture	SIS, identity provider, library, LTI tools, and open API depth.
Security and governance	Data residency, privacy controls, audit, and AI governance settings.
Mobile and usability	Mobile parity, offline access, and the everyday experience for faculty and students.
Support and partnership	Onboarding, training, customer success model, and change management services.

AI requirements: ask how AI is part of the platform, not whether it is

Almost every platform now claims AI. The useful question is where it lives and who controls it. Ask vendors to show AI inside a real teaching task, explain what data it draws on, and demonstrate the governance settings an administrator uses to turn features on or off by role. A platform where AI is designed into the core experience will show you that in the product, not in a slide.

Phase 3

Evaluate

Demos, hands-on trials, usability testing, and structured scoring.



Test in a trial, not only a demo

Demos are curated and controlled, so they tend to show a platform at its best. A hands-on trial shows how it behaves with your content and your workflows. Whenever possible, do not decide on the demo alone. Import your actual content, run your actual workflows, and watch how the platform handles your edge cases.



Run a consistent, scripted demo

Give every vendor the same scenarios so you can compare fairly. The demo instrument in the appendix gives you a script. At minimum, ask each vendor to walk through building a course, creating and grading an authentic assessment, using an AI feature inside that task, and showing the analytics a faculty member would see.



Put faculty and students in a sandbox

Usability is the strongest predictor of adoption, and adoption is where value is realized. Give a representative group of faculty and students hands-on time in a sandbox with real tasks. The sandbox and usability instruments in the appendix structure that test and capture the results.



Score against your weighted categories

Score each platform against the weighted categories you set in Phase 1. A simple one-to-five scale per category, multiplied by the category weight, keeps the comparison objective and keeps the committee focused on what matters instead of on the most polished demo.

Evaluate AI in the flow of work

When you test AI, do it inside a real task rather than as a standalone demo. Have a faculty member draft an assessment with AI support, then review and adjust it. Have an administrator change an AI setting by role. What you are testing is whether AI reduces friction in the work people already do, which is what drives adoption.

Phase 4

Select

Score, check references, and make the decision with evidence.



Synthesize the scores

Bring the demo scores, sandbox feedback, and requirement scores together into one comparison. Where a platform scores low on a high-weight category, decide whether that is a deal-breaker or a manageable gap with a clear plan.



Check references that look like you

Talk to institutions similar to yours in size, mission, and student profile. Ask what adoption looked like one year in, what the implementation surprised them with, and how responsive the partner was when something went wrong. Ask specifically about how AI features landed with faculty and how the vendor supported policy and change management.



Decide, and write down why

Document the decision and the reasoning behind it. The recommendations report outline in the appendix gives you a structure. A clear written rationale helps secure approval, and it gives you a baseline to measure against once the platform is live.



Phase 4 output

A recommendation backed by scores, sandbox evidence, and reference checks, plus the success metrics from Phase 1 that you will report on after launch.



Security, privacy, and trust

Look for a partner that follows a privacy-by-design approach across the full product lifecycle, whose process is globally recognized, with certifications that validate how it protects sensitive learner and institutional data. The three pillars below are the standard the right platform should already be built to. Trust isn't a feature. It's designed into every aspect of the platform and the partnership behind it.

For a higher education institution, the LMS holds some of your most sensitive data: student records, grades, accommodations, and identity information. Security is not a line item to check at the end of an evaluation. It is a property of how a platform is designed and operated. Use the three pillars below as a lens when you compare vendors and ask each one to show evidence rather than assurances.

Built-in security. Proven trust. Always-on learning.

D2L Brightspace protects what matters most by embedding privacy and security into every layer of the LMS, from initial design through ongoing operation and improvement. Backed by globally recognized certifications and independent validation, D2L combines a privacy-by-design approach with layered safeguards to help protect sensitive data and support institutional compliance. Resilient infrastructure and disaster recovery capabilities help keep learning accessible, reliable, and uninterrupted when it matters most.

PILLAR 1

Multi-instance cloud architecture for secure data isolation

Why it matters

- Supports strict data privacy requirements
- Provides the benefits of a scalable cloud with additional protection
- Prevents unauthorized access across instances
- Reduces cross-customer risk and impact

PILLAR 2

Built securely from day one, rigorously tested for vulnerabilities

Why it matters

- Security issues are prevented at the source rather than patched later
- Minimizes costly breaches and downtime
- Keeps pace with evolving threats
- Supports compliance and audit readiness

PILLAR 3

Globally recognized ISO certifications that validate our security commitment

Why it matters

- Demonstrates ongoing accountability and trust
- Supports client compliance and regulatory obligations
- Provides independent, third-party validation of security practices
- Accelerates procurement and vendor approval

Security questions to ask every vendor

- How is each institution's data isolated from other customers, and what prevents access across instances?
- Which security and privacy certifications do you hold, and can you share current audit reports?
- How is security built into your development process, and how often is the platform tested for vulnerabilities?
- Where is our data stored, and how do you meet data residency and privacy requirements?
- What are your disaster recovery and uptime commitments, and what is your track record against them?
- What governance controls let administrators manage AI features, data use, and access by role?

Why this belongs in your scoring

Security and trust shape procurement timelines and institutional risk as much as any teaching feature. A platform with strong data isolation, secure-by-design development, and recognized certifications moves faster through vendor approval and reduces the burden on your IT and compliance teams. Weight it accordingly, and ask for evidence, not promises.



The partnership behind the platform

The product you evaluate is only half of the decision. The other half is the partner who helps you launch it, drive adoption, and keep improving once the novelty wears off. The 2026 data makes the case plainly: institutions with a formal AI policy grew tenfold in three years, yet half of faculty doubt their policy is effective. The gap between having a capability and using it well is about people and process, and that is where a strong partner makes the difference.

As you evaluate, weigh three parts of the partnership that shape outcomes long after go-live: a supported migration onto the new platform, ongoing customer success, and structured change management.

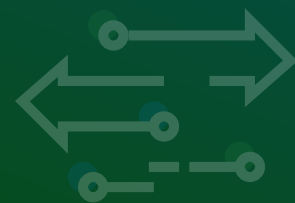
Migration support

The hardest part of changing platforms is rarely the new system. It is moving years of courses, content, and data without losing what faculty have built. A supported migration treats that move as a managed project, not a do-it-yourself task. With D2L, a dedicated project manager and a proven migration methodology guide the work from planning through go-live, so course integrity is preserved and disruption to faculty and students stays low. Content migration assistance is built into onboarding, and a migration map and report keep the institution clear on what is moving, when, and where it lands.

A managed migration also moves faster than institutions expect. Algonquin College migrated 35,000 online courses to Brightspace within six months. Another institution that had planned for a full academic year of transition went live in under three months. Embedded change management is part of why: preparing faculty alongside the technical move reduces resistance and keeps the timeline on track rather than letting it stall.

What a supported migration looks like

- A dedicated project manager who owns the migration plan and timeline.
- A proven methodology that preserves course integrity and minimizes disruption.
- Content migration assistance included in onboarding packages.
- A migration map and report so the institution always knows what is moving and when.
- Change management that runs in parallel, so faculty are ready when courses arrive.



The economics matter too, ask whether the work is priced as a flat-fee migration package that gives you cost certainty rather than surprises, and whether bulk course tools can move hundreds, or hundreds of thousands, of courses in a batch, with individual courses uploaded anytime. The strongest partners deliver each course in a ready-to-use shell, which keeps staff workload low and lets faculty start faster. Quick and easy migration should be part of the partnership, not a separate purchase. Trust isn't a feature. It's designed into the move itself.

For institutions that want more than a lift-and-shift, optional uplift services strengthen courses as they land, so the transition becomes a chance to improve rather than only to relocate.

Ask each vendor: *Who manages the migration, what is their method, how is course integrity verified, and what timeline have comparable institutions achieved?*

1:1 Customer Success

A dedicated customer success relationship gives your institution a named partner who understands your goals and helps you reach them over time. Rather than logging tickets, you work with someone accountable for your outcomes, who reviews progress against the metrics you set, points out features you are not yet using, and connects you to peers solving similar problems. For an evaluation, ask each vendor what their customer success model looks like, who you will work with, and how they measure your success rather than their usage numbers.

Change Management services

New technology only delivers value when people change how they work. Change management services help you plan the rollout, prepare faculty and staff, build training that fits real teaching, and sustain momentum past launch. This is the work that moves an AI policy into daily practice and helps hesitant faculty become confident users. Ask each vendor how they support change management, what their onboarding looks like, and how they help faculty who are hesitant rather than only the early adopters.

The right partner brings a team of change management experts who handle the details of the switch so your administrators can stay focused on what matters, helping learners reach their potential. That is partnership for success in practice, and it is another place trust is designed in rather than added on.

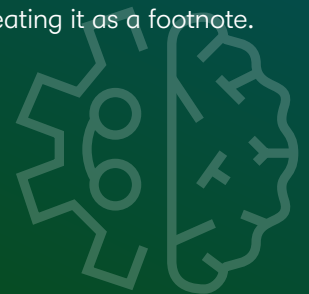
Partnership questions to ask every vendor

Who manages our migration, what methodology do you use, and how do you preserve course integrity during the move?

- Who is our day-to-day point of contact after launch, and how is their performance measured?
- How do you help us reach the success metrics we defined, and how often do we review them together?
- What does onboarding include, and how long until faculty are productive?
- How do you support faculty who are hesitant about AI, not only the early adopters?
- How have you helped similar institutions move an AI policy from document to practice?

Why this belongs in your scoring

Most adoption problems come from friction, not from people refusing to change. A partner who reduces that friction, through customer success and change management, has as much influence on your one-year outcomes as most features on the comparison sheet. Give partnership real weight in your scoring rather than treating it as a footnote.



Appendix: evaluation worksheets

These instruments are built to be used. Print them or copy them into your own tracker, fill them in as you go, and bring the completed worksheets to your selection meeting. Every scored item uses the same five-point scale.

Rating scale

1 = Does not meet our needs

2 = Below expectations

3 = Meets expectations

4 = Exceeds expectations

5 = Outstanding

Leave a row blank if it does not apply and note why in the comments.

A. Evaluation timeline and owners

Map the four phases to real dates and name an owner for each. Add an implementation planning stage once you have a shortlist.

Stage	Typical duration	Your target dates	Owner
Plan and requirements	1–2 weeks		
Vendor demos	1–2 weeks		
Hands-on trials	2–3 weeks		
Select and recommend	About 1 week		
Measurable gains in engagement and learning	Ongoing		

B. Stakeholder requirements survey

Distribute this before Phase 1 to faculty, students, IT, instructional designers, accessibility staff, and administration. Ask each respondent to rate how important each capability is to their work. The results inform your weighted categories and surface gaps between what faculty assume and what students experience.

Capability	Importance (1–5)	Notes and examples
Easy course setup and content reuse		
Authentic and project-based assessment tools		
Academic integrity support beyond proctoring		
AI support built into teaching tasks		
Analytics and early signals of student struggle		
Accessibility and accommodations experience		
Mobile experience for students and faculty		
Reliability and uptime		
Data privacy and security		
Integration with our SIS, SSO, and library		
Quality and responsiveness of support		

Open questions for each respondent:

What is the single biggest frustration with our current platform?

What would make you adopt a new tool quickly, or avoid it?

C. Weighted scoring worksheet

Set a weight for each category from your Phase 1 priorities. Score each platform one to five, multiply weight by score for the weighted value, and total the columns. Use one sheet, or repeat the score and weighted columns per vendor.

Category	Weight (1-5)	Score (1-5)	Weighted (WxS)
Teaching and course design			
Assessment and academic integrity			
AI capabilities and governance			
Accessibility			
Analytics and student success			
Integrations and architecture			
Security, privacy, and trust			
Mobile and usability			
Reliability, uptime, and disaster recovery			
Support and partnership			
Total			

D. Demonstration agenda and scoring instrument

Give every vendor the same time-boxed agenda so you can compare like for like. Assign a note-taker per topic and score each one as you go.

Time	Demo Topic	What to look for
10 min	Course build	Authoring, content reuse, rubrics, group and project work
10 min	Authentic assessment and integrity	Process-based assessment, originality and secure options
10 min	AI in the workflow	Where AI lives, what data it uses, faculty control
10 min	Analytics and early alerts	Engagement insight and signals you can act on
10 min	Accessibility and accommodations	Built-in checker and the student experience
10 min	Integrations: SIS, SSO, library	Depth of integration and open API
10 min	Admin governance and security	Role controls, data isolation, AI settings
5 min	Mobile experience	Parity with desktop for faculty and students
5 min	Support and onboarding model	Customer success and change management approach

SCORE EACH TOPIC AS IT IS DEMONSTRATED:

Demo topic	Score (1–5)	Notes
Course build		
Authentic assessment and integrity		
AI in the workflow		
Analytics and early alerts		
Accessibility and accommodations		
Integrations: SIS, SSO, library		
Admin governance and security		
Mobile experience		
Support and onboarding model		

E. Sandbox evaluation instrument

Give a representative group of faculty and students hands-on time in a trial environment with real tasks. Capture how it felt, not only whether it worked. One sheet per participant.

1. Executive summary and recommendation.
2. Evaluation goals and the outcomes you set out to improve.
3. Process: stakeholders, timeline, and platforms considered.
4. Weighted scoring results and what they show.
5. Demo, sandbox, and usability findings from faculty and students.
6. Security, privacy, and compliance assessment.
7. Reference-check summary.
8. Risks, gaps, and the plan to manage them.
9. Partnership and implementation plan, including the success metrics you will track after launch.

F. Usability evaluation worksheet

Usability predicts adoption. For each core task, record time to complete, any errors or points of confusion, and the participant's satisfaction. Run the same tasks on every shortlisted platform so the comparison is fair.

Core task	Time to complete	Errors or confusion points	Satisfaction (1–5)
Log in and find a specific course			
Submit an assignment (student)			
Post and grade an assignment (faculty)			
Set up an assessment with integrity options			
Check progress and grades on mobile			
Use an AI feature in a teaching task			

G. Reference check worksheet

Talk to institutions similar to yours in size, mission, and student profile. Capture their answers here.

Question	Response and notes
Is your institution similar to ours in size and mission?	
What did faculty adoption look like one year in?	
What surprised you during implementation?	
How responsive was the partner when something went wrong?	
How did AI features land with your faculty?	
How did the vendor support change management and policy?	
Knowing what you know now, would you choose them again?	

H. Recommendations report outline

Use this structure to document the decision and the reasoning behind it.

1. Executive summary and recommendation.
2. Evaluation goals and the outcomes you set out to improve.
3. Process: stakeholders, timeline, and platforms considered.
4. Weighted scoring results and what they show.
5. Demo, sandbox, and usability findings from faculty and students.
6. Security, privacy, and compliance assessment.
7. Reference-check summary.
8. Risks, gaps, and the plan to manage them.
9. Partnership and implementation plan, including the success metrics you will track after launch.

ABOUT D2L

D2L is a learning technology company built on the belief that learning is the foundation of human progress. Brightspace, the D2L learning platform, helps higher education institutions create teaching and learning experiences that reach every student, with accessibility, analytics, and AI designed into the core of the product rather than added on afterward.

Beyond the platform, D2L partners with institutions through dedicated customer success and change management services that help faculty adopt new tools and help institutions reach the outcomes they set out to achieve.

Learn more

Customer Success:

[D2L.com/services-and-support/succeed](https://d2l.com/services-and-support/succeed)

Change Management and Onboarding:

[D2L.com/services-and-support/onboard](https://d2l.com/services-and-support/onboard)

Source: 2026 Time for Class study, Tyton Partners in collaboration with D2L. Figures cited throughout reflect that study unless otherwise noted.

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