TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS
CASE STUDY

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USC Strengthens Teaching and Learning Infrastructure at Scale with D2L Brightspace

How a 23-school research university coordinated partners, a large pilot, and shared governance to modernize its learning platform on an accelerated timeline

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The Institution: The University of Southern California (USC) is a large private R1 university in Los Angeles, enrolling roughly 46,000 students and employing more than 4,500 faculty and 19,364 staff across 23 schools and a wide range of in-person, online, and hybrid programs.

The Challenge: USC needed to replace the learning management system (LMS) it had used for more than 25 years after its legacy provider announced the platform would be retired. Rather than automatically moving to the provider's successor product, USC launched a full evaluation and selected a new platform. The university then had to complete its transition to the new LMS before the legacy system's support window closed, giving USC roughly 10 months to migrate courses, prepare users, coordinate partners, and support adoption across a large and varied academic environment.

The Solution: After a 55-member committee representing faculty, students, administrators, and technical staff evaluated three finalist platforms, USC selected D2L Brightspace for its modern interface, accessibility, and pace of innovation. USC coordinated a multi-partner delivery model, engaging Deloitte for program management, change management, and technical integrations; K16 Solutions for course migration; and D2L for course uplift, platform support, and training. USC's Information Technology Services, Center for Excellence in Teaching, faculty leaders, and school-level teams led the day-to-day institutional work with partners and the broader USC community, ensuring faculty, staff, and student needs shaped training, support, configuration decisions, and how Brightspace was adopted in live courses.

The Result: USC moved more than 4,700 faculty and over 46,000 students onto Brightspace on schedule, migrating 40,000-plus courses with no transition issues escalating to the president or provost. In a 37-respondent stakeholder survey, participants rated the clarity of USC's rationale for the change 4.3 out of 5, and most rated Brightspace better than the legacy LMS. Student feedback also showed early adoption strength: 83% of respondents described Brightspace navigation as moderately to very intuitive, even though 86% were using Brightspace for the first time that fall. Since go-live, USC has continued to consolidate standalone LMS instances onto the central Brightspace platform and shift from implementation into deeper adoption, governance, and optimization.

140th commencement ceremony at the University of Southern California

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OVERVIEW

The University of Southern California (USC) is a large private research university with 23 schools and units. Across its in-person, online, hybrid, and executive programs, these schools use different instructional models, support structures, and course-design practices. For more than 25 years, most of USC relied on one primary learning management system (LMS), although some schools and programs used other platforms. When the provider announced it would retire the primary LMS, USC had to replace a system used by tens of thousands of students, faculty, and staff.

This case study explores USC's LMS modernization journey, drawing on Tambellini's independently conducted focus group with USC's Brightspace implementation stakeholders across ITS, instructional design, the Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET), and faculty governance. It also incorporates Tambellini's 37-respondent USC Brightspace project stakeholder survey and USC's October 2024 mid-semester student feedback survey, which included roughly 2,500 free-text responses.

CHALLENGE

USC's transition was set in motion by the planned retirement of its long-standing LMS, but the Office of the Provost and Information Technology Services (ITS) chose not to default to the existing provider's successor product. Because faculty would experience significant change regardless of the path chosen, USC used the unavoidable transition as an opportunity to reassess the market and select the platform best suited to modern teaching, accessibility, and the student experience over the long term. USC's LMS stakeholders described the shift as more than a product update: the university was moving faculty from a familiar but dated environment, often used as a file repository, to a cleaner and more flexible platform that required new daily practices for building, organizing, and managing courses.

The central challenge was executing a university-wide LMS transition across USC's complex academic environment on a highly compressed timeline. While institutions often allow about two years for an LMS replacement, USC had roughly 10 months to plan the implementation, coordinate partners, manage change, conduct a pilot, migrate courses, and launch the new system. The accelerated schedule was necessary to meet the legacy vendor's retirement timeline, align the transition with the academic calendar, and avoid requiring faculty to navigate two separate LMS changes. USC also weighed budget and implementation realities as part of the broader decision process, including the cost and change-management implications of avoiding two successive LMS transitions. The 10-month timeline concentrated a large volume of work into a short window and increased the criticality of internal ownership and governance, planning, sequencing, communication, and risk management.

USC's distributed academic and support structure added further complexity. The university does not have a central instructional design organization; instead, roughly half of its 23 schools have dedicated instructional design support, while others rely on individual subject matter experts. A lean central LMS team of approximately 6 stakeholders, supported by CET staff and school-level contributors across

the institution, coordinated a transition that touched every school and thousands of distinct courses. Managing that breadth, along with the natural variation in how each school teaches and supports faculty, became the core execution challenge that USC designed its strategy to address.

> *What makes this initiative especially instructive for other institutions is the scale and complexity USC managed within tight constraints: a roughly 10-month implementation window, a lean central LMS team, a distributed academic structure, and a faculty population with a quarter-century of habits built around the prior system.*

SOLUTION SELECTION

To understand how USC executed the transition, it helps to first step back to the platform decision. USC structured its selection process around evidence. Over roughly seven months, UX researchers conducted qualitative interviews with faculty and students, commissioned market research, and interviewed peer institutions that had completed comparable LMS transitions. A committee of more than 50 members, including faculty, students, administrators, and technical staff, then evaluated three finalist platforms.

To support hands-on review, vendors built sample courses in sandbox environments, and USC evaluation leaders held introductory presentations and office hours for committee members. Evaluators completed a common set of tasks in each system, such as creating a course, adding a module, and building a quiz. The evaluation committee synthesized its findings into a report and submitted it to university leadership.

The evaluation reflected the range of needs across a large institution. Participants who focused on implementation and migration weighed different factors than faculty and program staff, and the committee

surfaced a healthy diversity of perspectives across the three LMS solution finalists. Leadership weighed that input alongside institutional priorities and selected D2L Brightspace. The provost's announcement cited three priority attributes: user-friendly design, robust accessibility, and strong customer support.

Stakeholders described the LMS selection rationale in consistent terms. Faculty and staff valued Brightspace's clean, intuitive interface, its steady release cadence, and its ability to organize and present course content in a more integrated way than the legacy LMS. Accessibility carried real weight, with USC's Digital Accessibility Office viewing Brightspace as a strong fit. In the Brightspace project stakeholder survey, respondents rated the clarity of the rationale for the change an average of 4.3 out of 5, an indication that USC communicated the "why" of the change effectively.

A practical factor reinforced the choice. USC's School of Engineering already ran a Brightspace instance for its distance education program, housing roughly 150 courses, so the platform was already proven within the institution. As one project stakeholder survey respondent summarized the appeal, Brightspace offered a more modern, user-friendly platform capable of improving accessibility, engagement, and overall ease of use.

IMPLEMENTATION

USC's implementation approach reflected the compressed timeline. Project stakeholders described a practical discipline: the team had to keep moving by prioritizing the decisions required for go-live and deferring other items until after Brightspace was live. That mindset helped the project team avoid getting stalled by questions that were important but not essential to launch. It also made clear that go-live would not mark the end of the work. USC approached the launch knowing that Brightspace would require continued configuration, training, support, governance, and adoption efforts throughout the first year after go-live and beyond.

Phase	What Happened
Assessment (2022)	User-experience researchers conducted qualitative interviews with faculty and students over roughly seven months, supported by market research and interviews with peer institutions. A committee of more than 55 faculty, students, administrators, and technical staff evaluated three finalist platforms using vendor sandboxes and a common set of build tasks.
Decision and kickoff (summer 2023)	USC selected Brightspace and set a summer 2024 cutover. A four-day Foundations Week aligned every team on shared goals and an operating rhythm. Work was organized into academic, technical, change management, and sustainment streams.

Phase	What Happened
Pilot (spring 2024)	USC ran a pilot of 67 courses, well beyond the smaller 5-course pilot initially contemplated, to surface migration and configuration questions early while there was time to adapt.
Migration and uplift	K16 Solutions worked with USC to migrate roughly three to four years of courses, prioritizing pilot and near-term semesters. Even with automated migration support, faculty and school-level teams still needed to review, clean up, and adapt migrated content for actual instruction. As part of implementation planning and rollout readiness, USC's LMS project team members met with every school to understand local needs, surface risks, and coordinate readiness.
Go-live (summer 2024)	More than 40,000 courses were migrated and about 10,000 received design support; over 4,700 faculty and 46,000 students moved to Brightspace. No transition issues escalated to the president or provost.
Stabilization to today	USC continued refining the environment after launch. Course settings were adjusted in response to pilot feedback, and a Brightspace Product Governance Committee now reviews requests related to platform functionality, integrations, roles, permissions, and shared standards. USC also added YuJa Panorama to the Brightspace environment for digital accessibility support. Since the initial launch, several standalone LMS instances have consolidated onto the central Brightspace platform.

Front-Loading Risk Through a Large Pilot

A critical implementation decision was the size of USC's Brightspace pilot. Rather than run a small pilot, USC launched the Spring 2024 pilot with 67 courses across 20 schools, deliberately front-loading complexity to surface migration, configuration, training, and support issues before the broader rollout. A Brightspace project leader and faculty liaison described the spring pilot, paired with the project team's school-by-school discovery process, as the foundation that helped USC prepare for the summer cutover and the wider adoption that followed.

The larger pilot required USC to absorb significant effort early. Over several months, the project team and school-level contributors supported live courses as classes began, quizzes and assessments were delivered, and grades were entered in Brightspace for the first time. That early exposure helped the team identify where faculty needed more targeted guidance and created a cohort of engaged faculty whose feedback strengthened the broader rollout. The manual work involved in the pilot also

underscored why USC needed partner support from K16 Solutions to migrate course content at full scale. USC's approach shows how a large pilot can be used to manage complexity proactively, turning implementation risk into actionable learning before full-scale adoption.

Coordinating a Multi-Partner Delivery Model

To execute a transition of this scale on an accelerated timeline, USC assembled a multi-partner delivery model with defined responsibilities. Deloitte provided support for program management, change management, and technical integrations. K16 Solutions performed the bulk course migration, moving roughly three to four years of courses. The courses needed for the pilot and upcoming semesters were migrated first. D2L Creative Services supported course uplift for the most recent year of courses. In total, USC migrated more than 40,000 courses and provided design support for about 10,000.

This division of labor gave USC the capacity and structure to move far faster than its internal team could have managed alone. However, stakeholders emphasized that external support did not replace institutional ownership. USC still needed ITS, the Center for Excellence in Teaching, faculty leaders, and school-level teams involved in daily decisions to ensure USC's partner work reflected the university's academic context, local knowledge, and stakeholder expectations.

That became one of the project's clearest operating lessons. Brightspace project stakeholders praised D2L's guidance and training and highlighted the value of establishing coordinated workstreams to support the compressed migration. At the same time, participants stressed that institutional knowledge needed to be built into partner-supported work early. For example, while D2L's initial training was comprehensive, faculty with limited time and capacity often found USC's shorter, internally managed, task-specific sessions more useful because they focused on immediate needs, such as setting up a course, building a module, or creating an assignment. After go-live, USC has applied that lesson by using the Brightspace Product Governance Committee to manage requests related to platform functionality, integrations, roles, permissions, and shared standards, while continuing to offer targeted support based on faculty and student feedback.

Setting Expectations Around Course Migration

Course migration gave faculty a starting point, not a finished course. Standard files such as PDFs, Word documents, and spreadsheets generally transferred cleanly, while more complex elements, including rubrics, certain quiz-question types, graded discussions, question banks, and LTI-based integrations with external learning tools, required review and rework. Because USC operates on a build-your-own-course model, with faculty typically starting from a course shell, instructors responded in different ways: some rebuilt courses from scratch, while others adapted migrated content.

USC's Brightspace project stakeholders emphasized that this cleanup required meaningful time and hands-on support. School-level instructional designers and support staff helped faculty reconnect LTIs, reconstruct question banks, resolve broken or duplicated content, and determine what needed to be rebuilt rather than reused. For some schools, the work became a scramble because the migrated course did not always show faculty exactly what would need attention before teaching began.

USC's experience points to a practical lesson for peer institutions: communicate early and specifically about what migration will and will not carry over. That clarity helps schools plan cleanup time, prepare faculty with practical checklists, and avoid the assumption that migrated content will be instruction-ready without review and revision.

OPERATIONAL IMPACT

Brightspace gave USC a more unified learning environment while making common teaching, learning, and support tasks easier to manage in daily practice. For students, the most tangible gain was consolidation and a more modern interface. Bringing schools and programs onto one platform reduced the number of separate systems students navigate, and USC's October 2024 mid-semester student feedback survey found that most students, despite being new to Brightspace, reported being comfortable navigating it during their first term.

For faculty, the cleaner interface eased everyday tasks once the initial learning curve passed. Staff reported that routine course-maintenance work became more straightforward, and the ability to upload and move multiple files at once was a frequently cited practical improvement. For administrators and support staff, Brightspace improved reporting and oversight in specific areas. USC Brightspace project stakeholders cited Brightspace's User Progress tool and reporting capabilities as a clear step forward, giving ITS, CET, and school-level instructional support staff more visibility into course activity than they had in the legacy LMS.

USC also identified opportunities it continues to pursue. Several respondents noted that analytics work in Brightspace requires a different approach than the legacy LMS because much of Brightspace's data is accessed through dashboards rather than queried directly through other systems. ITS has expanded faculty access to the Brightspace Performance+ analytics package, giving instructors course-level dashboards that provide a clearer view of activity and performance patterns within their own courses. The team is also exploring how to use LMS data more proactively, including work toward an early-alert model that could help advisors identify students who may be struggling before the midterm reporting process.

Accessibility was also part of USC's post-launch operating work. USC added YuJa Panorama to the Brightspace environment to support alternative formats for students and accessibility review for course materials. Stakeholders reported meaningful student adoption and continued work to expand faculty use of YuJa Panorama through training and support.

> *The go-live marked the success of the transition, not the end of the work. USC's longer-term value is taking shape through stronger Brightspace governance, consolidation of standalone LMS environments, expanded accessibility support, analytics development, and continued progress toward a more consistent student experience.*

OUTCOMES TO DATE

USC moved more than 4,700 faculty and over 46,000 students onto Brightspace on its accelerated timeline. Its most telling outcome is the smoothness of the transition itself. No transition issues escalated to the president or provost during the cutover, a measure stakeholders returned to repeatedly as evidence that careful planning absorbed the complexity before it reached senior leadership or disrupted students.

Survey and student data reinforce the picture. In the USC Brightspace stakeholder survey, the largest group rated Brightspace better than the legacy LMS, with most of the remainder rating it comparable; respondents scored communication during the transition and the adequacy of training both at roughly 4 out of 5.

USC's October 2024 mid-semester student survey showed that most students could find key course information in Brightspace during their first term on the platform. Students reported finding grades

on assignments 94% of the time and grades on quizzes 92% of the time. They also reported finding feedback on assignments, discussions, and quizzes in roughly 82% to 87% of cases.

Adoption has also broadened organically. Several smaller, standalone LMS instances across USC have consolidated onto the central Brightspace platform, including the School of Engineering's separate instance, reflecting both the efficiency of a single enterprise platform and growing institutional confidence in the choice.

USC is candid that a transition of this scope leaves work to continue. Stakeholders and the student survey converged on a constructive priority: because USC gives faculty broad freedom to customize their courses, students taking multiple courses can encounter different layouts. A Brightspace project stakeholder and faculty liaison framed USC's goal as preserving that valued flexibility for faculty while standardizing a small number of core elements so students can reliably find the syllabus, grades, and assignments. Other forward-looking items USC is working toward include a consolidated cross-course grade and calendar view, continued growth in mobile use, and broader use of advanced tooling such as D2L's interactive course-authoring package, Creator+.

> *"Even when a new system is easier in every respect, you are still asking faculty to change established practice. Familiarity matters, and respecting that is part of managing a transition well."*

TAKEAWAYS

1. **Treat a required platform change as a strategic decision.** USC used the retirement of its legacy LMS as an opportunity to evaluate the market and select the best long-term fit, and to avoid asking faculty to change systems twice. Institutions facing a mandated change benefit from weighing the full set of options rather than defaulting to the successor product.
2. **Use a large pilot to manage risk early.** USC saw significant risk in the compressed timeline and chose to front-load that risk by expanding the pilot well beyond the initial recommendation of five courses. The Spring 2024 pilot, which began with 67 courses, surfaced migration, configuration, training, and support issues before the broader rollout and helped the team prepare for summer go-live.
3. **Test migration assumptions and communicate clearly about what carries over.** Moving between two LMS platforms preserves some course elements cleanly and requires rework on others. Institutional project teams should ask vendors and partners for specific examples of what will migrate successfully, what may need repair, and what faculty or support staff will need to review before courses go live. That clarity helps institutions set expectations, plan cleanup time, and prepare practical resources such as checklists, targeted training, and instructional support so migrated courses are ready for teaching.

4. **Pair partner capacity with institutional knowledge.** A well-structured multi-partner model gave USC the added capacity and coordination needed to move quickly. The accompanying lesson is that external support works best when internal teams remain central to decisions that depend on local context, such as migration priorities, training design, communications, and support planning. Institutions should embed their own LMS, instructional design, faculty, and school-level experts into partner workflows, so the work reflects how teaching and operations actually function on campus.

5. **Plan governance and customization standards alongside the technology.** Broad faculty customization in an LMS can support academic freedom and varied teaching models, but students still benefit from core shared conventions across courses, such as where to find syllabi, assignments, grades, and key deadlines. As institutions implement an LMS platform, they should define early which decisions belong to individual faculty, which should be guided by school-level practice, and which require central governance. A durable LMS governance model helps the institution manage requests, review integrations and permissions, set shared standards, and keep improving the platform after go-live.

CONCLUSION

USC replaced a 25-year-old learning platform in roughly 10 months across 23 schools by combining disciplined program structure, a large pilot, a coordinated multi-partner model, and strong internal ownership, completing the transition without issues escalating to the president or provost. The effort gave USC a stable enterprise teaching platform, reduced reliance on separate LMS instances, and created a stronger foundation for consistent support, accessibility, and continued teaching and learning innovation. USC's next chapter is shifting from transition to optimization as the university expands its use of analytics, matures Brightspace governance, and works toward a more consistent student experience across courses.

REFERENCES

This case study draws on multiple sources of evidence. Tambellini conducted a focus group with University of Southern California stakeholders from Information Technology Services, the Center for Excellence in Teaching, instructional design, and faculty governance. Tambellini also worked with USC to distribute a Brightspace project stakeholder survey. Findings from that survey, along with results from a USC-owned mid-semester student feedback survey, were analyzed to inform the case study. Tambellini also reviewed publicly available information published by USC's Office of the Provost and D2L.

This report was prepared in connection with a D2L-commissioned engagement. The Tambellini Group is an independent research firm and does not recommend or endorse any vendor solution. USC reviewed this case study prior to publication.

FUTURE CAMPUS IMPACTS

The Future Campus™ Framework is Tambellini's innovative tool for generating strategic-level conversations and action for appropriate investments and divestments across the four key pillars of people, process, data, and technology. The Framework is scored across ten key higher education workspaces.

USC's transition to D2L Brightspace most directly affects the following Future Campus Workspaces:

Retain	A modern, consolidated, and accessible platform lowers the friction students face in finding grades, feedback, and course materials. USC's plan to standardize a core set of high-value course elements will further support a consistent student experience and persistence.
Operations	Consolidating multiple standalone LMS instances onto one Brightspace platform streamlines licensing, maintenance, and support. Further, Brighstpace's modern interface has made routine course-maintenance tasks more straightforward for faculty and staff.
Governance	USC has established a Brightspace Product Governance Committee, which manages change requests and reviews satisfaction data. Further, the shared-governance approach USC built for this LMS transition has become a model that the university applies to broader digital transformation.
Risk	Replacing an end-of-life platform on a disciplined timeline reduced the risk of running an unsupported system, avoided a two-step LMS transition for faculty, and used a large pilot with coordinated support to reduce rollout risk. Consolidating standalone LMS instances onto Brightspace also reduces long-term platform complexity, while YuJa Panorama strengthens USC's digital accessibility posture as user requirements continue to evolve.
Innovate	USC is moving from a successful baseline adoption of Brightspace toward learning analytics, including an early-alert model to flag at-risk students to advisors, and is exploring AI-enabled teaching tools, building on the data foundation the new platform provides.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The purpose of this report is to provide higher education institutions with information about the objectives, solutions, and outcomes related to the utilization of technology in colleges and universities across the US.

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