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Original Paper

Digital Transformation in Student Affairs: Overcoming Socio-Technical Barriers in China's "One-Stop" Student Communities

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Abstract

Under the strategies of "Digital China", higher education institutions are undergoing profound digital transformation. However, current initiatives, specifically the "One-Stop" student community model, face challenges such as data silos and collaborative inertia. This study addresses the gap between technical implementation and institutional governance by adopting a conceptual analysis approach grounded in Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory. Through a systematic review of national policy guidelines (2019-2025) and implementation reports from pilot universities, five structural barriers were identified: value misalignment between instrumental and educational rationality, technical fragmentation through persistent data silos, organizational inertia resisting networked collaboration, bottlenecks in technical empowerment, and lack of distinctiveness in educational models. To address these socio-technical misalignments, a four-tiered integrative framework—Philosophy, Technology, Mechanism, and Ecology—is proposed, advocating for the joint optimization of values, infrastructure, processes, and culture. By shifting the focus from instrumental rationality to value rationality, this study offers a theoretical pathway for sustainable digital governance in higher education. Although the "One-Stop" student community model is specific to the Chinese higher education system, the underlying socio-technical challenges it reveals—such as data fragmentation, organisational silos, and the tension between administrative efficiency and student-centred values—are widely shared across higher education systems globally, suggesting that the analytical framework may inform digital governance reform in diverse institutional contexts.

Keywords

digital intelligence empowerment, "one-stop" student community, collaborative education, higher education management, student affairs, socio-technical systems

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has emerged as a global imperative for reshaping higher education governance, teaching, and research ecosystems (Prabowo, H., & Bandur, A., 2022, p. 5; Bond, M., Marín, V. I., Dolch, C., Bedenlier, S., & Zawacki-Richter, O., 2018, p. 48). While institutions worldwide grapple with the integration of digital technologies into student services, the challenges of data fragmentation, organizational inertia, and misaligned governance structures remain persistent (Benavides, L. M. C., Tamayo, A. J. A., Arango, S. M. D., & Branch, B. J. W., 2020, p. 3291; Williamson, B., & Piattoeva, N., 2022, pp. 3515-3531).

In China, this transformation has taken a distinctive form. Since 2019, the Ministry of Education has promoted the construction of "One-Stop" student community comprehensive management models, positioning digital governance as a key pathway for reforming student affairs under the broader national strategy of "Digital China" (Ministry of Education, 2023). This initiative seeks to shift from the traditional "School–College–Class" vertical management model to a more integrated, community-based approach supported by digital intelligence technologies such as AI, big data, IoT, and blockchain.

However, a critical gap remains: current research and practice predominantly focus on technical implementation, while the institutional and structural barriers that hinder sustainable adoption are underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by drawing on Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory to critically examine the misalignments between technological infrastructure and organizational structures in the "One-Stop" model, and proposes a four-tiered integrative framework for sustainable digital governance in higher education.

In this context, "digital intelligence technologies"—represented by AI, big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), and blockchain—are reshaping the paradigm of university education with unprecedented depth. At the current stage, "digital intelligence empowerment" has evolved from a superficial grafting of "tools to scenarios" to a deep reconstruction of "paradigms to ecology". It is no longer merely a tool for management services but the core engine of collaborative education and a crucial lever for implementing the fundamental task of fostering character and civic virtue.

In this study, "collaborative education" (xietong yuren) refers to the coordinated engagement of multiple institutional actors—including academic departments, student affairs offices, logistics services, and external stakeholders—in supporting students' holistic development. Unlike discipline-specific instruction, collaborative education emphasises the integration of ideological guidance, academic support, life services, and psychological care across organisational boundaries within the student

community.

This study contributes both theoretically and practically: it extends holistic education theory by applying a socio-technical lens to student community governance, and it provides university administrators with a structured diagnostic framework for addressing key bottlenecks in "One-Stop" community construction.

This article proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, adopting a Socio-Technical Systems (STS) perspective. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 critically examines the structural barriers in the current "One-Stop" student community model. Section 5 proposes a four-tiered integrative framework. Section 6 discusses the theoretical contributions and cross-contextual implications. Finally, Section 7 concludes with practical implications and future directions.

2. Theoretical Framework: A Socio-Technical Perspective

To analyse the challenges of the "One-Stop" model, we adopt the Socio-Technical Systems (STS) theory. This framework posits that organizational performance depends on the joint optimization of the technical subsystem (processes, tasks, technology) and the social subsystem (people, relationships, culture) (Appelbaum, S. H., 1997, pp. 452-463).

In the context of student communities, current failures often stem from a misalignment between these systems. For instance, the deployment of "smart" platforms (technical) frequently clashes with traditional, compartmentalized administrative structures (social), creating what we define as "collaborative inertia." This perspective moves beyond a techno-centric view, allowing us to diagnose barriers not as mere software glitches, but as deep-seated institutional misalignments similar to those observed in other higher education systems (Lakhno, M., Rageth, L., He, D., & Perich, R., 2026, pp. 1-21).

Within this socio-technical framework, it is notable that current research on "one-stop" student communities generally focuses on practical dilemmas and feasible pathways (Wan, K., & Ren, Y., 2020, pp. 98-104; Zhou, L., Wu, S., Zhou, M., & Li, F., 2020, pp. 501-519; Yang, Z., Wu, D., & Zheng, X., 2018, pp. 16-22), while the deeper systemic obstacles arising from the misalignment between technical and social subsystems remain insufficiently examined.

3. Methodology

Given the nascent stage of deep digital integration in student communities and the predominantly policy-driven nature of this reform, this study adopts a conceptual analysis approach (Jabareen, Y., 2009, pp. 49-62). Conceptual analysis is particularly suited for examining emerging phenomena where empirical data is limited but where policy texts, institutional reports, and theoretical frameworks provide rich sources for constructing analytical models.

The study proceeded in three phases. First, we conducted a systematic review of national policy guidelines issued between 2019 and 2025 regarding the "One-Stop" student community construction, including directives from the Ministry of Education and implementation reports from pilot universities. Second, drawing on the Socio-Technical Systems (STS) framework, we performed a thematic analysis of the identified policy documents and existing literature to diagnose recurring structural barriers. Third, based on the identified socio-technical misalignments, we constructed the "Philosophy–Technology–Mechanism–Ecology" four-tiered integrative framework as a prescriptive model for sustainable digital governance.

This approach is consistent with established methodological traditions in higher education policy research, where conceptual and analytical frameworks are developed through the synthesis of policy documents, theoretical perspectives, and cross-contextual comparisons (Tight, M., 2012; Kezar, A., 2018). While this study does not present primary empirical data, the framework is grounded in documented implementation challenges reported by both Chinese and international scholars, providing a robust basis for theoretical contribution.

4. Structural Barriers in Digital Governance: An STS Diagnosis

Applying the sts lens, we identify five structural barriers.

4.1 Value Misalignment: Instrumental Rationality vs. Educational Logic

As observed in practice, a "cognitive dilemma" exists where technological deployment prioritizes administrative convenience over student development. Similar to the institutional and structural barriers identified by Lakhno et al. (2026) in higher education governance, there is a tendency to view digital tools merely as administrative instruments rather than enablers of educational development.

The construction objectives and schemes in some universities lack specificity, often remaining at the level of physical space and basic activities. They have failed to form a systematic pattern characterised by "data co-ordination, stratified objectives, and clear rights and responsibilities" (Wu, Q., 2025, pp. 75-78). International scholars have similarly warned that the rapid datafication of education requires critical governance to prevent algorithmic decision-making from oversimplifying complex student developmental needs.

4.2 Technical Fragmentation: The Persistence of Data Silos

A critical technical barrier is the lack of unified data standards. Student data remains scattered across isolated systems (Academic Affairs, Logistics, Student Services), creating "information islands". As highlighted in our analysis of implementation issues, the construction of new platforms often results in "new silos arising before old ones are levelled". This fragmentation prevents the formation of a holistic student profile required for precision support. This finding echoes the broader challenge of "digital silos" in higher education worldwide, where legacy systems and vendor lock-in create fragmented data ecosystems.

4.3 Organizational Inertia: Vertical Hierarchies vs. Networked Collaboration

The most significant "social system" barrier is the structural conflict between traditional vertical management and the horizontal requirements of digital governance. The "One-Stop" model demands cross-departmental data flow, yet current organizational structures suffer from "compartmentalization" and "collaborative inertia". Without a mechanism to clarify rights and responsibilities, data sharing becomes a burden rather than a collective asset. Such structural conflicts mirror what Kezar (2018) describes as the "organized anarchy" of universities, where loosely coupled systems resist the coordinated change that digital governance demands.

4.4 Bottlenecks in Technical Empowerment

Some universities have weak internal technical capabilities and limited funding guarantees, making it difficult to meet professional demands such as platform development and data security protection. Existing digital applications often remain at the conceptual level, with insufficient data collection and analysis capabilities. They fail to integrate deeply with ideological and political education, making it difficult to meet students' personalised and precise needs (Ye, R., Ma, H., & Hu, W., 2025, pp. 76-82). This reflects a broader concern in higher education literature that digital technologies often prioritise institutional administrative efficiency over the actual "usefulness" and learning benefits perceived by students (Henderson, M., Selwyn, N., & Aston, R., 2017, pp. 1567-1579).

4.5 Lack of Distinctiveness and Effectiveness in Educational Models

A "one-size-fits-all" phenomenon is prevalent, with many universities failing to form a unique community culture combined with their own operational characteristics. Traditional management service models are extensive and rough, contradicting student expectations for precise and personalised services. Furthermore, channels and incentive mechanisms for student participation in community governance are imperfect, resulting in the failure to fully activate their subjectivity and endogenous motivation (Xu, X., 2025, pp. 59-63).

5. The Four-Tiered Integrative Framework: Philosophy, Technology, Mechanism, and Ecology

To address the socio-technical misalignments identified above, we propose a four-tiered integrative framework (see Figure 1). This model moves beyond piecemeal solutions, advocating for a systemic restructuring where values, infrastructure, processes, and culture are jointly optimized.

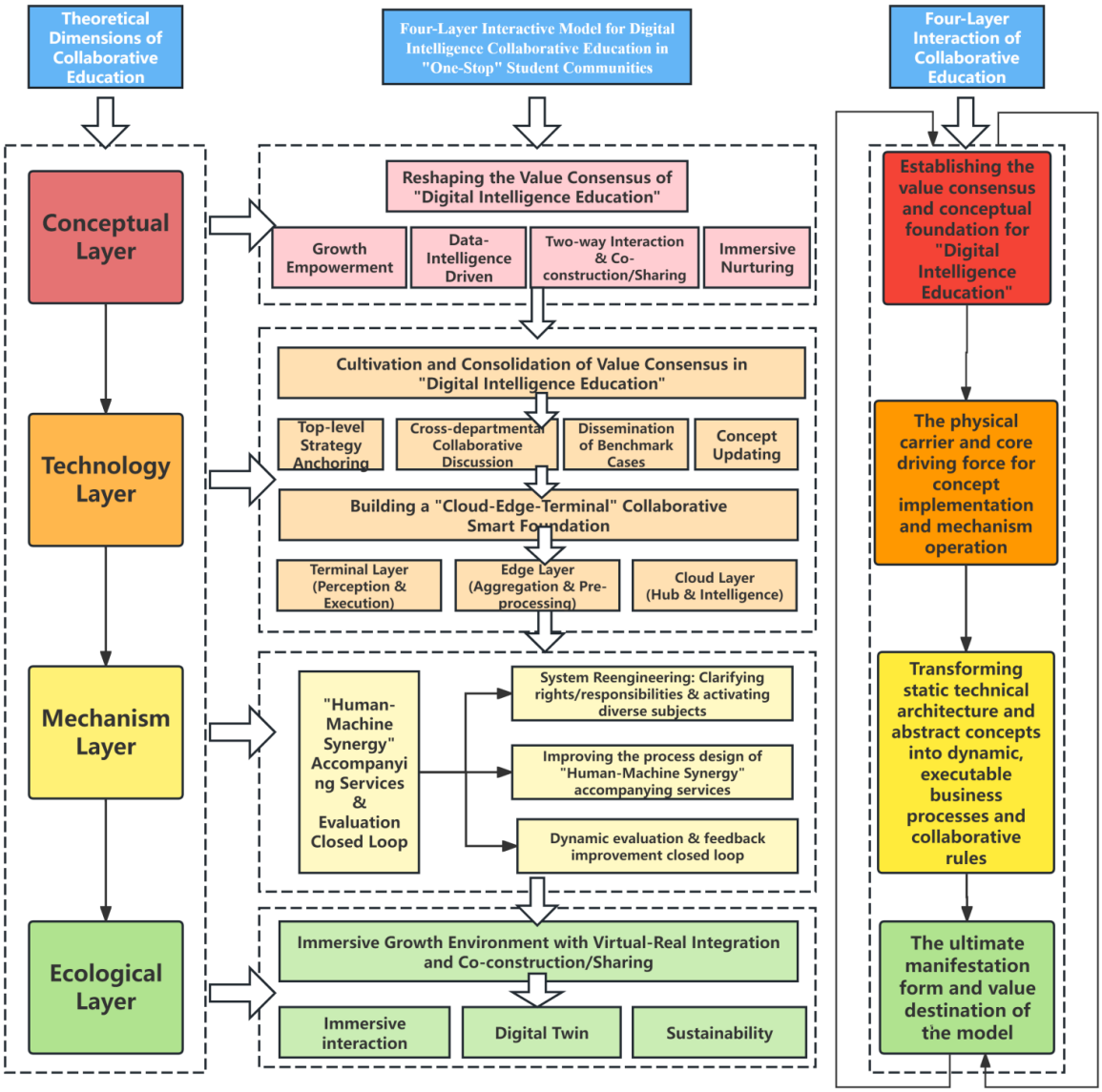

Figure 1. Four-Tiered Integrative Framework for Digital Intelligence-Enabled Collaborative Education in "One-Stop" Student Communities

5.1 The Value Dimension: From Instrumental to Value Rationality

The foundational layer requires a philosophical shift from "managing students" to "serving development." We argue for "Digital Humanism" as the core guiding principle. This involves establishing ethical norms that prioritize student privacy and agency over algorithmic efficiency. For instance, in demand profiling and affective computing, the goal must be to enhance the emotional connection between teachers and students, rather than mere behavioral monitoring. This aligns with Selwyn's (2019) critique that educational technology discourse often privileges efficiency over equity, and with the broader call for "digital humanism" in higher education governance (Williamson, B.,

2017). Research has shown that university residential experiences, when effectively managed and supported by holistic programmes, significantly contribute to students' development of generic competencies and well-being (Cheng, MWT, & Chan, CKY, 2019, pp. 31-48), reinforcing the necessity of a value-driven rather than efficiency-driven approach to community digitalization.

In practice, this requires that all planning and design phases of platform construction take as their core logical starting point whether the technological application truly benefits students' comprehensive development. Through demand profiling, affective computing, and participatory modelling, students should be integrated into the entire chain of community governance—decision-making, execution, and evaluation—thereby realising the identity of "my community, my choice". Furthermore, a comprehensive "digital intelligence literacy" improvement plan should be promoted, covering data thinking, the use of intelligent tools, online collaborative working methods, and technical ethics for university leaders, academic staff, counsellors, and students, thereby eliminating the "digital divide" and "cognitive barriers". Finally, an organisational culture of "openness, sharing, and collaboration" should be cultivated, fostering a cultural atmosphere where "data sharing is valuable and business collaboration is honourable" to softly resolve departmental barriers.

5.2 The Infrastructure Dimension: The "Middle Platform" Architecture

To resolve the technical fragmentation, institutions must transition from isolated applications to a unified "Middle Platform" (Zhongtai) architecture. This approach creates a data lake that aggregates multi-source data without altering original legacy systems, effectively bridging the gap between stable backend data and flexible frontend applications. Furthermore, the integration of Digital Twin technology allows for the mapping of physical community spaces into virtual environments, supporting precise decision-making. Critically, the infrastructure must incorporate privacy-by-design principles, as large-scale data collection raises legitimate concerns about privacy and algorithmic fairness. The boundaries of data use, as well as the transparency and explainability of algorithmic decisions in areas such as financial aid and academic early warning, require explicit governance protocols.

At the operational level, top-level design must abandon the "chimney-style" construction model and instead build a unified smart service platform as the sole official entry point. Universities should construct data and business middle platforms to achieve unified data collection, cleaning, governance, modelling, and service provision. The principal university leadership should spearhead the establishment of a Data Governance Committee to enforce data interface standards and sharing specifications. Data lake technology enables cross-system aggregation without disrupting legacy infrastructure, prioritizing "data availability" before pursuing deeper integration. Focusing on application scenarios, technology must deepen from "connection" to "intelligence", forming a scenario matrix characterised by "same screen, different faces; same campus, different policies". By fusing multi-source data, dynamic, multi-dimensional, and predictive student growth models should be constructed, with more refined early warning and intervention systems developed for academic

difficulties, psychological crises, and career development, ensuring that algorithms are explainable and interventions are compassionate. The AI assistant should be upgraded from a simple Q&A bot to a proactive agent capable of pushing personalised activity information, learning resources, and consulting services based on user profiles, crucially supporting "one-click transfer to human staff" to form a "human–machine collaborative" accompanying service.

5.3 The Mechanism Dimension: Human-In-The-Loop Collaboration

Technology alone cannot drive change; it requires process re-engineering. We propose a "Human-in-the-Loop" (HITL) mechanism to overcome collaborative inertia. Instead of fully automated decision-making, the system should generate "Student Growth Attention Reports" that trigger human intervention. This creates a closed feedback loop of "warning–push–intervention–feedback", ensuring that technology empowers rather than replaces the counselor's professional judgment. This mechanism should be complemented by a process-oriented evaluation system that uses information technology to record student growth trajectories, shifting from static outcome assessment to dynamic developmental tracking (Wang, H., 2024, pp. 45-48).

Specifically, the system can automatically screen "warning lists" via AI models (e.g., academic prediction, psychological risk models). These lists, packaged as Student Growth Attention Reports containing warning reasons, supporting data, and preliminary suggestions, are pushed to the corresponding counsellors or academic mentors via the workbench. Mentors then decide on intervention methods (online care, scheduled interviews, contacting parents, etc.) based on the report and their personal knowledge of the student, recording the process and results into the system. The system continues to track the student's subsequent data to evaluate the intervention's effect, forming a complete closed loop of "warning–push–intervention–feedback–evaluation". The human–machine collaboration model also facilitates the flexibilisation of organisational structures, empowering the "One-Stop" Student Community Management Service Centre with greater coordination authority. A "whistle-blowing and reporting" mechanism should be established: when the community identifies student needs, relevant departments must respond immediately. Data sharing contributions and cross-departmental problem-solving performance should be incorporated into the performance appraisal systems of departments, providing substantive rewards to academic staff who deeply engage in community guidance and activities.

5.4 The Ecosystem Dimension: Co-Creation and Student Agency

The final layer focuses on the sustainable culture of the community. Governance should shift from a top-down mandate to a model of co-creation. By providing digital tools for student organizations and integrating alumni resources, the community becomes an open ecosystem. Crucially, feedback mechanisms must be established to transform students from passive managed objects into active participants in community governance. This includes cultivating student self-management organizations and encouraging participation in community consultation, co-construction, and

co-governance, thereby expanding the space for student autonomy (Sun, X., 2025, pp. 69-72).

In practice, physical spaces such as community shared living rooms, seminar rooms, and maker spaces should be deeply integrated with digital platform functions like reservation, content sharing, and online collaboration, creating educational scenarios that blend online and offline elements. Through the platform, high-quality social resources—including alumni, enterprise mentors, and social experts—can be invited into the community via online lectures, micro-courses, and one-on-one consultations, thereby expanding the boundaries of educational resources. The platform should be used to conveniently collect real-time feedback from students and teachers regarding community services and activities. Data analysis of common needs and issues will drive the continuous optimisation of services, forming a closed loop of "perception–analysis–decision–execution–evaluation". The platform design must emphasise humanistic care and emotional connection; whilst pursuing efficiency, it must incorporate warm interactions. Critical affairs must retain offline human channels, and important humanistic care must be delivered by real people to prevent the "dehumanization" of educational work.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes two primary theoretical contributions. First, by applying the STS framework to the Chinese "One-Stop" student community model, it demonstrates that the challenges of digital transformation in student affairs are not merely technical problems but deeply embedded socio-technical misalignments. This extends the STS literature into the under-explored domain of student affairs governance in non-Western higher education contexts.

Second, the proposed four-tiered framework (Philosophy–Technology–Mechanism–Ecology) offers an integrative lens that moves beyond the piecemeal approach common in current practice. Unlike existing models that treat digital infrastructure, organizational reform, and cultural change as separate initiatives, this framework argues for their joint optimization—a core principle of STS theory.

6.2 Cross-Contextual Implications

While grounded in the Chinese context, the structural barriers identified in this study—data silos, collaborative inertia, and the dominance of instrumental rationality—are not unique to China. Similar challenges— including data silos, collaborative inertia, and the dominance of instrumental rationality—have been widely documented in the international higher education literature. Studies from Australian and North American contexts further confirm that these structural barriers transcend the Chinese setting. This suggests that the four-tiered framework may have broader applicability as a diagnostic and prescriptive tool for digital governance reform globally, though its transferability requires further empirical validation in diverse institutional contexts.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. As a conceptual analysis based on policy documents and existing literature, it does not provide primary empirical validation of the proposed framework. Future research should employ mixed-methods approaches—including surveys of stakeholders and case studies of pilot institutions—to test the framework's explanatory power and practical utility. Additionally, the framework's applicability to different types of institutions (research universities, teaching universities, vocational colleges) warrants investigation, as their organizational structures and digital maturity levels may moderate the effectiveness of the proposed interventions.

7. Conclusions

The digital transformation of student communities represents a paradigm shift from "management" to "governance." This study argues that overcoming data silos and collaborative inertia requires more than technical upgrades; it demands a systemic socio-technical realignment. By applying STS theory to the Chinese "One-Stop" student community model, this study identified five structural barriers—value misalignment, technical fragmentation, organisational inertia, bottlenecks in technical empowerment, and lack of distinctiveness in educational models—and proposed a four-tiered integrative framework encompassing Philosophy, Technology, Mechanism, and Ecology.

Compared with existing studies that address digital infrastructure, organisational reform, and cultural change as separate initiatives, the proposed framework emphasises their joint optimisation, offering a more holistic approach to digital governance in student affairs. This represents a theoretical advancement in applying socio-technical thinking to the under-explored field of student community governance.

Implications for practice are threefold. First, university leaders must prioritise data governance standards before purchasing new hardware, establishing Data Governance Committees to enforce unified data interface specifications. Second, the role of student affairs staff must evolve to include data literacy, shifting from administrative execution to data-informed mentorship supported by "Human-in-the-Loop" mechanisms. Third, institutions must foster a culture of openness where data sharing is incentivised and student participation in community governance is actively encouraged.

Nevertheless, as a conceptual analysis, this study has not been empirically validated. Future research should employ mixed-methods approaches—including stakeholder surveys and case studies of pilot institutions—to test the framework's explanatory power across different types of higher education institutions. Additionally, the transferability of this framework to non-Chinese higher education contexts warrants further investigation.

By implementing the proposed four-tiered framework, higher education institutions can transform student communities from fragmented administrative units into integrated, smart ecosystems that truly support holistic student growth.

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