



RED VAN

Playbook

Launching and Scaling Ecommerce in Higher Education

Tested by declining enrollment and deteriorating finances, higher education leaders must act decisively to secure their institution's future. This playbook provides higher education leaders with actionable strategies to identify, develop, and scale new revenue opportunities with ecommerce — ensuring they not only pass the test but emerge stronger, more resilient, and ready for the future.



Higher Education Faces an Uncertain Future

The Challenge of Declining Enrollment

For decades, higher education has operated under the stable assumption that a steady stream of undergraduate students would sustain institutions through tuition revenue. But today, that foundation is crumbling. Nationwide undergraduate enrollment has been on the decline for more than a decade, with institutions collectively losing 15% of their student population between 2010 and 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, causing a one-year drop of over 350,000 students¹.

The outlook is even more alarming. The higher education sector is on the brink of what experts call an “enrollment cliff.” Between 2025 and 2029, the number of college students is projected to plummet by an additional 15%. This equates to over 400,000 fewer students, driven by demographic shifts and declining birth rates². This forecast is bleak for many institutions, especially those heavily reliant on tuition.

15%

Decline in Enrollment
between 2010 & 2021

Projected Decline in
Enrollment by 2029

15%

+400,000

Fewer Students

¹Elissa Nadworny, “A Looming ‘Demographic Cliff’: Fewer College Students and Ultimately Fewer Graduates,” NPR, January 8, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/08/demographic-cliff-college-enrollment>.

²Nathan Grawe, an economist at Carleton College in Minnesota, predicts that the college-going population will drop by 15 percent between 2025 and 2029,” The Hechinger Report, September 10, 2018, <https://www.hechingerreport.org>.

The Funding Squeeze

A shift in state financial priorities is compounding the enrollment crisis. Public institutions have traditionally depended on state funding to subsidize tuition and support operations. Yet, state budgets are under strain, and higher education is increasingly losing ground to other priorities such as healthcare, infrastructure, and pension obligations. As a result, state support for higher education has shrunk, forcing institutions to raise tuition fees — a strategy that is no longer viable given dwindling student numbers and growing price sensitivity.

The Urgency to Diversify Revenue Streams

Higher education's financial model is at a breaking point. Tuition alone can no longer sustain the mission of education, research, and community engagement. The combined impact of shrinking enrollment and reduced state support demands bold action. Institutions that cling to traditional revenue models risk falling into a downward spiral of budget cuts, program eliminations, and reputational decline.

The solution? A strategic pivot toward diversified revenue streams. By leveraging assets, partnerships, and innovations in education delivery, colleges and universities can reduce their dependency on tuition and secure long-term financial resilience. Diversification is no longer optional — it's essential to surviving and thriving.

Embracing Ecommerce: A Solution for Sustained Growth

The Potential of Ecommerce in Higher Education

E-commerce presents an increasingly promising opportunity for universities to counteract declining enrollment and tuition revenue. By expanding their offerings into digital channels, such as e-courses, branded merchandise, and publications, institutions can diversify their revenue streams and foster stronger connections with students, alumni, and lifelong learners. Universities can leverage their strong brand recognition and engaged audiences to establish “cradle-to-grave” learning experiences. This diversifies revenue while cultivating loyalty and community by providing alumni and other learners with continuing education opportunities.

Opportunities in ecommerce

Ecommerce offers higher education institutions a chance to unlock new revenue by leveraging their existing assets and strengths.

Opportunities include:



Non-credit e-courses
for lifelong learners



Exclusive branded
merchandise



Monetizing digital
publications



Tailored corporate
training programs



Virtual and
hybrid events

Together, these initiatives allow universities to engage diverse audiences and reduce their reliance on traditional tuition.

A New Model for Higher Education

The financial challenges facing higher education are daunting, but they are not insurmountable. By embracing ecommerce as a tool to diversify revenue streams, institutions can reduce their dependence on traditional tuition models and secure a more sustainable future. This is not just about survival — it’s an opportunity to strengthen the connection between universities and their communities, delivering value that extends well beyond the campus gates.

Turn Vision into Reality with Goals to Define Success

Starting an ecommerce project can feel overwhelming, but setting clear, shared goals makes it manageable. Goals don't just guide the team — they define the project. They clarify what's in scope, shaping its size, complexity, and focus. By prioritizing essential features and saving “nice-to-haves” for later phases, clear goals prevent scope creep and keep the project on track. With everyone aligned on the objectives, teams can focus resources where they matter most and deliver a successful outcome.

Here are some key goals higher education institutions should consider for ecommerce:

Increase Non-Tuition Revenue

Establish realistic revenue targets for ecommerce initiatives, such as online course enrollments, merchandise sales, or donations. These benchmarks create measurable objectives and help allocate resources.

Expand Revenue Opportunities.

Continuously innovate by introducing diverse products and services. Examples include launching niche online courses or creating exclusive merchandise. A varied portfolio attracts broader audiences and maximizes revenue potential.

Enhance the Online Learning Experience

Build a user-friendly platform with intuitive navigation, modern search functionality, and convenient course registration. An optimized digital experience encourages engagement and participation.

Strengthen Alumni Engagement

Use ecommerce to deepen alumni relationships. Offer tailored content, exclusive merchandise, or access to special events to keep alumni connected and invested in the institution's success.

Improve Institution Efficiency

Streamline backend processes such as inventory management, order fulfillment, and reporting. Operational excellence supports scalability and ensures a positive customer experience.

Articulating the Vision

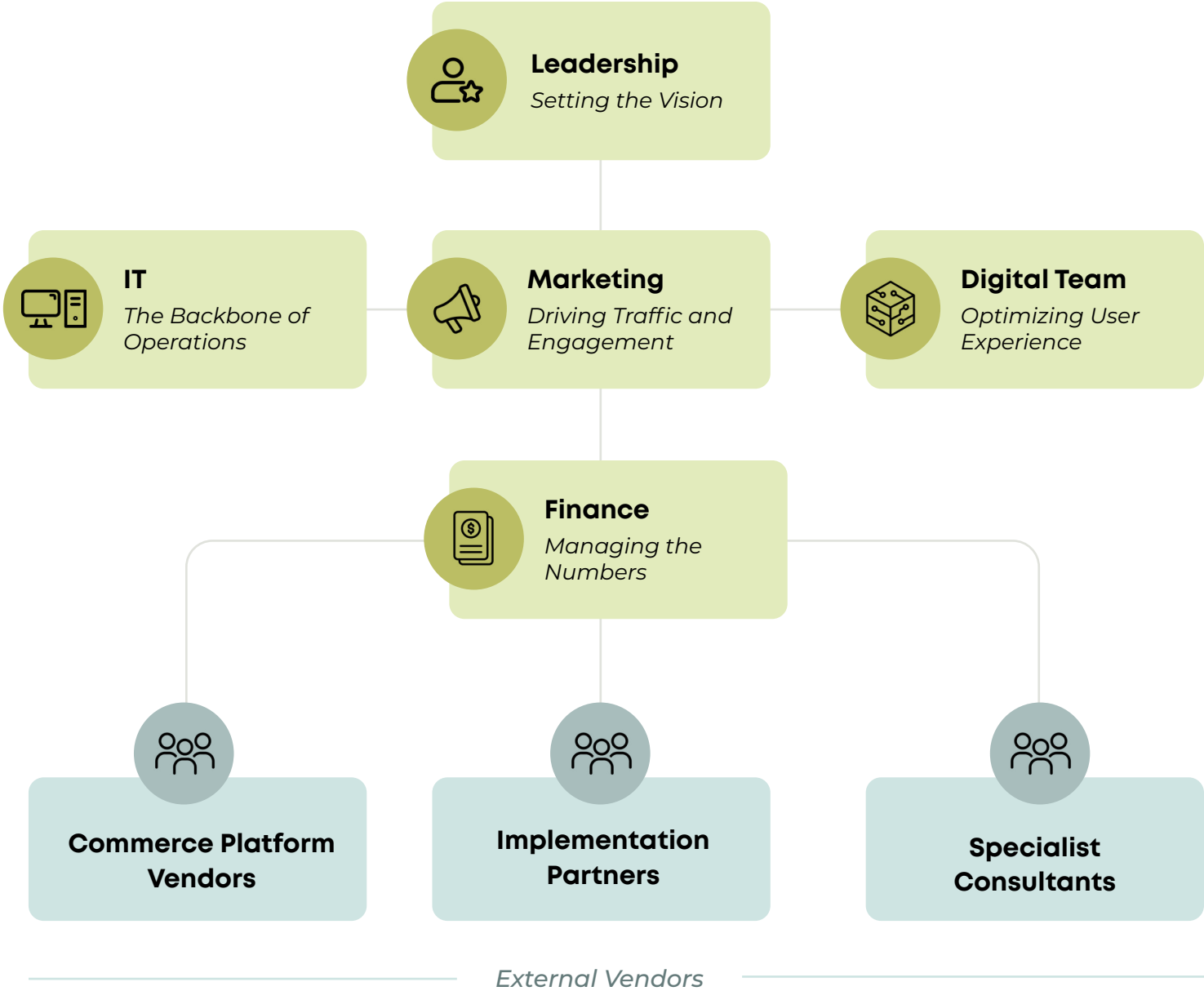
The vision for an ecommerce initiative should be ambitious and aligned with the institution's mission. By diversifying revenue streams and enhancing engagement, the institution can secure its financial future while extending its impact on learners and the community. A successful ecommerce project should:

- Empower lifelong learning by making education accessible to a broader audience.
- Strengthen the institution's brand and community connections.
- Position the institution as an innovator in digital-first education.

Through careful planning, goal-setting, and a commitment to innovation, higher education institutions can turn ecommerce from an idea into a transformative reality.

Assembling a Team to Power Ecommerce in Higher Education

Launching a successful ecommerce initiative in higher education takes a carefully assembled team with the right expertise, partnerships, and culture. Here's how to build that team.



Key Roles and Responsibilities



Leadership - Setting the Vision

Strong leadership is essential for defining the vision, securing buy-in, and ensuring alignment across stakeholders. Leaders champion the initiative, allocate resources, and monitor progress to keep the project on track.



IT - The Backbone of Operations

The IT team plays a critical role in implementing and maintaining the commerce technology stack. They handle integrations, security, and platform stability, ensuring smooth operations and a modern user experience.



Marketing - Driving Traffic and Engagement

The marketing team promotes courses, products, and services while driving traffic to the ecommerce site and creating compelling content to engage audiences.



Digital Team - Optimizing User Experience

A dedicated digital team focuses on website design, user experience (UX), and continuous optimization. Their efforts ensure that the platform is user-friendly, accessible, and visually appealing.



Finance - Managing the Numbers

The finance team oversees budgeting, pricing, payment processing, and financial reporting. Their role is vital for ensuring the project's financial sustainability.

Partnering with External Vendors

Higher education institutions can benefit greatly from external partnerships to fill expertise gaps and reduce risk. Consider these options:



Commerce Platform Vendors

Build strong relationships with your commerce platform vendor for training, insights, and ongoing support.



Implementation Partners

Engage certified partners experienced in higher education to guide strategy and assist with platform selection, integration, and deployment.



Specialist Consultants

To enhance the initiative's effectiveness, collaborate with experts in UX design, SEO, and marketing.

Don't Forget About Culture and Communication

A strong team culture and clear communication are key to any project's success. Create a collaborative environment where innovation and shared ownership thrive. Pair this with clear communication channels, like regular check-ins and collaborative tools, to keep the team aligned and address challenges quickly.

From Courses to Community: Offerings for Higher Education

Higher education institutions have a range of opportunities to generate revenue and enhance engagement through ecommerce. By strategically prioritizing and rolling out offerings, institutions can address the needs of students, alumni, and the broader community while supporting financial sustainability.

Online Courses

Expand Educational Access

Schools can generate revenue by offering online courses through ecommerce platforms. Extension schools, certificate programs, and specialized workshops attract non-traditional learners and expand the institution's geographic reach.

Books and Publications

Share Knowledge

Institutions can sell books, research publications, and other educational materials online. This gives learners and researchers easy access to valuable resources while generating additional income.

Branded Merchandise

Build Community Pride

Universities can tap into school spirit by selling branded merchandise like apparel, accessories, and memorabilia. Items from student-run organizations can add a unique touch to the assortment.

Events and Services

Offer Unique Experiences

Monetize access to lectures, cultural events, athletic facilities, recreational areas, and more. These offerings not only serve as revenue streams but also deepen connections with students, alumni, and the community.

Donations

Promote a Giving Culture

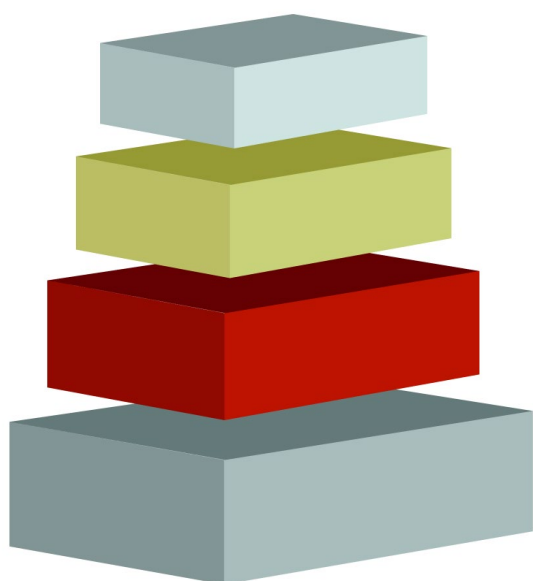
An optimized online giving experience can drive increased alumni and community donations. Modern platforms make it easy to contribute to scholarships and other programs.

Prioritizing Impactful Rollouts

To ensure success, institutions should focus on offerings that align with their institution's strengths and audience needs. By gradually introducing new offerings, collecting feedback, and optimizing based on performance, institutions can build momentum and create lasting impact.

Choosing the Right Commerce Technology Stack

Selecting the right technology stack is a critical step in launching and sustaining a successful ecommerce initiative in higher education. By focusing on scalability, integrations, and user experience, institutions can create a digital experience that meets their unique needs and drive long-term success.



Exploring Platform Options



Integrating with Existing Systems



Ensuring Scalability and Flexibility



Other Considerations



Explore Platform options

Research the Right Fit

Conduct thorough evaluations of ecommerce platforms, such as Salesforce Commerce Cloud. Assess features, pricing, security, and ease of use to identify the best fit.

Address Unique Institutional Needs

Higher education has distinct requirements, from managing online courses and donations to selling merchandise and integrating with Learning Management Systems (LMS). Ensure the chosen platform supports these needs effectively.

Learn from Peers

Seek recommendations and case studies from other institutions with similar use cases. Understanding their successes and challenges can guide your decision-making process.



Integrating with Existing Systems

Focus on Essential Integrations

Ensure fundamental integrations with CRM, ERP, and payment gateways are readily available. Staying within ecosystems like Salesforce can streamline architecture by connecting core CRM, Marketing Cloud, and Commerce Cloud.

Prepare for the Future

Choose a platform that supports future integrations, such as connecting with an LMS to simplify online course delivery. Flexibility in integration is key to scaling and adapting to changing needs.



Ensuring Scalability and Flexibility

Invest in Scalability

Select a platform designed to handle increasing traffic and transactions as your ecommerce initiatives grow. Future-proof your technology for expansion.

Prioritize Flexibility

Look for features that allow customization and adaptability, such as support for multiple storefronts, personalized experiences, and tailored price books.

Plan for Growth

Anticipate future needs by selecting a platform capable of accommodating expanding use cases, new products, and services.



Other Considerations

Security

Choose a platform with up-to-date security features to protect sensitive student, alumni, and institutional data.

User Experience

Opt for a solution that provides an intuitive, user-friendly experience for all stakeholders, from students and alumni to administrators.

Support and Maintenance

Evaluate the level of support and maintenance offered by the platform provider. Ensure ongoing costs are manageable and support is readily available,

Winning Leadership Buy-In and Building the Case for Ecommerce

While an ecommerce initiative can help institutions remain relevant and sustainable, this bold idea may not be aligned with the traditional values of academic decision-makers. To address this concern, a thoughtful strategy that aligns ecommerce with institutional goals is needed to help gain buy-in from leadership. Here's how:

Addressing Academic Mindsets

Building an ecommerce business may seem to contradict the mission of most higher education institutions. This perspective, particularly prevalent among academics who view education through a “purist”, non-commercial lens, can be a significant hurdle. Recognize and address this resistance upfront.

To overcome these concerns, frame ecommerce as a tool to advance the institution's mission rather than detract from it. Highlight how an effective ecommerce strategy can:

- **Expand access to education** by reaching new audiences and offering flexible learning options.
- **Promote lifelong learning** through online courses, certification programs, and digital resources.
- **Ensure financial stability**, enabling the institution to better serve its students and community.
- **Foster alumni and community engagement** through a forum for networking and ongoing learning opportunities.

When communicating these benefits, emphasize alignment with institutional values. Position ecommerce not as a departure from the mission but as an enabler that empowers the institution to achieve its goals on a broader scale.

Demonstrating Operational Feasibility

Leadership will be more receptive to an ecommerce initiative if they see a well-thought-out operational plan. Provide clear, actionable details, including:

- **Technology and system integration:** Outline the proposed technology stack and how it integrates with existing systems like CRM, ERP, and payment gateways.
- **Logistical solutions:** Address challenges related to shipping, billing, and accounting, presenting strategies that ensure compliance and mitigate security risks.
- **Expert support:** Reassure leadership by emphasizing partnerships with experienced consultants and support teams familiar with higher education needs.

Additionally, propose a phased implementation approach. Starting small — perhaps with a pilot project — allows for adjustments and demonstrates value early on. This incremental strategy can build confidence and provide a roadmap for scaling the initiative.

Presenting Your Strategy as a Formal Business Case

A well-crafted business case ties ecommerce to the institution’s strategic objectives and financial health. To make a strong case:

- **Present financial evidence.** Use data to show the revenue potential and long-term financial benefits of ecommerce. Highlight case studies or benchmarks from peer institutions to reinforce credibility.
- **Align with institutional priorities.** Connect the ecommerce initiative to broader goals such as enhancing student success, increasing accessibility, and ensuring sustainability.
- **Provide measurable outcomes.** Define success metrics, such as increased enrollment, revenue growth, or improved engagement, to demonstrate the initiative’s tangible impact.

Addressing academic concerns, aligning ecommerce with institutional goals, and presenting a clear, data-backed business case can help secure leadership buy-in. This strategy addresses the initiative’s financial benefits and amplifies the institution’s ability to fulfill its mission.

Launching Ecommerce in Phases: A Roadmap for Success

Embarking on an ecommerce initiative can be a transformative step for educational institutions. By taking a phased approach and setting clear priorities, your institution can minimize risks, maximize impact, and build a strong foundation for long-term success.

Start Small: The Power of a Pilot Project



Begin with a smaller-scale project that addresses a specific need, such as improving access to online courses or selling a curated selection of merchandise. Starting small allows your institution to:

- Test strategies and refine processes.
- Identify and address potential challenges early.
- Build momentum by showcasing tangible results.



Promote your pilot project using cost-effective strategies that leverage existing resources and encourage community involvement:

- **Email Marketing:** Reach your audience directly with targeted campaigns.
- **Social Media:** Use platforms like Instagram and Twitter to engage users.
- **Campus Announcements:** Leverage bulletin boards, newsletters, and events to raise awareness.



Incentivize participation with discounts, referral rewards, or exclusive perks. Additionally, engage students, faculty, and alumni as ambassadors to amplify your message and drive interest.



When your pilot begins to deliver tangible results, share these successes:

- Highlight key metrics, such as increased sales or improved engagement.
- Communicate wins to stakeholders to build support and optimism

Apply lessons from your pilot projects to ensure your ecommerce strategy evolves with your institution's needs and opportunities.

Navigating and Overcoming Operational Challenges

Higher education ecommerce initiatives face unique operational challenges, from logistics and IT to financial complexities. To succeed, institutions must tackle these hurdles strategically, creating systems that align with their mission and meet the high expectations of learners and alumni. Minimize risks, maximize impact, and build a strong foundation for long-term success.



Delivering Modern Digital Experiences

Today's learners and alumni expect modern, intuitive digital experiences that rival leading ecommerce retailers. Meeting these expectations is critical to creating loyalty and converting interest into revenue. Higher education institutions must recognize this requirement and invest in creating an engaging and user-friendly experience from the outset.

Managing Inventory Proactively

Real-time inventory tracking is required across online stores, campus locations, and special events to avoid stockouts or overstocking. A centralized inventory system enables institutions to balance supply and demand while minimizing waste and delays.

Streamlining Shipping and Fulfillment

Managing the distribution of physical goods like books, merchandise, and course materials can be complex. Institutions can simplify logistics by:

- Partnering with professional fulfillment providers to handle shipping and delivery.
- Leveraging existing campus resources, such as bookstores or mailrooms, for local distribution.

Simplifying Billing and Payments

A quick, convenient payment process is essential for customer satisfaction and efficiency. Institutions should implement payment tools that accommodate complex tax regulations, financial reporting standards, and diverse payment methods.

Exceptional Customer Support

Customer support plays a critical role in delivering a positive ecommerce experience. Institutions can build trust and satisfaction by offering robust support options, including:

- Email and phone support for personalized help or live chat for immediate assistance.
- Self-service resources like FAQs and knowledge bases to empower users to solve common issues independently.

Addressing Risks Proactively

Fraud, security breaches, and compliance violations are ever-present risks in ecommerce. Mitigating these threats requires a proactive approach, such as consolidating systems to reduce vulnerabilities and investing in fraud prevention tools. Regular audits and adherence to compliance standards ensure operations remain secure and trustworthy.

Addressing customer experience, logistics, risk, and financial challenges head-on, means institutions can confidently scale their ecommerce program. A strategic, proactive approach lays the foundation for sustainable growth and innovation.

Scaling Smart: The Path to Impactful Ecommerce Growth

Scaling an ecommerce initiative in higher education requires more than just growth — it demands a strategic approach that prioritizes goals, expands offerings, and embraces continuous improvement. Institutions that focus on these areas can drive sustained growth, engage broader audiences, and create lasting impact.



Diversify and Expand

To scale successfully, institutions must extend their ecommerce offerings beyond their initial scope. With a solid infrastructure in place to act as a central hub, schools can sell a wide range of courses, products, and services. Engaging alumni with branded merchandise, professional development courses, or lifelong learning opportunities is another route to expansion focusing on a broader audience. Additionally, adopting a multi-brand approach allows institutions to tailor experiences for specific customer groups, ensuring relevance and appeal across diverse markets.



Promote a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Scaling is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process. Institutions can track performance, uncover opportunities, and guide expansion strategies by leveraging data and analytics. Incorporating customer feedback ensures offerings stay aligned with user needs and preferences, enhancing satisfaction and loyalty.

Encouraging experimentation and innovation is equally crucial. Whether testing new ideas or staying ahead of industry trends, a creative approach can unlock new revenue streams that weren't even contemplated at the start of your digital commerce journey. Support this philosophy and culture with ongoing professional development — through certifications, workshops, or industry conferences — to keep teams sharp and forward-thinking.



Align with Institutional Goals

Ecommerce growth should always align with institutional priorities. By focusing on initiatives with high revenue potential and clear strategic value, such as professional development programs or donor-driven incentives, ecommerce efforts can support broader goals like student success, alumni engagement, or community outreach.

Action Plan and Checklist

A step-by-step roadmap to get started with ecommerce in higher education.

1. Planning and Goal Setting

- Define your vision for the ecommerce initiative, ensuring it aligns with the institution's mission.
- Set clear, measurable goals
- Prioritize essential features to prevent scope creep and keep the project on track.
- Develop a formal business case

2. Team Assembly and Partnerships

- Assemble a team with key roles and responsibilities
- Consider external partnerships

3. Technology and Infrastructure

- Select an appropriate ecommerce platform
- Integrate the platform with existing systems
- Prioritize scalability and flexibility
- Ensure security and user-friendliness
- Evaluate the level of support and maintenance offered by platform providers

4. Ecommerce Offering

- Identify and prioritize offerings based on institutional strengths and needs
- Roll out offerings gradually, collecting feedback and optimizing based on performance.

5. Launch and Operations

- Start with a pilot project to test strategies and refine processes
- Celebrate early wins and communicate successes to stakeholders.
- Manage inventory proactively with a centralized system.
- Streamline shipping and fulfillment
- Simplify billing and payments
- Provide exceptional customer support
- Address risks proactively

6. Scaling Growth

- Diversify and expand your ecommerce offerings beyond the initial scope.
- Promote a culture of continuous improvement by tracking performance, incorporating customer feedback, and encouraging experimentation.
- Align ecommerce growth with institutional goals, focusing on initiatives with high revenue potential and strategic value.



RED VAN

Ready to transform your institution with ecommerce but not sure where to start?

The experts at Red Van can guide you through the process of diversifying revenue streams, increasing engagement, and creating a digital-first institution.



Contact Us

redvanworkshop.com

About Red Van

Red Van is the foremost leader in ecommerce consulting and custom systems, building solutions that enable businesses to succeed in the digital marketplace. We truly operate as a collection of artists, engineers, and architects, assembling each team to meet the unique needs of our clients. Since our inception in 2012, our digital ecommerce experts have launched over 400 sites.