How Can We Fix Off-Track Technology Projects?

Module 5.3

Contents

This resource will be useful to those tasked with leading technology implementation on behalf of their department, senior leaders, and individuals actively engaged in implementation planning

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

The Ada Center

ADVISING SUCCESS NETWORK

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Taking Your Technology Project to the Doctor

It's the telltale sigh. It's the tight grimace, the exasperated hands thrown in the air, and the all-to-common metaphors: "a train wreck," "a dumpster fire," "a real slog." It is, in short, the familiar song and dance of a technology implementation gone awry.

However, though we may all know the lines of this particular ballad, our individual stories can often be quite different. "It's like the old Tolstoy quote," one CIO noted, "the one that goes: 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' That's the story of off-track technology implementations."

In other words, technology implementations can go off-track for a variety of reasons. As a result, solutions to off-track implementations can be equally varied. So, where do we start?

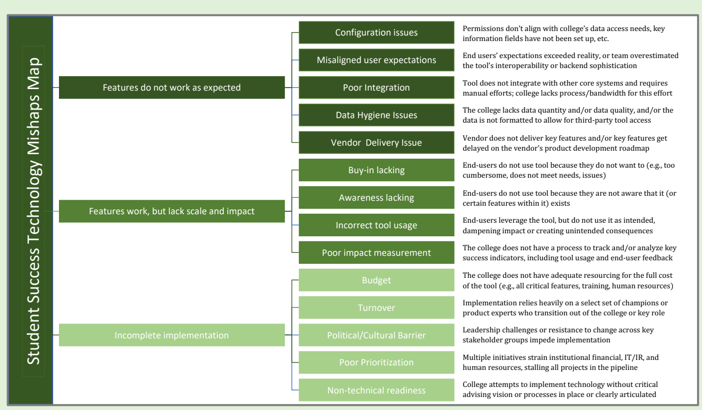
In short, while technology implementation challenges may come in every size and shape, turning those challenges around begins with the same first step: **Accurate, specific diagnostics.**

Think of this step like a doctor. A patient may come in with a headache, but it's important to accurately diagnose the root cause issue before jumping to a solution. Do they need Tylenol? Surgery? Just a glass of water and some electrolytes? The diagnostics matter.

In this module, we will be leveraging the "**Mishaps Map**," a tool developed by The Ada Center, to help pave a path forward for off-track implementations by figuring out:

1) **What**, specifically, is going wrong?

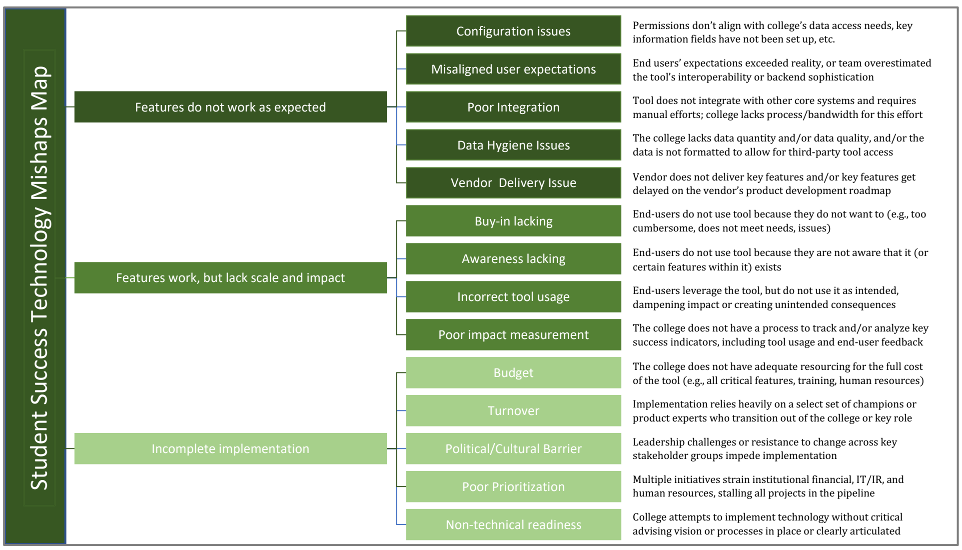
2) **Why** are these challenges are arising?



Then, equipped with this knowledge, we can then start to think strategically about which next steps and solutions make the most sense for our specific issues.

Introducing the Mishaps Map

Getting Started: Download the Mishaps Map



Links: We recommend downloading a copy of the Mishaps Map to reference across this guide. The link to the guide can be found here:

www.theadacenter.org/resources

About the Mishaps Map

The Mishaps Map was created in collaboration with education technology implementation experts and institution-based practitioners at community colleges and MSIs nationwide. The Map captures some of the most pernicious challenges to technology implementation and unpacks common root cause issues for each of them. While individual institution contexts (and therefore solutions to these issues) may vary, this tool can provide a means for leaders to begin the turnaround process with a foundational understanding of their project's specific barriers to success.

Step 1: What's Gone Awry? Identifying Specific Symptoms

As a first step in our diagnosis, we need to be able to describe our key challenges with a deeper level of specificity. The **Mishaps Map** outlines three main categories for you and your team to consider. Below, you can also find common "symptoms" that tend to be associated with each of the three mishap categories:

Categories:	Common Symptoms: *What might this look like on campus?*
Features do not work as expected	• Certain data fields (e.g., student club participation, scholarship status) are missing • Features are more difficult to use than expected (e.g., require extensive manual effort, interface is clunky) • Data fields are presenting inaccurate information • Features shown in the product demo are missing altogether, not available for implementation
Features work, but lack scale and impact	• Few people use the product at all • People use the product, but are not using it fully (e.g., not using all available features) • People use the product, but use it incorrectly (e.g., incorrect or incomplete inputs) • Institution cannot tell whether product is being used and are unsure about overall impact
Incomplete implementation	• Project lacks funding • Project is missing clear leadership and/or political will • IT and other team members are stretched thin across multiple demanding projects • Project is waiting on answers to process-related questions (e.g., What should the new advising workflow be once the technology is implemented?)

Step 1: What's Gone Awry?
Identifying Specific Symptoms

Defining Our "What"

Which of the options on the prior page most represent what is going awry in your implementation? Check all that apply:

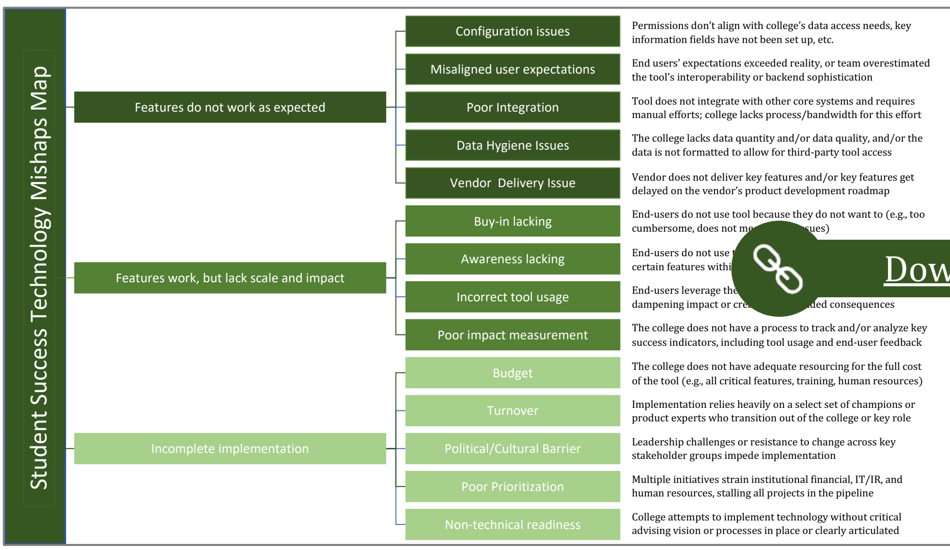
- [ ] Features do not work as expected
- [ ] Features work, but lack scale and impact
- [ ] Incomplete implementation

Getting Granular

For each of the categorical options that are relevant to your institution, what are the specific symptoms that you notice? For example, if you feel that "Features do not work as expected," which features aren't working? In what way?

Step 2: Breaking Down the "Why"

Now that we have a sense of the "what," we need to try to isolate why our implementation is experiencing challenges. Consult your list of granular symptoms from Step 1. Then, reference the **Mishaps Map**...



[Download Link]

This section of the **Mishaps Map** lists common root cause issues of implementation challenges.

Which "Why"?

As you look across the **Mishaps Map**, which root cause issues seem most likely to be at play at your institution? Jot these down.

Step 2: Breaking Down the “Why”

Which ”Why”? Example Notes Sheet

The What	Symptom Details	The Why: Suspected Root Causes
Features don’t work as expected	Missing Data: Student profile page is missing: • Data field for ABCD scholarship status • Student Peer Advisor tag	Configuration Issues: Some of these are custom data fields that we did not ask the vendor’s implementation team to set up Integration Issue: Some data is in niche tool, which has not been linked to our new system
	• Inaccurate Data: Student academic plan viewer is showing inaccurate progress to degree information	Data Hygiene Issue: After talking to IT/IR, it seems our degree audit is feeding the progress to degree data, and the data in the audit is filled with dated course rules and requirements
	• Advisor complaints: The user interface is not as robust as what we were shown during the product demonstration	Misaligned User Expectations: The product demonstration showcases the most robust version of the product, which includes all the bells and whistles; we will only be implementing some of these features due to cost constraints.

Getting to these specific insights may require you to seek input from around campus. However, teams find that this process pushes them to ask better and better questions about their challenges. This lays the foundation for their turnaround success by assisting them in pinpointing solutions that directly address their unique challenges. These insights can also be used to guide efforts to procure outside support by informing RFP language, vetting third-party providers for their expertise, etc.

Step 3: Figuring Out the "What Next?": A Team Discussion Guide

The following discussion guide should be used to help teams, including technology project leads, end-user representatives, IT/Data representatives, and relevant senior leadership representatives to brainstorm next steps that are most critical given your institution's specific challenge areas and root cause issues.

We recognize that having discussions about off-track projects can be difficult. The Ada Center has found that it is therefore helpful to ground these discussions with certain group norms that focus the discussion on productive problem-solving rather than "blaming and shaming."

Example Group Discussion Norms

- **Center Respect and Empathy:** Acknowledge that we are all doing/did the best we could with the information and resources we had at the time.
- **Keep The Goal (Students) In Focus:** This work is difficult. Implementation challenges happen at every institution – it is how we move forward that makes the difference for our students.
- **Stay Future-Focused:** At this point, we should already have a list of challenges and potential root causes guided by the **Mishaps Map**. Focus this time on ideas and strategies for improvement.
- **No Blame Games**: Focus on the issues, not the person. Finger-pointing is counter-productive to problem-solving
- **One Speaker at a Time:** This prevents cross-talk and ensures that everyone has an opportunity to contribute.
- **Set Time Limits:** Avoid circling a topic ad nauseum. If a conclusion cannot be reached, opt for a method to move the discussion forward (e.g., set up a parking lot, list of open questions, etc.)

Step 3: Figuring Out the "What Next?": A Team Discussion Guide

Our Team Discussion Norms

Consider the example norms on the prior page. Do any of these seem like they would be helpful for your team? Are there others that you would like to add before beginning your discussion? Jot these down.

Step 3: Figuring Out the "What Next?": A Team Discussion Guide

Team Discussion Logistics and Guiding Questions

This guide can be used in several different ways, depending on your team's preferences and context. Options include:

Group Discussion
Team works through guide live, as a group; suggest selecting one team discussion leader and notetaker

Facilitated Discussion
Outside facilitator guides team through the discussion; helpful for larger teams and/or teams that anticipate touching on more contentious or complex topics

Asynchronous Reflection and Share-Out
Team members fill out and submit individual responses to discussion questions, review group inputs, and meet to focus on sense-making across responses (rather than discussion questions themselves); best for smaller, geographically dispersed teams with a strong culture of trust and candor.

Consider your team's capacity, bandwidth, and dynamics as you determine how to approach this discussion.

Step 3: Figuring Out the "What Next?": A Team Discussion Guide

Team Discussion: Guiding Questions

1) Re-centering: Why do we believe that this implementation is important to our institution? To our students?

2) Check: Do we feel like we have accurately captured all of the main symptoms (the "what") of our off-track implementation? If not, what else should we add?

3) Check: Do we feel like we have a comprehensive list of root causes (the "why") that are driving some of our biggest challenges?

4) Prioritize Issues: Which of these root cause issues are the most urgent and important to address? Why? (Hint: Consider the scale of the issue, impact on students, equity)

5) Brainstorm: What are some potential next steps to address these issues (Note: We suggest going in order of priority, but aiming to brainstorm for all issues over time)? If we are unsure about next steps, what open questions do we need to investigate further to help us move forward?

6) Which next step ideas or open questions feel the most challenging to address? Why? Which steps or questions feel the most feasible? Why?

7) What stakeholders will need to be brought in to lead and/or address these open questions and/or next step items? Will they be amenable to assisting? If not, what additional steps may need to be taken to bring them on board?

8) Do we have the internal knowledge, skill, and leadership buy-in to complete next steps? If not, what do we need to do to source the support we need?

9) Do we have the internal capacity and bandwidth to complete our next steps? If not, how might we need to sequence and prioritize these items and other ongoing obligations to ensure our implementation turnaround moves forward? And/or, what resourcing might we need to create added capacity for this work?

10) What processes should we put in place to ensure we continue to move forward on this work?

Step 3: Figuring Out the "What Next?": A Team Notes Sheet

As you work through next steps, it can be helpful to return to your notes sheet to jot down your ideas.

Next steps should include:

- Action Item (ideally directly tied to specific root cause)
- Action Item Leader
- Time Horizon

The What	Symptom Details	The Why: Suspected Root Causes	Next Steps
Features don't work as expected	Missing Data: Student profile page is missing: • Data field for ABCD scholarship status • Student Peer Advisor tag	Configuration Issues: Some of these are custom data fields that we did not ask the vendor's implementation team to set up Integration Issue: Some data is in XYZ tool, which has not been linked to our new system	• Rishabh Vaka to meet with vendor team next week to inquire about configuration changes and integration with XYZ tool

Next Steps

Congratulations! You have completed Module 5.

For additional resources on technology implementation, we recommend reviewing Module 1.3 How Can I Continue Learning?, which lists other critical guides and resources from a variety of organizations including Complete College America, the Advising Success Network, EDUCAUSE, and others.

- *Read and Plan* Module 5.1 How Do We Effectively Implement Technology Projects?
  2 - 3 hours
- *Read and Reflect* Module 5.2 How Can We Augment Our Implementation Support Capacity?
  1 - 2 hours
- *Read and Plan* Module 5.3 How Can We Fix Off-Track Technology Projects?
  2 - 3 hours

About This Series

This five-part instructional series on Student Success Technology is designed for minority serving institutions (MSIs) and their friends. Taken together, these instructional resources aim to provide practitioners with the tools to establish and maintain a technology ecosystem that effectively supports the institution's broader student success and equity goals. The exercises and resources within these modules are also widely applicable across the higher education field.

This resource was compiled with generous funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and was authored by The Ada Center based on six years of insight from The Ada Center's work with hundreds of MSIs and access-focused institutions. The curriculum would not be possible without the thought partnership and support from Complete College America and the Advising Success Network.

For additional curriculum modules, please visit:
www.completecollege.org/navigating-student-success-technology

For questions about this resource, or to explore additional higher education technology research and tools, please visit www.theadacenter.org/resources.

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