The Evolving Conversation About Quality in Online Learning

By Kristi DePaul

INSIDE HIGHER ED

WITH SUPPORT FROM

NC SARA

Table of Contents

Now Is the Time:
Quality Distance Education Within Reach

In the Fall 2020, 2,201 SARA-participating institutions reported a **93% increase** in exclusively distance education enrollments. Nearly **6 million students** took distance education courses exclusively that term. Public institutions had a **144% increase** year-over-year in exclusively distance education enrollments. Almost **60%** of SARA institutions surveyed indicated they were planning to continue some or all of their emergency remote offerings via online learning after the pandemic.

These data from NC-SARA's most recent Annual Data Report represent a mere snapshot of some of the massive changes for students and institutions that have been taking place during the global COVID-19 pandemic. And as this report and other reports convey, online learning will likely only increase given the access, flexibility, and experience it can afford 21st century learners.

NC-SARA is pleased to sponsor this special report about quality online learning. As members of an organization dedicated to distance education, NC-SARA's states provide students with assurance of consumer protections such as onsite visits, outcomes reporting, refund policies, closure processes, surety bonds, and tuition recovery funds. The more than 2,300 SARA institutions must meet **eleven student consumer protection requirements** annually in order to participate. These activities support NC-SARA's mission to provide broad access to postsecondary education opportunities to students across the country; to increase the quality and value of higher learning credentials earned via distance education; and to assure students are well served in a rapidly changing education landscape.

We all have a critical need to attend to quality in distance education – the pandemic has illuminated this need more forcefully than ever.

Sincerely,

Lori Williams, Ph.D.
President & CEO
NC-SARA

NC SARA
National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements

Introduction

The watershed moment for online learning in higher education happened at a time when many students, faculty and staff would have been preparing for spring break. When the COVID-19 pandemic exploded into the national consciousness in March 2020, it upended long-held plans and deep-seated norms. As of this writing, it remains a central topic of concern and deliberation.

Because of it, online learning rose to prominence in a way that may have otherwise taken years (if not decades) to transpire. Digital forms of postsecondary education were suddenly thrust into the national conversation, as almost all educators and students moved to what became known as emergency remote instruction for at least several months.

Circumstances for all involved were less than ideal. Sofas and dining tables took the place of desks found in traditional classrooms and lecture halls. Educators and peers now had a window, albeit limited, into students' personal lives. As one expert told me: "We saw them in a totally different context—we actually came into their homes." For some learners, this meant a sense of privacy and well-being were compromised.

For others, it meant managing an array of distractions and uncertainty as schools, day cares and other facilities also were shuttered. Learning, then, often included cameo appearances from family members, roommates, or pets, along with myriad logistical challenges related to technical issues as some households experienced multiple video calls happening simultaneously.

Inequities were also on display. "Students' entire lives were brought with them to the virtual classroom in a way that was more difficult to set aside than in a face-to-face classroom," with their backgrounds literally evident in a way that made inequality more visible, says Matthew Rascoff, vice provost for digital education at Stanford University.

"Some of the students were obviously in very large homes, probably vacation homes, and some were in little rooms, or even a closet," recalls Anna Levia, a reference and instruction librarian embedded in Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR), a course taken by about 95 percent of Stanford undergraduate students.

All of this happened with an absence of the careful design process that typically occurs in preparing a course for online delivery, and largely without the extensive training that most colleges and universities either require or offer to online instructors. Educators from four U.S. institutions wrote an article for *EDUCAUSE Review* that became the organization's most widely shared piece at the time.

"Those who have built online programs over the years will attest that effective online learning aims to be a learning community and supports learners not just instructionally but with co-curricular engagement and other social supports," they argued. "Ultimately, effective online education requires an investment in an ecosystem of learner supports, which take time to identify and build. Relative to other options, simple online content delivery can be quick and inexpensive, but confusing that with robust

online education is akin to academics confusing lectures with the totality of residential education."

This attempt at widespread technology-enabled learning almost certainly influenced the long-simmering debates about the relative quality of online versus in-person learning, including how to judge which types of education are best for different subsets of students. But exactly *what* we learned from the pandemic era (from which we have yet to emerge) is unclear.

We dig into this set of issues throughout this report, starting with an exploration of the past and steady states of online learning. How has the pandemic catalyzed the modality, and has it dramatically changed the typical online student profile? Who judges quality, and what are the current perceptions of online learning?

Naturally, people are unaccustomed to analyzing the very recent past or approaching it with nostalgia. Yet for most of us, routines that were the essence of our daily lives shifted so significantly in such a short period that it isn't unreasonable to look at higher education through a very different lens in 2022.

What has become of this collective forced experiment? Has it afforded academe the opportunity to collectively reevaluate its approach to program design and delivery? What concerns persist regarding equity, access and quality, and how might those be mitigated?

In this report, we explore these questions and aim to provide some initial analysis and insights based on data and interviews with a dozen experts—academic, technologists and analysts—within higher education and across the private sector.

I also drew on 15 years of experience in which I held roles in public and private institutions in the U.S.; helped to establish university programs in Africa, Central Asia and South America; led ed-tech marketing and communications efforts across five continents; and supported higher education leaders, association teams and post-secondary-focused firms.

The reporting that follows focuses on the current state and the evolving debate about quality: who gets to decide its parameters, and what is the general sentiment about online learning as it stands. We hope the following sections will help you navigate this challenging time and better support your students and campus communities, both online and off. ◾

--Kristi DePaul

Thoughts, comments, suggestions?

Contact us as editor@insidehighered.com
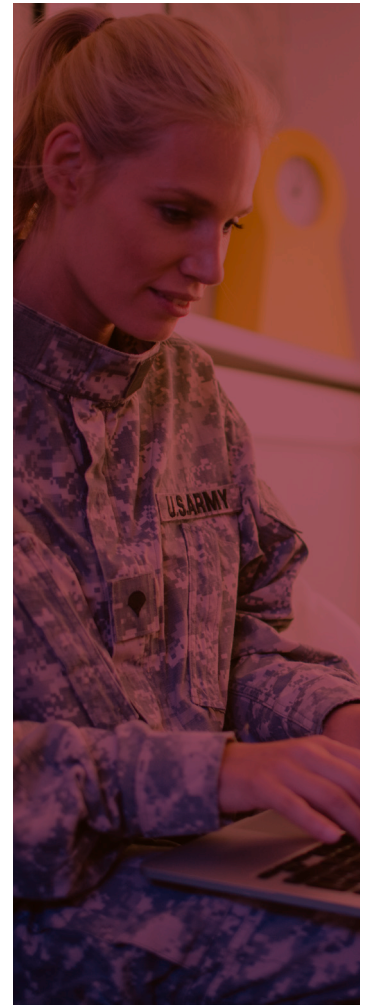
Quality Distance Education Within Reach

NC SARA

National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements is committed to helping strengthen quality distance education programs for every student.

Learn more about our work at www.nc-sara.org.
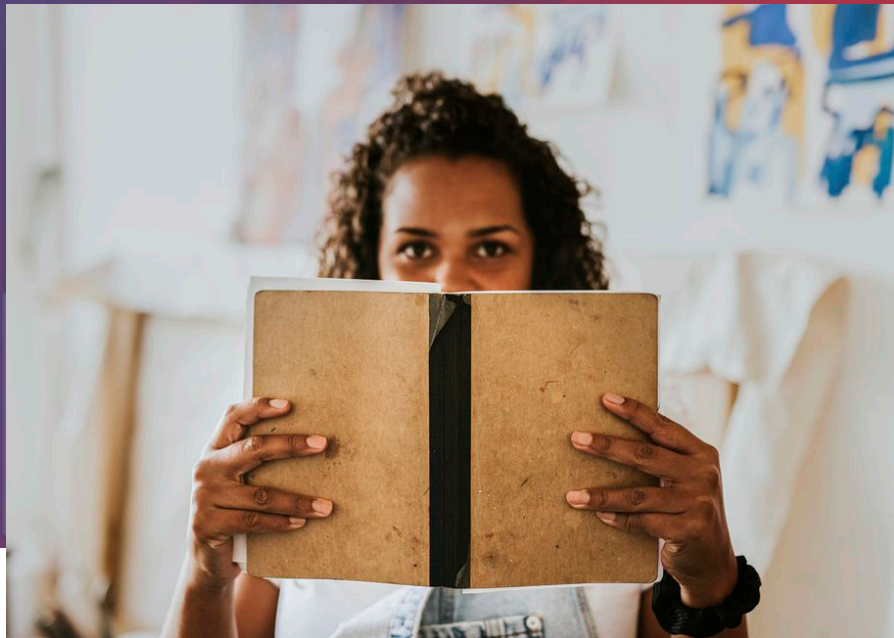
The Recent Past and Steady State

Certain aspects of college life once had a highly predictable cadence. Every year in August, students returned to campuses. Quads echoed with voices, buildings bustled with activity and cafeterias hummed. Those studying online had elected to do so, and such courses were designed with this modality in mind.

That was until those cycles ceased abruptly. In the U.S., it was the second week of March 2020. Leaders, administrators, educators, students and parents were forced to figure out what to do on the fly—most often operating without a manual. Challenges immediately arose for the millions who were thrust into virtual classrooms. There was little to no preparation for onboarding students, mastering new tools, or managing what were, in some cases, suboptimal technologies.

Students encountered issues with access to equipment and quiet learning spaces. Educators who had never taught online found themselves either rising to the challenge or lamenting their inadequate training. Leadership teams faced existential questions with severe consequences—involving the future of programs and entire institutions themselves, as well as (and most importantly) the health and safety of their stakeholders.

Juxtapose that scenario with online learning pre-2020, which was considered a "nice to have" for many institutions. Aside from the comparatively few that had constructed their core business models around digital degrees and certificates, most colleges and universities offered the modality on a more peripheral and sometimes sporadic basis. Some openly characterized it as a niche offering for students whose life circumstances may conflict with course schedules. Studying from a distance was an option that they offered, but not their *raison d'être*. However, interest in distance learning had been growing, albeit modestly.

Bay View Analytics has studied the higher education market since the early 2000s. Its director, Jeff Seaman, noted that survey data going back to 2012 show a steady rise in online enrollments, both in terms of students who choose to enroll in a single course and in those exclusively studying online.

"What's noteworthy about this online growth is that nationwide [total] undergraduate enrollments had actually decreased during a seven-year period following 2012, to a total loss of 6.8 percent," Seaman says. "An influx of graduate-level enrollments (5.7 percent) didn't

mitigate the loss—nor was it evenly distributed across institutions. What was evident was that a modest subset of the population continued to actively seek out distance learning opportunities."

In summer 2020, a reported 97 percent of postsecondary faculty members surveyed took part in training related to online learning. Of those who participated, the majority indicated that the experience affected their teaching, irrespective of format or synchronicity.

"Institutions saw the need and stepped up to provide a lot of support and training," Seaman says. They saw a significant influx in training and professional development resources, which has continued across the board in terms of institution groups. When asked if this response was expected, he noted: "I was pleasantly surprised; I did not think they had it in them to react as quickly and comprehensively as they did."

When the field of higher education emerges from the effects of COVID-19, it may look and feel quite different from its earlier incarnation. Institutions' reactive responses and subsequent iterations of supports have underscored the importance of agility in an industry rooted in tradition and often little motivated to change.

How Individual Institutions Fared Differed Dramatically

Some colleges and universities were much more prepared at a system level to immediately switch to online learning, buoyed by more than two decades of attention to and cultivation of internally developed and delivered services. Others turned to external teams and companies to help them navigate unfamiliar territory.
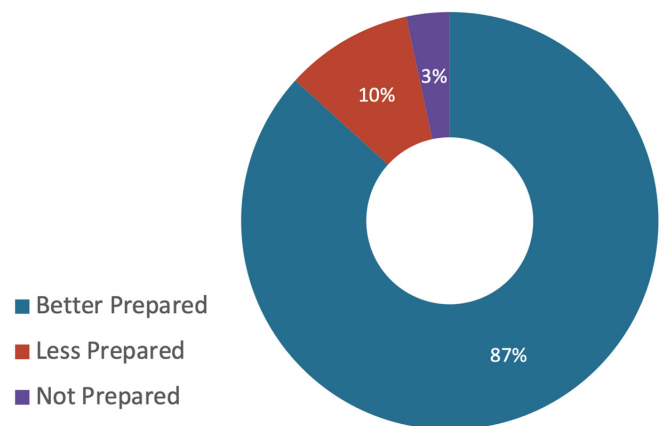
Majority online institutions—those with more than 1,000 online students (thus extensive support staff) or 25 percent or more of their students online—by and large fared better than the rest.

This isn't to assert that classes went on elsewhere without disruption. Bay View Analytics' research shows that

large colleges and universities with under 1,000 online students or those that weren't majority online institutions (with fewer than 25 percent of their students online) were less prepared. These institutions had fewer support staff to handle an influx of faculty requests for help in delivering their classes.

The picture gets significantly less rosy for those colleges whose sole learning modality had been on-site. As of 2019, there were 928 institutions nationally with no distance students (representing 22.7 percent of the total number of U.S. institutions) that were likely not well prepared for a rapid transition to distance learning.

OVERALL ENROLLMENT BY PREPAREDNESS

- Better Prepared
- Less Prepared
- Not Prepared

Preparedness Definitions

BETTER PREPARED: Schools with more than 1,000 online students (thus extensive support staff) or having 25 percent or more of their students online

LESS PREPARED: Large schools with less than 1,000 online students (thus some support staff) or having less than 25 percent of their students online

NOT PREPARED: Schools with no distance enrollment

Source: Seaman, J and Seaman, J.E. 2019. Distance Education State Almanac – National. Bay View Analytics.

Among those colleges that fared better, some witnessed significant increases in enrollments for non-degree courses as well. Holly Morris, head of Universal Learner Courses at Arizona State University's Learning Enterprise, the institution's lifelong learning ecosystem, noted that the university has attracted a

wide range of learners. The majority are adult learners returning to higher education after negotiating a variety of life circumstances when they realize that a degree would benefit them in a new role or industry, but some highly gifted students as young as 8 years old who need enriched learning options are successfully participating as well.

She believes that the new steady state involves a mix of online and in-person programming. The necessity of online instruction has also changed some students' and professors' beliefs about a teaching and learning modality that many had not yet experienced. "Learners who might never have been interested in online learning have now realized that it's just as rigorous and challenging, but the online environment can make taking courses much more convenient," Morris says.

"For institutions with robust online programs, like ASU, the new steady-state means continuing to expand what's offered online, thinking hard about how formats and different modalities of delivering content impact learning, and digging deeper into how we can best support learners in an online environment for greater success." ◼

The Catalyst

As COVID-19 brought online learning to the forefront, leaders grappled with logistics, operations and infrastructure concerns. Plans were made and routines were, in many cases, scrapped. Priorities included faculty professional development, course conversions to online (and later hybrid) settings, investment in learning technologies, and more broadly accessible student services.

The pandemic exposed what Sean Gallagher and Jason Palmer characterized in *Harvard Business Review* as colleges' "fragmented adoption of high-quality education technology and digital capabilities." It placed a significant amount of pressure on leadership teams to operationalize and manage not only students' academic coursework, but also wraparound services. The authors argued that experiences were not equal even if the modality was the same. They also emphasized that student services and support teams now need to embrace technologies like machine learning, SMS messaging, and AI—making the argument for digital transformation to top institutions' strategic plans.

Meanwhile, myriad personal challenges and stressors factored into the experiences of educators, students and institutional leaders alike. Instructors balanced home life with teaching, some with school-aged or younger children in tow. Instructional designers' skillsets were suddenly in great demand. Temporary online courses turned into more permanent or hybrid courses.

At the societal level, major social justice issues emerged in the U.S. In the midst of the pandemic's early months, fueled by repeated instances of police violence and racist actions toward Black Americans and the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among others. Spikes in hate speech and violent attacks on members of the Asian American/Pacific Islander community were witnessed as well, linked to the pandemic's suspected emergence in China. These events had a traumatizing impact on many people across the country. That they happened during a time of grave health concerns and a recession further amplified their impact.

According to Stanford's Rascoff, some instructors at the university felt than an "erosion of trust" had occurred with their students, who could no longer interact with their peers or instructors face to face. "Difficult conversations were harder to navigate remotely, at a time where there was much to be discussed," he says. The change in classroom dynamic was likely felt by faculty members across the country.

Gates Bryant, a partner at Tyton Partners, an investment

banking and strategy consulting firm focused on the education sector, acknowledges the change swiftly catalyzed by the pandemic. "There were a small but meaningful number of institutions that had invested in institutional infrastructure and professional development prior to it," he says. "Increasingly, those institutions are being viewed as high-quality pioneers in online education, with others looking to them as examples of how to invest in their infrastructure, how to support faculty effectively, and how to provide solid professional development."

Just as industries differed between "remote-first" (prepared to work virtually) organizations and those that were "remote-forced," experts argue that such a distinction also exists within education. Getting the terminology right from the outset is critical, says Joshua Kim, director of online programs and strategy at Dartmouth College and co-author, with Eddie Maloney, of *Learning Innovation and the Future of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, February 2020).

"The emergency shift to remote learning is not online learning," he emphasizes. "We keep conflating these two, but they're very different. Online learning teams typically spend a lot of time developing resources specifically for this modality. [When the pandemic occurred] schools had to do this overnight, and yes, you use a lot of the same tools. Some similarities exist, but the level of preparation is worlds apart. It's really important we acknowledge that with the language we're using and learn what we can from our performance within these unique circumstances."

Maloney, a professor of English and executive director of the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship at Georgetown University, agrees. "The difference between a course that's received a lot of design and media consideration and has been built online from the ground up versus one that moved in a rushed manner into a new modality is significant. That distinction is

> **"**
>
> The emergency shift to remote learning is not online learning. We keep conflating these two, but they're very different.
>
> **Joshua Kim**
> Director of online programs and strategy,
> Dartmouth College
>
> **"**

lost on a lot of people who think that online is a terrible way to teach or learn—this is especially true of students who didn't choose to take online courses. Their experience was not often good at many colleges."

Given the circumstances at the onset of the pandemic, institutions appeared to have a grace period in which students and other stakeholders were willing to overlook imperfect processes and experiences. As the terms wore on and remote learning continued, expectations seemed to rise. The field also witnessed significant changes in demographics. ■

Has the Nature of the Typical Student Changed?

In both the near and long term, colleges and universities will welcome incoming cohorts who experienced emergency remote learning in high school, middle school or even at the elementary level. (Those who entered virtual kindergarten in fall of 2021 will matriculate in 2034.)

However, the above statement assumes that students are exclusively embarking on postsecondary programs immediately following their high school graduation, which is no longer true. Given today's typical student, the effects of this era (and learners' experiences of it) may be felt well into the 2040s.

The "traditional" student profile had been evolving for some time before the pandemic. No longer were they the 18-year-old high-school graduates whose parents help them move into on-campus dormitories. According to postsecondary education research from RTI, the profile of the 'traditional' postsecondary student has been shifting since 1996. Today, the typical student embodies one or more of the following characteristics: is financially independent; is a single caregiver; has dependents; works full-time; has delayed their postsecondary studies and/or is enrolled part-time. Such a description reflected nearly 74 percent of undergraduates in 2018.

Just as demographics have changed, so have programs to accommodate them. Institutions that opted to provide more flexibility in the form of distance learning also had to build key processes and supports around the experience. Student affairs, advising and career services all had to engage the learner in a digital space. This was a significantly different experience from those who were enrolling in on-campus degree programs, and the students choosing them had varying motivations for doing so.

Prior to March 2020, that had always been a choice rather than a necessity.

Traditionally online institutions like Western Governors University (WGU), which has grown to enroll about 130,000 mostly adult learners over 25 years, had already witnessed growth in online learning as a preferred option for working students. "Once the pandemic hit, we saw that population continue to grow," says Marni Baker Stein, WGU's provost. "Those who held high resiliency jobs and gained time in their day [as remote workers] took the opportunity to get that next credential—particularly in fields where there is clear value around that extra certificate, that extra degree to

move up in the workplace."

That was true for one segment of the population. Another group found themselves on the other end of the spectrum regarding discretionary time. "Caretakers for their families were, of course, very hard hit," she adds. "Those with child-care or elder-care responsibilities lost extra gaps in time that they might've had to pursue an education and had to slow down. So, we saw certain subsets of that audience really speed up and move their careers forward with degree attainment, while subsets—particularly caretakers and folks working in more low resiliency jobs, such as frontline workers—really have to slow down."

The pandemic sidelined many students, as hundreds of thousands appeared to either discontinue or chose not to begin their postsecondary education, as made clear by regular reports from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

Jessica Rowland Williams is director of Every Learner Everywhere, a national network of 12 partners strengthening digital learning in postsecondary institutions. She emphasized that factors outside of coursework continue to weigh heavily on students. "What we're seeing is that students now need to balance more responsibility, whether that involves working while going to school, dealing with health concerns, or caring for others. Online learning has provided perceived flexibility during this period. But at the same time, we find that students are carrying much more responsibility within their personal lives."

Jaimie Hoffman has served as an administrative leader and faculty member; currently, she is vice president for student support and learning at Noodle, which works with a network of colleges and universities to offer

"

What we're seeing is that students now need to balance more responsibility, whether that involves working while going to school, dealing with health concerns, or caring for others.

Jessica Rowland Williams
Director,
Every Learner Everywhere

"

online programs. "We used to primarily see online students as those who had the least access to on-campus courses for various reasons. Now that taking courses online (or blended) has become normalized, students from all backgrounds see online learning as a way (at least a partial one) to complete their education while meeting the various demands of their lives." ■

534179/RAWPIXEL.COM

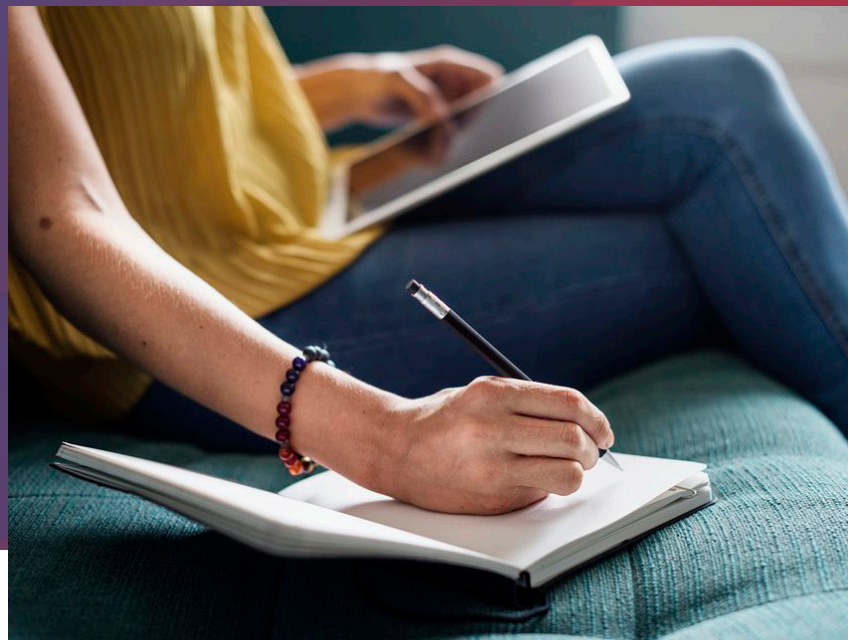# Current Perceptions of Online Learning

As is true about so much in our personal and professional lives, we're unlikely to know for years exactly whether, how and how much the pandemic has reshaped perceptions and behavior about digital learning. But we have some early indications.

Before COVID, skepticism about the quality of virtual forms of education lingered even as more institutions offered them and more professors and students engaged with them.

A series of surveys *Inside Higher Ed* conducted of faculty attitudes on technology showed in 2019 that even as the proportion of instructors who had taught an online class grew to nearly half (46 percent), fewer than a third (32 percent) agreed that "online courses can achieve student learning outcomes at least equivalent to in-person courses." (Thirty-six percent disagreed, while the rest were neutral.)

Those who had never taught an online course were three times likelier to disagree than agree with that statement (42 vs. 14 percent), while those who had taught online were three times likelier to agree than to disagree (61 percent vs. 20 percent).

Professors who expressed skepticism about online quality cited several reasons for their doubts: belief that in-person learning better served their students, concerns about corporate influence, and loss of control over their courses.

But only about half of instructors said they believed they received adequate support from their institutions for creating and teaching online courses, and fewer than a quarter said their institutions adequately rewarded teaching with technology and contributions to digital pedagogy in promotion and tenure decisions.

This was before online teaching and learning went mainstream. When the pandemic fundamentally changed educators' roles overnight, some were thrust into online teaching with little to no resources while others scrambled to support their colleagues.

In the aforementioned piece from *EDUCAUSE Review*, its co-authors acknowledged the challenging scenarios instructors across the country were already facing. "Faculty might feel like instructional MacGyvers, having to improvise quick solutions in less-than-ideal circumstances. No matter how clever a solution might be—and some very clever solutions are emerging—many instructors will understandably find this process stressful."

Organizations have since sought to study the effects of the transition.

In 2020, Tyton Partners wrote a three-part "Time for Class" special edition in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere that tracked faculty sentiment over three periods: immediately following the emergency transition to remote in the spring, during the summer in preparation for the fall term, and during the fall term.
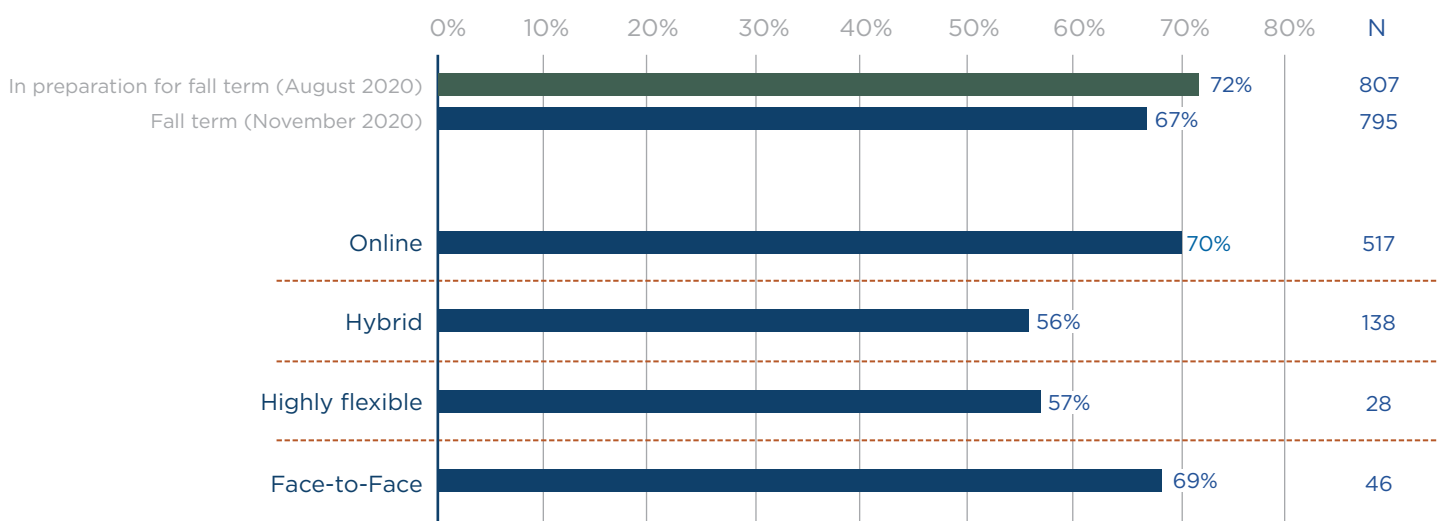
Across the three survey initiatives they conducted, they asked faculty who teach introductory courses about their belief in the value of online learning. They observed a small but notable uptick in those who rate it as "positive" (43 percent to 48 percent).

"We found that faculty note that it is far more achievable to teach a high-quality education either fully online or fully in-person and that hybrid presents more challenges, especially for those faculty teaching for the first time," says Nandini Khedkar, a principal at Tyton Partners.

"While this is a call for additional resources and supports for hybrid courses as they are appropriate, we are also seeing institutions be more specific about whether a course is fully in person or fully remote," adds Khedkar. "For example, UC Berkeley has announced that 'hybrid is not a desirable modality for many courses; instructors are not required to teach any course in a hybrid mode.'" It appears that for some, a binary approach to course development and delivery offers the best teaching and learning experience.

How has the emergency switch to remote learning impacted students' experiences? In a July 2020 national survey by Digital Promise in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere and Tyton Partners, more students (45 percent) attributed problems with course implementation to the unplanned move to online instruction than to inherent limitations of online learning (37 percent). Comparatively few students cited emergency remote learning as a better experience in classes that

"I AM (WAS) PREPARED TO DELIVER A HIGH-QUALITY COURSE TO MY STUDENTS THIS FALL"

	%	N
In preparation for fall term (August 2020)	72%	807
Fall term (November 2020)	67%	795
Online	70%	517
Hybrid	56%	138
Highly flexible	57%	28
Face-to-Face	69%	46

From Time for Class COVID-19 Edition – Part 3: August survey question: "As you consider the coming fall term, how would you characterize your agreement with the statement [I am prepared to deliver a high-quality course to my students this fall]?"; November survey question: "How would you characterize your agreement with the following statements [I was prepared to deliver a high-quality course to my students this fall]?"

COMPARISON OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THEIR COURSE BEFORE AND AFTER THE SHIFT TO REMOTE INSTRUCTION
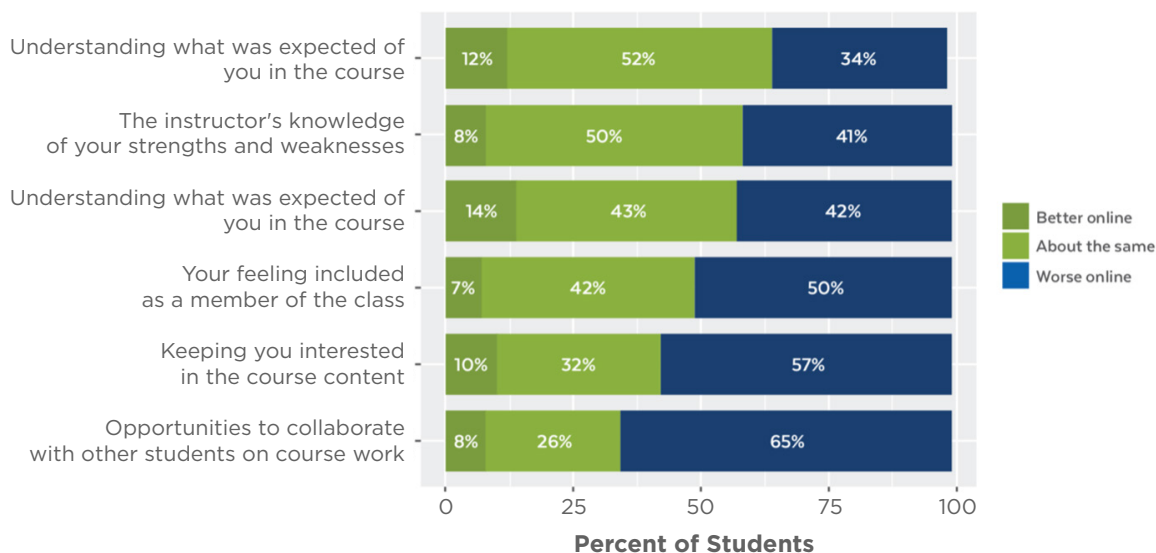
Suddenly Online: A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic

were previously onsite.

Rascoff, the Stanford vice provost for digital education, says educators need "to draw a critical distinction between what occurred during the pandemic at Stanford and true online learning." He explains:

"Emergency remote teaching was an urgent response to a global crisis. Well-designed online learning is the product of patient 'backwards design,' an intentional, collaborative process that begins with the learning goals and needs of the student. There was no time for such design during the pandemic—but there may be in the future. As we emerge from the pandemic, the skills and confidence that instructors developed for emergency remote teaching can be translated to more intentionally designed learning experiences."

We're now settling into a post-pandemic mode, when teaching and learning may be less reactive and more planned, Rascoff says. One change he cites is the now widespread recognition of the role of the learning experience designer. "Work that was once hidden from faculty view has been validated and valued, and the role of learning designer has become one of the most sought-after jobs in higher education and ed tech."

What else is changing? "A more team-oriented approach to teaching has emerged," he says. "You can't build something good online as a lone instructor, as you

can in a lecture. In well-designed online learning experiences, there's still an instructor of record, but there's also a team of collaborators. We're moving from a solo to a collective teaching orientation. This is a big move for teaching and learning that is not going back."

Given the emergency investment in teaching support throughout higher education in the first two years of the pandemic, Rascoff says, some faculty are bringing new digitally supported approaches to all their teaching. From digital whiteboards, peer instruction, and breakout rooms to lecture capture systems and student engagement apps, educators were exposed to a set of previously unfamiliar tools to support active learning. These will be relevant to hybrid and in-person courses as well as those taught fully online. As they re-enter classrooms, many instructors will want to continue using these technologies, and institutions should provide infrastructure and support to foster their ongoing experimentation with modern learning technologies.

Signs of Optimism and Yearning for Community

Bay View Analytics has been conducting multiple Digital Learning Pulse Surveys with national samples of faculty, administrative staff and students throughout the

680823/RAWPIXEL.COM

pandemic (four in 2020 and two in 2021). The team polled more than 800 U.S. higher education faculty and administrators from over 600 different institutions to gauge concerns and needs in completing the spring 2020 term and preparing for the fall. The latter surveys included responses from 2,266 students, 1,248 faculty members and 831 administrators.

"Each time we administer the survey, faculty, administrators and most recently, students—a group we added a year ago—now all say they have a much higher opinion of online learning," Seaman says. "They're now three or four to one in terms of likelihood of being more optimistic about the future of online learning." He noted that a "small group" was more pessimistic about online learning than before the pandemic.

Faculty members and students indicated that they want more online options for the future, not less. "This experience has really opened the eyes of people who didn't have any previous exposure to this modality," Seaman adds. "We received lots of open-ended responses along the lines of *'I had no idea it would work'* and *'I thought it would be terrible, but I actually like it!'* "

Students' biggest complaint had nothing to do with course structure or material or faculty interactions. When asked "What single thing would you do to improve online learning experience for yourself?" respondents said: "I want to know who I'm learning with, get to know other students."

According to his team's research, students cited a sense of isolation as a critical problem with online learning. "They felt unable to engage with their peers," Seaman explains. "They were not receiving the needed social supports; this was the piece where we had the most negative feedback. And even there, it was more neutral than negative. Undergraduate students in particular overwhelmingly responded that this was an issue. They wanted better communication and to feel a sense of community with fellow students."

At an institution where roughly 57,000 study fully online, ASU's online learning model has matured to the point of exploring what next level engagement looks like. Morris underscored the importance of "retaining the unique, human part of the experience and making that available in a meaningful way."

She also noted that course creation should not occur in a vacuum. "It's about including many voices – including learner voices – in the course experience so that the instructor isn't responsible for all the human interaction in the course. Students can learn so much from each other in terms of what works, what has meaning, what makes an impact." Enabling greater remote communication and collaboration with peers via synchronous or asynchronous means could offer some solution for the loss of community widely cited by students. For example, discussion boards such as Inscribe or Harmonize help with peer collaboration and creating community-embedded assignments gets students engaged

outside of their computers.

Baker Stein of Western Governors acknowledges that personal circumstances and priorities influence perceptions about the modality. "To a certain extent, it's true that the attitudes toward online learning are in the eye of the beholder," she says. "If I'm looking for flexibility, I love online learning. And if I'm seeking this incredible coming of age experience on campus, maybe I don't want to be studying 24/7 at a computer. But online learning is going to be a part of the higher ed experience into the future, whether it's to support on-campus learning or offer a fully virtual experience. And we need to embrace it to get better at it. Because it can allow for deeper, more personalized learning experiences for students that are just not possible when they're sitting in a 50-person classroom."

What about administrators' perspective? "The student affairs professionals who believed that learning, development, and engagement can't happen online, still do not think the quality of the online experience is strong," says Hoffman, the vice president at Noodle. "Those who loved online learning and technology, however, are more engaged than ever before. But there's now a whole host of student affairs pros and faculty who were 'in the middle' before the pandemic—probably because of lack of knowledge or experience—who now see that online learning can be powerful, if done well, (acknowledging the varying levels of quality) and better meet the needs of (some) students."

Campus leaders themselves seem of two minds on the quality of digital learning and how the pandemic has changed the outlook for it. In *Inside Higher Ed*'s 2022 Survey of College and University Presidents, published in March 2022, half said they believed students would increasingly seek to enroll in virtual courses in the years to come, and most (83 percent) reported that they would sustain the increased online learning options they embraced during the pandemic.

Presidents said about two-thirds of their courses were being delivered in person in spring 2022 (down from

"

If I'm looking for flexibility, I love online learning. And if I'm seeking this incredible coming of age experience on campus, maybe I don't want to be studying 24/7 at a computer. But online learning is going to be a part of the higher ed experience into the future, whether it's to support on-campus learning or offer a fully virtual experience.

Marni Baker Stein
Provost,
Western Governors University

"

71 percent pre-pandemic), and they predicted on average that the proportion would rebound to 68 percent next year.

Campus leaders appeared to be influenced both by their sense of consumer preferences and their own biases. Eighty-four percent agreed that parents and students are disinclined to pay as much for virtual learning as they are for in-person learning, and presidents were
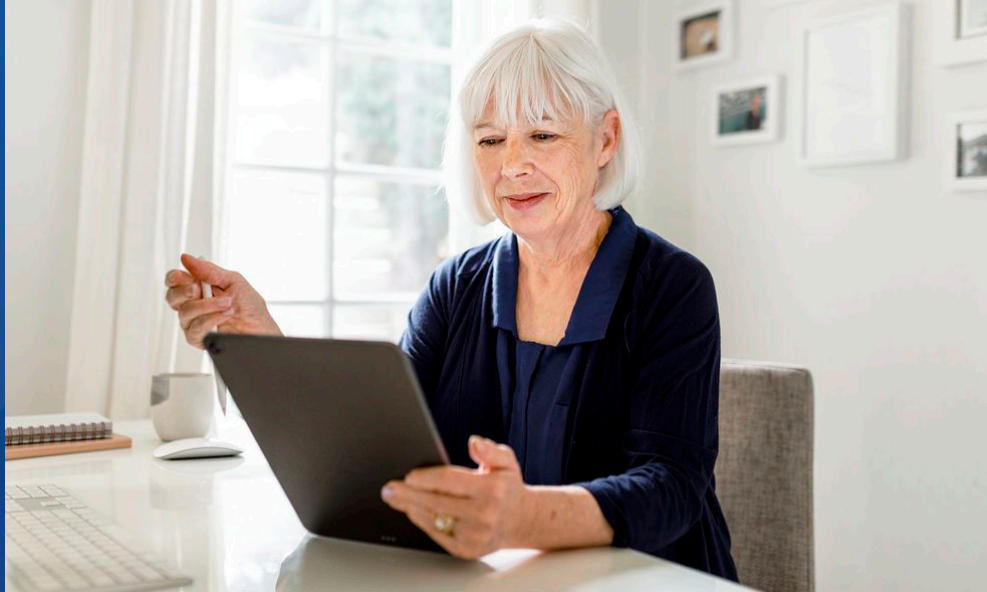
6002316/RAWPIXEL.COM

far likelier to rate their in-person courses as of "excellent" quality (73 percent) than was true for either online (19 percent) or hybrid courses (27 percent).

## An Openness to the Potential of Online Learning

The exposure effect is a psychological concept well known to those in the advertising business. More colloquially known as "familiarity breeds liking," it could represent a plausible explanation for increased openness toward online learning.

"While this is likely going to vary by institution, I believe that there has been a general increase in belief in the possibility of online or remote learning for the long term," says Khedkar of Tyton Partners. "To be clear, it is not perfect for everyone or every course, but the increase in flexibility that it affords institutions, faculty and students can work for many courses. Institutions are currently navigating what size of class they can safely have in person, opting for larger lectures over zoom while hosting smaller discussion sections or labs in person. This balance not only has the possibility to keep students and faculty safer, but also can support space maximization for those institutions reaching capacity."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Seaman's team reported that two demographic characteristics led to a predisposition toward favoring online learning for its flexibility. "When we asked people if they were working full-time or if they had children, it had a massive impact on their attitudes toward online learning," he adds. "Both were far more positive given their constraints and the flexibility it offered. Some were even remarking 'This is even better than my earlier experience when I was attending classes in person.'" The data underscore experts' perspectives shared earlier in this section.

As the pandemic eases and becomes an endemic, academic and administrative leaders will have an opportunity to weigh the immediate effects of this crisis period. Reexamining quality in the context of online learning will likely factor into institutions' strategic plans. ■
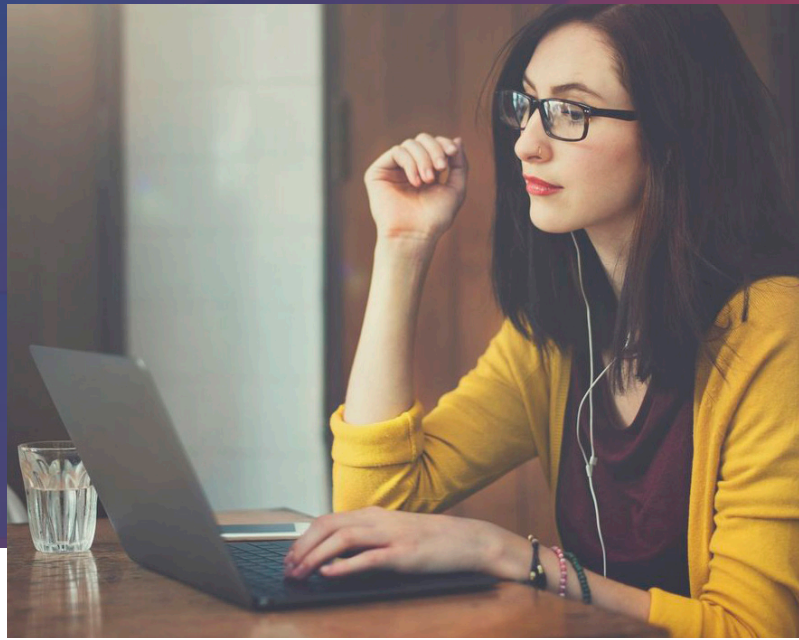
62705/RAWPIXEL.COM

The Quality Question:
Who Judges Excellence in Online Education?

Distance learning has been a subject of debate for more than three decades, subjected to the scrutiny that just about anything new to the status quo attracts. Historically, institutions were restricted from offering too many courses in remote settings. A provision in the 1992 Higher Education Act Amendments known as "the 50 percent rule" dictated that colleges and universities offering either more than half of their courses by correspondence or enrolling more than half of their students in courses at a distance could not receive federal student aid. As internet access became more widespread and online programs emerged, the law had to be adjusted.

A 2008 requirement put in place by the U.S. Congress states that aid-eligible online learning programs must have "regular and substantive" interaction between students and instructors.

Regulation of higher education is a responsibility shared by the federal government, states and accreditors, and that is true for online education, too. Each state also has had its own requirements for institutions to offer online programs within their borders. As demands for distance education opportunities grew, a group of higher education stakeholders—including state regulators and education leaders, accreditors, the U.S. Department of Education, and institutions—established the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA), intended to streamline regulations around distance education programs. The intention: to improve quality of distance learning nationwide and increase access to programs across state lines, while reducing bureaucracy, optimizing costs and shared resources.

Today, the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) engages with 2,200 institutions in 49 member states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands—reportedly saving participating institutions an average of just under $70,000 annually. California has so far chosen not to participate. *[Editor's note: NC-SARA has sponsored this report, but* Inside Higher Ed *maintains editorial independence and full discretion over the content.]*

Online learning has since been hailed by some as the solution to breaking the "iron triangle" (quality, access and cost), and therefore as a means for enabling greater equity, yet major doubts about the efficacy, utility and value of distance learning remain.

Now that a disproportionate number of students have

been exposed to emergency remote learning (if not traditional online learning), a pressing need exists to determine what quality looks like, and how it might be regulated by institutions. Without demonstrating its inherent worth, academe may feel the burden of its even temporary reliance on online learning for decades to come—in terms of enrollment, alumni engagement, and institutional giving.

But who judges the quality of online education is a thornier question. It invites further considerations about what perspectives and biases they bring with them to those discussions.

Rowland Williams of Every Learner Everywhere encourages leaders to push back on their own assumptions about quality, starting with two questions:

- Who decides how quality is defined?
- Are the parameters and criteria mimicking that of on-site education, or are we being more intentional about how we judge this different modality?

"For a long time, we haven't questioned whose voices are at the table when we're defining quality; because of that, we've come up with a definition that doesn't align across the board for everyone," Rowland Williams says. "Consider our conversations around rigor. Often, we think about this in terms of how difficult a course is or how much a student learns. When looking at these descriptors from an equity lens, we realize they're very loaded."

Of course, higher education was initially designed in a very different era. It is modeled after centuries of instruction in hierarchical cultures that emphasized significant power differentials. In assessing students, faculty and administrators have historically asked: "Is the learner meeting institutional expectations?"

Rowland Williams and others would like to see that flipped, where administrators and leaders ask whether the institution (both in its online and on-site programs) is meeting learners' expectations. Underneath it all, she says, is "a tangible need to redefine what quality means in a way that doesn't just take the institution's perspective

into account but also includes the voices, goals, dreams and aspirations of the students."

Abby McGuire, director of research at the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), acknowledged the complexity in defining quality. "If you talk to anyone in the field about quality online learning, you'll get an array of different answers. It's almost like defining truth or justice or love. Everyone has their own nuanced definition. But I think if you really strip it down to its simplest form, it's really about a perspective shift," she explained.

"It's not about asking 'How can I translate my face-to-face content to an online course or to online content?' but rather: 'How can I maximize the opportunities that the online environment affords?' "

She argues that quality in the online context centers on a pedagogical shift, in terms of both student access and equity regarding how information is presented and accessed. But the definition isn't exclusive to that. "We can't talk about quality in online learning without acknowledging opportunities for meaningful connection, because that's really at the heart of teaching and learning. The craft of teaching doesn't change just because the modality does; it's just how we use that modality to create those connections between student and instructor and among students as peers as part of the learning experience."

McGuire served as the editor and a co-author on a 2020 publication ("Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty") in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. The playbook "provides intentional definitions and strategic perspectives about quality online learning, as well as design, teaching, and assessment strategies."

OLC also has developed a suite of free scorecard tools and services (e.g., course and program reviews), including the Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practices Scorecard, which are designed to help faculty and academic leaders measure quality online course and teaching effectiveness.

Other organizations focused on researching distance education have studied the quality question for some time. Originally funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancement (DETA) "seeks to foster student access and success through evidence-based, cross-institutional online learning

Online Course Quality Indicators

Eight indicators

These indicators were developed based on quantitative and qualitative cross-instutitional studies conducted by the DETA Research Center.

Design
- specific and measurable learning objectives
- alignment to assessments and learning activities
- authentic, real-world experiences

Organization
- well-organized course
- easy to navigate
- logical and consistent format
- alignment between topics and subtopics
- manageable sections

Support
- manage students expectations
- provide orientation to the course (purpose, format, and getting started)
- Illustrate alignment of objectives, assessments, and activities
- clear instructions and directions
- description of grading and assessment plan

Clarity
- reduce barriers to learning
- provide clarity in the expectations of student activity (participation and performance)
- include explanations, descriptions, standards, requirements, guidelines, and context

Instructor - interaction
- express interest in student learning
- actively participate in online discussions
- facilitate learning and peer interaction
- expand students' thoughts and knowledge
- provide new prompts and additional content
- provide timely and detailed feedback on assessments and student inquiries

Peer - interaction
- facilitate active learning through frequent and ongoing peer involvement and meaningful collaborative work
- provide opportunities and technologies available for students to learn from each other

Content - interaction
- strategically enhance the student interaction with accessible and interactive content (preferably OER)
- support dialogue, critical reflection and analysis, and real-world applications of the content
- provide materials that are current, rich, and sufficient in breadth and depth
- identify important topics and provide context

Richness
- provide richness in learning materials and activities, support and instructions, instructor interactions, and tools and media

DETA

practices and technologies." The center identifies and evaluates effective course and institutional practices in online learning.

In 2019, DETA published a multi-year study that identified important practices when designing and teaching online courses. The study, titled *A Cross-institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?*

The Online Course Quality Indicators infographic below details their findings. Interestingly, the eight indicators reinforce much of what subject matters experts and recent national studies have shared regarding high quality online learning.

With a global community of over 60,000 members, Quality Matters (QM) was cited by several experts as an international steward of online learning quality. QM has developed a rubric of course design standards and replicable peer-review process to train and empower faculty to evaluate courses, provide guidance for improving course quality and certify the quality of online and blended college courses across institutions. Its Course Design Rubric Standards for higher ed in particular was created for course designers—including faculty members and instructional designers—to evaluate courses that are fully online or have a significant online component (hybrid and blended courses).

Judging Student Performance Pre- and Post-COVID

An ever-present challenge in objectively judging the quality of something new in higher education—whether that may involve technologies, modalities or formats—is that standards are an amorphous concept with many variables. Online learning is no different, and in attempting to compare it directly with an approach that is wildly different and steeped in tradition will arguably lead to skewed results or the well-meaning application of irrelevant standards.

Historical findings (circa 2010) published in a meta-analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Education concluded that students' outcomes in online learning exceeded those of students receiving face-to- face instruction, and that blended learning yielded the best learning outcomes for students.

The latter point may come across as especially promising for those building hybrid courses. It's worth noting, however, that the approaches do have fundamental differences: blended involves a combination of virtual and face-to-face learning, while hybrid gives students the option to attend in person or study remotely. In a hybrid scenario, educators must design experiences to suit two concurrent delivery modes.

Since the time of this study, interactive technologies and teleconferencing tools have advanced significantly, and the field has grown exponentially. It would be difficult to compare what is routinely experienced by today's learners with the circumstances of distance learners some 12 years ago, and an average edtech spend that is anticipated to nearly double by 2025.

Prior to the pandemic, research from the Public Policy Institute in California showed that while online students in community colleges weren't performing as well at the individual course level as those studying face-to-face, they were actually graduating in higher numbers than onsite peers.

Why was this? Online sections of required courses fit better within the broader framework of students' lives, which in some ways had become more complex due to the pandemic. When budget cuts led to fewer on-campus sections being offered, there weren't as many opportunities for students to accrue credits in person. Those enrolling online had an easier time aligning schedules, which led to a higher graduation rate.

Just how are students performing in a virtual setting? Researchers have specifically sought to determine whether the emergency remote scenario has been effective. In a paper titled "Is Online Education Working?," economists from Auburn University, the University of

Southern Mississippi, and American University used a large-scale data set of approximately 18,000 students from one public research university to compare how studying in person versus online impacted students' course completion rates and grades, both before and after the pandemic. Their findings, which have held steady throughout the pandemic period, show that students who enroll in online courses are more likely to withdraw than their on-site counterparts and earn lower grades than peers who are studying in person.

The study's authors noted that many institutions and individual instructors adopted more flexible policies on grading, assignments and attendance in recognition of the pandemic's negative impact on wellness, mental health and other personal matters.

Those variables should be more stringently examined in context. Seaman has cautioned that the unusual circumstances—specifically the lack of faculty preparation and planning time in spring 2020 for those who had never taught online—would skew the results. "[Faculty] reported that they were under considerable stress because of this. The number one concern for institutions at this time was student stress. Yet, the discussion reads as if these are normal times, and the conclusions could be applied in general."

However, higher education's most important stakeholder—the student—is rarely polled on this. Seaman stressed this point. "One person who I'd want to judge quality in online learning is a student. What do they think about the education they're receiving?"

It's logical to look to the ultimate consumer of a course to determine how well it met their needs. In one survey, the Bay View Analytics team had asked a national sample of 2,000 students enrolled in online, blended and face-to-face courses: "How effective was this course in meeting your educational needs?"

The result? Those taking online classes essentially gave their courses the same grade—stating that the learning experience was similarly effective. Students thought they were able to engage just as well with instructors remotely as they had with in-person counterparts. Not only did they indicate that the modality has worked for them, but that it is improving over time. Results show that course ratings from fall 2021 are higher than those the students gave in spring 2020. In the meantime, faculty members have had more time to adjust pedagogical approaches and potentially become more selective about (and familiar with) tools and technologies used.

Regulation Challenges in Online Learning

Are accreditors the ultimate arbiters of quality in higher education? Will (or should) opinions from commissions potentially count as much as a tuition-paying student or parent? Just as accreditation bodies have evaluated traditional programs, they have been the legal entities charged with judging quality in an online context as well.

The University of Arizona Global Campus, for example, has come under fire from its accrediting body for low student success outcomes following its acquisition of Ashford University, a fully online for-profit institution. Ohio's Eastern Gateway Community College has encountered legal challenges tied to poor teaching quality and a relationship with a third-party for-profit company that may skirt ethical boundaries. The college outsources core services such as student advising and financial aid.

If a course is well run and well designed, the same questions should go into judging teaching and learning in a virtual setting as in face-to-face, Georgetown's Maloney argues. It's important to note that modality doesn't automatically change the quality level; classes that aren't engaging or educators who are subpar in person are rarely if ever a runaway success in an online setting.

How are colleges handling the question of quality? "The answer, fundamentally, is that we don't have a good or consistent way of judging quality instruction in general," he says. "We know which students are doing well in certain classes and we can look at broader patterns. We have ways of evaluating the instructor. Some of these

methods require more energy than schools are reasonably able to devote to course evaluation; this tends to lead to course evaluations that are easy to administer rather than ones that tell us a lot about the effectiveness of a given course."

Georgetown's leadership has spent a lot of time redoing its course evaluation during the pandemic and thinking about the effectiveness of all courses—those in person and online. "Specifically, we are looking at the ways in which we evaluate courses and student success to try to create some depth there, using faculty reflections and peer review just as we look at data." The university's online faculty reflect on what did or didn't work and engage with instructional designers to ameliorate courses that missed the mark.

Monitoring and regulating quality is a complex problem, but not isolated to online learning. However, the latter lends itself to a more data-driven approach.

Baker Stein notes that Western Governors collects data about students' digital learning experiences on an ongoing basis. The approach enables her team to uncover macro-level patterns as well as better understand needs at the individual learner level. "And we're continuously iterating upon and improving these experiences; we're not only doing so from an aggregate sense of how they work with students, but in a very personalized way to understand what works for you versus what works for me."

She is among experts who agree that higher quality online learning supports a wide range of pedagogical approaches, from project-based to service learning to case-based to social pedagogy. "I think quality online learning can support all of these and not only be engaging but drive the field forward as well. We're looking at

a content revolution in terms of interactive, AI-driven material and augmented and virtual reality, among other formats."

How that content can be personalized involves finding ways to leverage data. Rick Staisloff, founder and senior partner of rpk GROUP, a higher education consulting firm focused on sustainable business models, has worked with hundreds of institutions on optimizing their academic portfolios and the services that support them.

"We've never run into a problem where there isn't data; the issue is that institutions either don't have the capacity or the time to really understand that data and use it to make informed decisions," he says. "Moving toward online learning is part and parcel of better understanding who are our students, where are they, what are we offering and how well does it respond to their needs?"

Data disaggregation, he explains, enables us to understand what they're asking for (answering the demand question). Other questions institutions are using data to answer include:

- Where do students ultimately land in their studies?

- How are students advancing toward completion at a program level?

- What obstacles are they encountering along the way?

- Ultimately, how successful are graduates in entering the world of work?

"We can further disaggregate to understand what's happening with race, gender and other demographic factors," Staisloff adds. "That's the only way we're going to deliver on higher education's promise of a transformative experience for all students." ■

Embracing Online Learning—Today and for the Long Term

More than half of all college students enrolled in at least one distance course during the 2019-20 academic year. What's perhaps most interesting is that these data do not count the courses moved online on an emergency basis. Moreover, enrollment patterns are showing greater consistency, with students continuing to choose online courses from one semester to the next.

What changes will need to be made to improve the learner experience and perceptions of value? Where did collective efforts to support faculty or students seem to fall short? What else didn't we foresee when setting out upon this forced experiment? How might we reassess expectations moving into a "steady state" where online plays a more centralized role?

Research from Steve McCarty in *The Journal of Online Education* considers what issues might arise with regard to post-pandemic pedagogy.

Among the myriad issues facing educators is the choice of technologies, which should depend on the local situation more than what is currently at the cutting edge for those with a robust infrastructure and institutional support. When it comes to balancing synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (by next class) activities, one interesting finding is that veteran online teachers are less likely to rely on synchronous technologies like teleconferencing that are used to replicate the classroom experience (cf. Bates, 2019, Chapter 4.2.3).²

Progress has been made since the emergency remote learning experience. Leaders must now consider the complexities around campus culture, perceptions, and creating an intentional approach to online learning with built-in continuous improvement.

Researcher Luca Botturi writes in *Balancing Technology, Pedagogy and the New Normal: Post-pandemic Challenges for Higher Education:*

I think the goal now is keeping what works and blending it seamlessly with campus-based education. This does not depend on the tools (which are now in place) and on individual skills, rather on academic strategy (what was pioneering or emergency should become mainstream), proper curriculum and course design, including key decisions about synchronous/asynchronous learning, evaluation practices, etc.³

In its interim report shared with *Inside Higher Ed*, Stanford University leaders believe that "these very serious challenges to student well-being required thoughtful solutions." Their solutions are wide-ranging and include:

- Rebuilding informal networks in the virtual space to encourage student interactions and maintain a sense of culture and belonging.

The Evolving Conversation About Quality in Online Learning

- Providing support for flexible programs focused on student well-being.

- Centering inclusive, collaborative instructional practices through the creation of feedback loops that enable faculty and administrators to adapt to diverse student experiences and needs.

Some of these practices were as simple as opening a virtual class 15 minutes early, and ending it 15 minutes after the scheduled time, which replicated the opportunity students had for casual conversations with peers and the instructor. Instructors also added ice-breakers or discussion prompts to encourage sharing and community-building.

Experts agree that a discussion about the quality of online learning shouldn't be limited to academics.

"High quality online learning isn't just about the classroom experience, it's about the total experience," Baker

Stein says. "We can't just attend to the moments when students are attending a Zoom lecture, accessing course content or taking assessments; we also have to attend to their whole experience, and make sure that all supporting services are accessible to them online, and that that feels warm, supportive, and as if they have a community around them." These are the components of online learning that she believes are critical now, and in the years to come—especially as increasingly more institutions beyond online institutions adopt the modality.

"When the pandemic hit, temporary funding and other forums arose to make sure that students had access to a laptop or an iPad or broadband internet," Tyton's Bryant adds. "But there's actually still a fair amount of work to be done to ensure that those who are pursuing postsecondary education at the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder have the digital access that they need. This is an area where I think there has been a bit of a gap, or not

PERCENT OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS AS "MAJOR," BY RACE/ETHNICITY
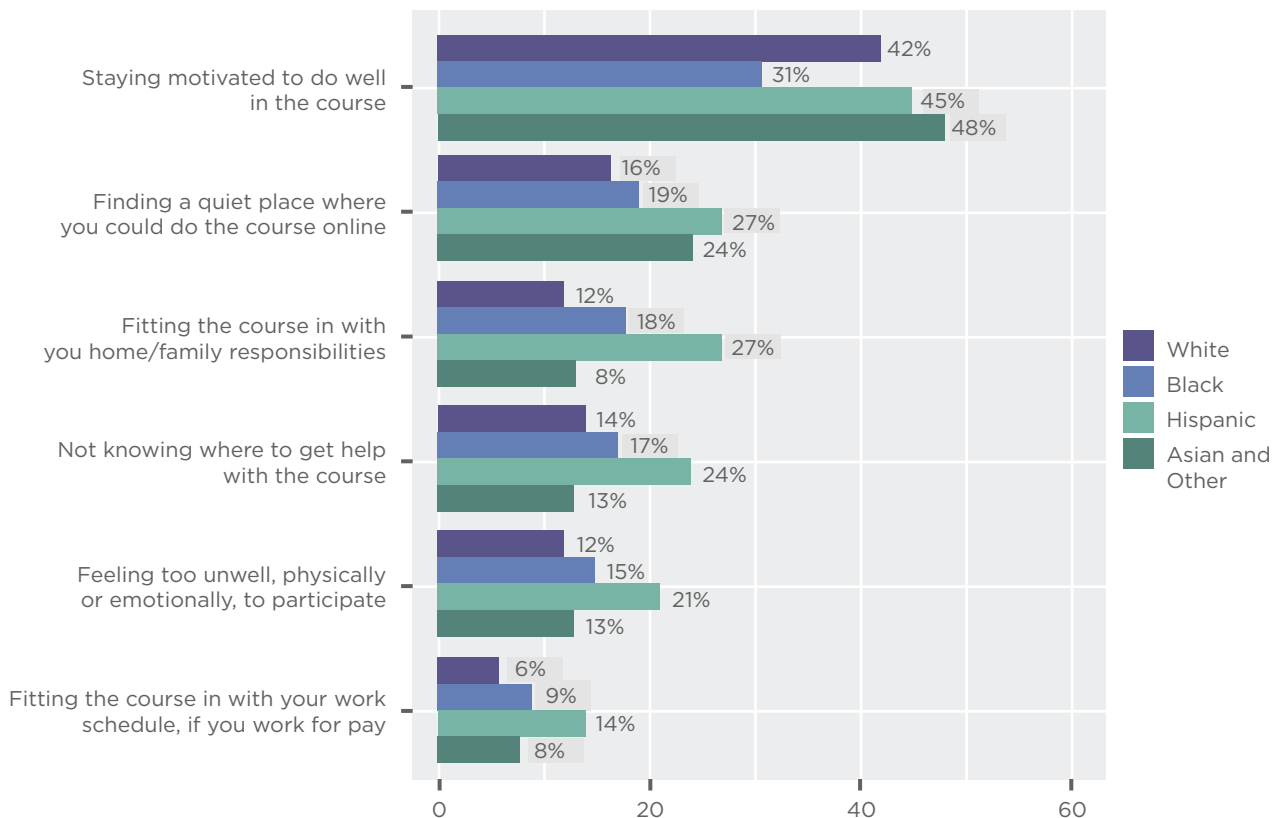
A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic

enough support: ensuring that students of low income and students of color have equitable access to the necessary technology."

A July 2020 survey by Digital Promise and Every Learner Everywhere found that of all student groups, Hispanic students reported a greater number of challenges to their continued course participation after instruction went online. The top issues cited were fitting courses alongside home/family responsibilities (27 percent for Hispanic students and 12 percent of non-Hispanic students) and finding a quiet place to work (27 percent for Hispanic students and 16 percent of non-Hispanic students). Hardware and software issues differed dramatically based on household income. However, these were less problematic than reliable internet connectivity for survey respondents overall.
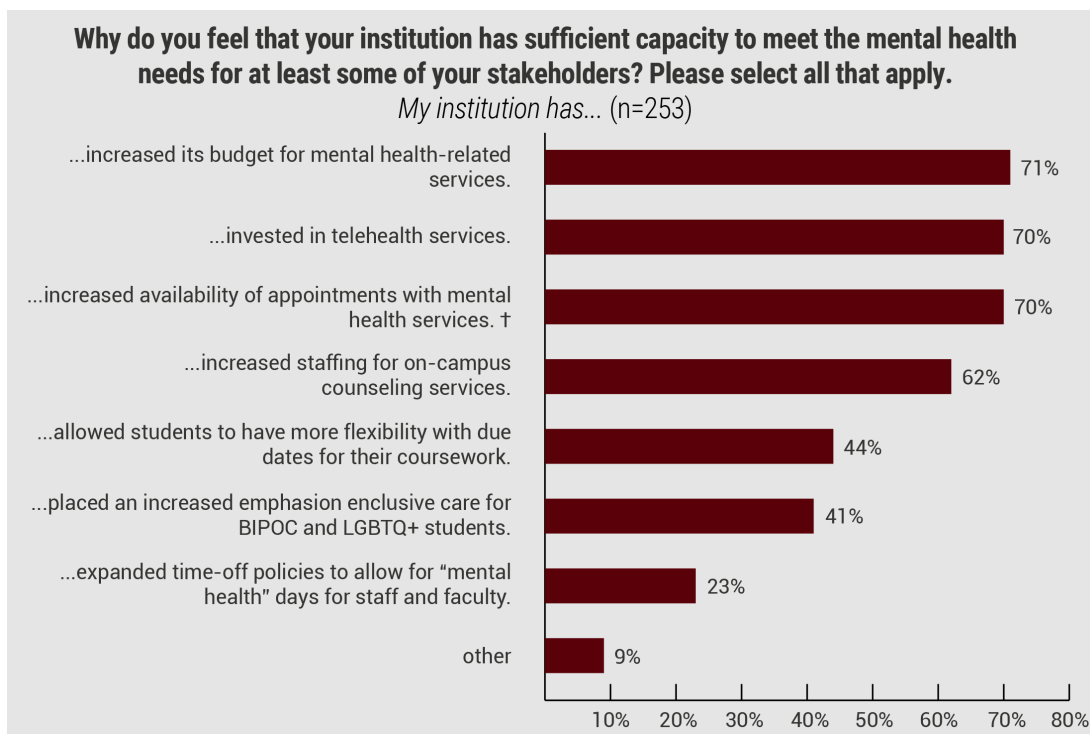
Mounting Mental Health Concerns

This period has weighed heavily on students as well. Several months after the pandemic began, mental health came into sharper focus. In a June 2020 survey by TimelyMD, a telehealth provider, 85 percent of college students indicated that they were experiencing increased stress and anxiety because of the coronavirus and uncertainty about continuing their education.

Student health centers report that demand for both physical and mental health care has increased significantly since fall 2019, with large numbers of students seeking support for stress, anxiety and depression.[4]

"People talk about the mental health crisis that exists among the student population," Bryant says. "Today, I think institutions are not particularly well prepared to address the full range of mental health challenges that exist for students. But I think they're trying. I believe institutions should be on the hook for considering how to build a sense of belonging, and a sense of community and connection."

While many institutions have historically focused on their academic mission, many are seeing an urgent need to address the mental health challenges students are facing—representing an expansion of their mission and required capabilities.

Why do you feel that your institution has sufficient capacity to meet the mental health needs for at least some of your stakeholders? Please select all that apply.
My institution has... (n=253)

...increased its budget for mental health-related services.	71%
...invested in telehealth services.	70%
...increased availability of appointments with mental health services. †	70%
...increased staffing for on-campus counseling services.	62%
...allowed students to have more flexibility with due dates for their coursework.	44%
...placed an increased emphasion enclusive care for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students.	41%
...expanded time-off policies to allow for "mental health" days for staff and faculty.	23%
other	9%

Inside Higher Ed *2022 Survey of College and University Presidents*

In a recent *Inside Higher Ed* survey of college presidents, respondents reported having the greatest awareness of the situation of undergraduate students, followed by faculty and staff members, with graduate students trailing. They were twice as likely (22 percent versus roughly 10 percent) to strongly agree that their institution "has the capacity to meet the mental health needs" of undergraduates as opposed to faculty and staff members.

Those who agreed that their institution has the capacity to meet the mental health needs of undergraduate students or other stakeholders were most likely to say that was so because they had increased the budget for mental health–related services (71 percent), invested in telehealth services (70 percent) or increased the availability of appointments with mental health services staff (70 percent).

When asked why they believed demand for mental health services had risen among students, their top reason—above students' struggles with balancing economic and familial duties with academics (62 percent) and pre-existing mental health conditions (54 percent)—was "declining student resilience due to the prolonged nature of the pandemic" (76 percent).

"For example, most institutions know how important student engagement is. And they have an infrastructure—programs and people who think about that on a day-to-day basis. That's part of the holistic orientation that institutions want to take. "But I don't think they're equipped to address the mental health challenges students face exacerbated by their feelings of disengagement or disconnection to campus."

Nance Roy, chief clinical officer of the Jed Foundation, which works to protect students' emotional health and prevent suicide, says, "We should be saving our counseling center folks for those students who really need clinical care," she said, "and encouraging a culture of care in which everybody from the professors to the groundskeepers has the tools to identify those who need a lot of help and support those who might just be having a bad day."

Online Learning and the Business Model

Tech-enabled learning isn't just here to stay; it's likely to become a more fundamental part of most institutions' core operation. It will represent a prominent modality for educating students moving forward, especially but not limited to working learners. Because of this, how institutional leaders choose to operationalize individual courses and entire programs is relevant to the conversation about quality.

Many colleges and universities have elected to build and deliver online programs using internal resources and people. If distance learning programs aren't built from the ground up, however, institutions turn to outside providers for services such as course development, enrollment, student support and services, among others.

They may do so due to a lack of expertise (particularly in digital marketing), upfront capital or perhaps even the confidence that internal teams can successfully enter a previously untapped market. This circumstantial trifecta has fueled the expansion of online education in positive ways in the short-term, enabling program launches and growth at a faster rate than might otherwise be possible.

However, the nature of for-profit providers' incentives, revenue sharing structures and interaction with key stakeholders (most importantly, students) has created a vulnerability as well. Alignment with institutional mission and high quality aren't necessarily guaranteed.

What happens when core services are outsourced? WGU's Baker Stein cautions that institutions need to be careful about subcontracting that infrastructure out to third-party for-profit companies. "That infrastructure is going to be their future," she advises. "The focus on digital infrastructure must be right up there with any other critical strategic decision that these university leaders are making. That unfortunately hasn't often been the case."

"A good online program is one that's well designed, with

a significant set of resources and support to help faculty plan all aspects of it," Maloney says. "It's also one that helps students actually learn how to learn in an online course—which is a step most courses don't take."

He explains that these are intellectual capacities that institutions don't inherently have. "Learners need to learn, faculty need to teach, and to support both requires significant attention to course design, program curriculum, and actual pedagogy. When they outsource these capabilities, they lose the ability to do the work internally, and effectively atrophy those skill sets."

Maloney and Kim assert that revenue-driven decisions versus those that are institution-centered are often myopic. The short-term focus at many institutions is often on deals that bring some immediate value, they say, while the long-term considers how to build core competencies into an institution's "DNA." Yet leaders may not always consider that costs saved upfront often appear on the backend, in the form of ongoing service fees for operations and brand management—and those cannot be offset.

"What ends up happening, we argue, is that institutions fundamentally abdicate a significant responsibility for this work, they lose a core capacity they need to have for students and faculty to be successful. Not that there aren't good partnerships; there are, but we continually make the case to our colleagues: for your work to be successful in the long-term, you've got to build this internal capacity. It's better to redirect resources, though we know that often requires navigating internal politics and silos to do it."

Online program management (OPM) firms, as an example, have played a more prominent role since the onset of the pandemic.

"There's no question that OPMs take a majority portion of the revenue gained from the program and student credit hour activity," says Staisloff. "That said, if an institution is unable to move toward a launch and offer remote programs right now that would serve a different part of the market, then while it's getting a smaller percentage, it's still more than the zero they would've gained from not doing it," he explains.

The bottom line, according to Staisloff: if institutions don't have the internal capacity to better leverage their courses, tapping into an OPM can be a good strategy as an initial step into the online market. "In the long-term, ideally an institution would start to wean itself from that OPM partnership as it takes on more responsibility for producing high quality learning internally, whether that results in online or hybrid courses."

In 2019, Vincent J. Del Casino Jr. and Evangeline J. Tsibris Cummings wrote about leading without OPM support, arguing that building and managing their own online programs helps institutions transform themselves and prepare for the future. Their advice may be prescient for those making strategic decisions for 2022 and beyond.

"While there are some OPM-like organizations that now offer start-up support, we think that building internal capacity across all the core verticals of online education – faculty support and design, student enrollment, advising and coaching services, and marketing – is the real long game." ∎
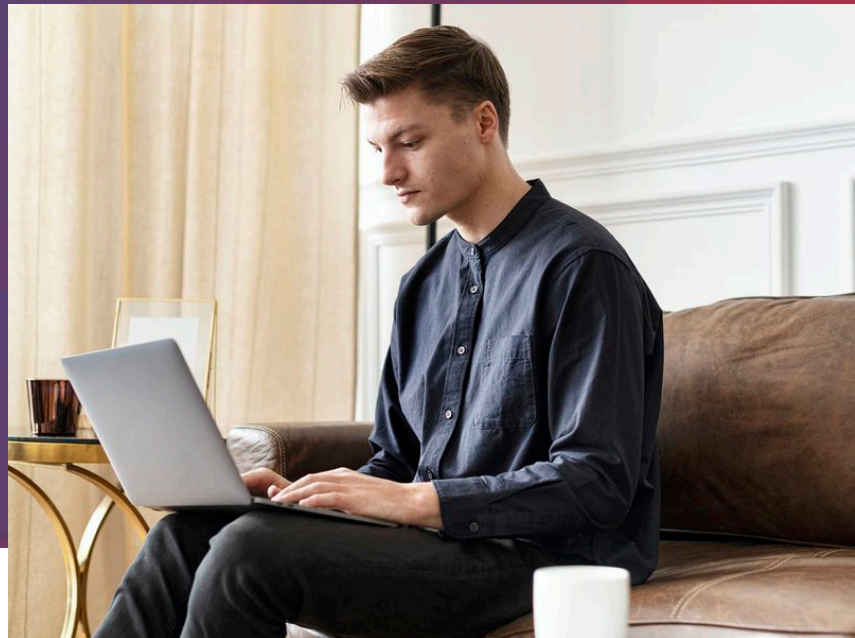
Next Steps:
Toward a Holistic Approach to Online Learning

It has become clear in recent years that high-quality online learning requires much more than a digital syllabus, learning management system and virtual classroom engagement tools.

"One of the things that comes out about learning science is the importance of caring for the whole learner — people can only learn if they're supported in all the other parts of their lives," Kim says. "Instructional designers work on content and it's not just about content — it's about making learners successful. It's about supporting them in myriad ways. That's one of the things that's coming out of the pandemic: the criticality of caring for our learners. They have incredibly complicated lives."

"We understand these challenges and are working to orient as much of our programs around students as possible," Maloney adds. "This is a value we hold at Georgetown and I know that Dartmouth does, too. But we'll have to fight for it, I think. We're going to have to keep talking about caring and centering the student experience."

Realistically, what key strategic decisions should administrative and academic leaders be making?

Below are considerations as they look to provide more holistically support for faculty and students.

1. **Making ongoing investments in resources (both talent and technologies).**
   Continuous professional development and an increased focus on instructional design support are of critical importance. "For the go-forward state to include more online or remote instruction, institutions need to continue to invest in resources," Khedkar says. This includes, among other aspects, infrastructure, training and tools. "As you see on p. 19 of our Time for Class 2021 report, this time last year, the majority of administrators reported an investment in digital transformation which we will likely see play out for many years to come."

2. **Involving technological leaders in decision-making and weighing what capabilities to grow in-house.**
   Baker Stein advises that leaders add their CIO or CTO on their executive leadership and strategic planning teams. "Because digital infrastructure is just as important as buildings and parking lots," she says. "It is probably the most critical infrastructure for the future of any institution. We need to

focus on it, invest in it and have the right people at the table when decisions are made. At the same time, institutions have to be very careful about subcontracting that infrastructure out to third-party for-profit companies. Because that infrastructure is going to be their future."

3. **Designing courses and support that fit into students' lives.**
ASU's Morris says that institutions with less mature online programs must make critical decisions about strategically investing in their online programming, noting that "students have now experienced the convenience of online learning and would like to maintain a mix of options. There's an expectation that online options will be available ubiquitously and that all institutions have to be serious about meeting learners where they are. That might be in a virtual chatboard at 11 p.m. or riding the bus home from work listening to a podcast via smartphone."

Morris notes that many institutions are seeing the need for and importance of offering online alternatives to in-person courses, along with providing flexibility and accessibility via technology and pricing in ways they might not have considered before.

The overall theme in questioning and shifting operational practices has been both candid and pragmatic: *What is really necessary? How does this help our learners?* ◾

Achieving the Dream. "Holistic Student Supports." [https://www.achievingthedream.org/resources/initiatives/holistic-student-supports]

Cummings, Evangeline J. Tsibris, Del Casino Jr., Vincent. "Leading Without an OPM in the Age of 'Bigger Is Better'." *Inside Higher Ed*, June 5, 2019. [https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2019/06/05/universities-can-go-online-without-corporate-partner-even-age]

Gallagher, Sean, and Palmer, Jason. "The Pandemic Pushed Universities Online. The Change Was Long Overdue." Harvard Business Review. September 29, 2020. [https://hbr.org/2020/09/the-pandemic-pushed-universities-online-the-change-was-long-overdue]

Hodges, Charles; Moore, Stephanie; Lockee, Barb; Trust, Torrey; and Bond, Aaron. "The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning." *Educause Review*. March 27, 2020. [https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning]

Joosten, Tanya; Cusatis, Rachel; Harness , Lindsey. "A Cross-institutional Study of Instructional Characteristics and Student Outcomes: Are Quality Indicators of Online Courses Able to Predict Student Success?" *Online Learning*, [S.I.], v. 23, n. 4, dec. 2019. ISSN 2472-5730. [https://olj.onlinelearningconsortium.org/index.php/olj/article/view/1432]

Kim, Joshua, and Maloney, Eddie. *Learning Innovation and the Future of Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, February 2020).

Lederman, Doug. "College Presidents Confident, With an Asterisk." *Inside Higher Ed*, March 2, 2022. [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/college-presidents-confident-finances-upbeat-about-race-relations]

Lederman, Doug. "Professors' Slow, Steady Acceptance of Online Learning: A Survey." *Inside Higher Ed*, October 30, 2019. [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/professors-slow-steady-acceptance-online-learning-survey]

Lederman, Doug. "Student Performance in Remote Learning, Explored (Imperfectly)." August 6, 2021. *Inside Higher Ed*. [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/08/06/do-college-students-perform-worse-online-courses-one-studys-answer]

McKenzie, Lindsay. "Back on Track: Helping Students Recover from COVID-19 Learning Disruption." *Inside Higher Ed*. 2021. [https://www.insidehighered.com/content/back-track-helping-students-recover-covid-19-learning-disruption]

Means, B., and Neisler, J., with Langer Research Associates. (2020). Suddenly Online: A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic. San Mateo, CA: Digital Promise.

Online Learning Consortium. "Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice Scorecard." [https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-course-teaching-instructional-practice/]

Online Learning Consortium, Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, Every Learner Everywhere. "Optimizing High-Quality Digital Learning Experiences: A Playbook for Faculty." [https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/tools/optimizing-high-quality-digital-learning-experiences/]

Rapanta, Chrysi; Botturi, Luca; Goodyear, Peter; et al. "Balancing Technology, Pedagogy and the New Normal: Post-pandemic Challenges for Higher Education." Postdigital Science and Education. 3, 715–742 (2021). [https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00249-1]

Seaman, Jeff, and Seaman, J.E. Distance Education State Almanac – National. 2019, Bay View Analytics. [https://www.bayviewanalytics.com/reports/almanac/national_almanac2019.pdf]

Seaman, Jeff, and Johnson, Nicole. "Pandemic-Era Report Card: Students, Faculty and Administrators Reflect Upon the Academic Year." 2021. [https://www.bayviewanalytics.com/reports/pulse/pandemic-era-reportcard.pdf]

About the Author

Kristi DePaul is an entrepreneur whose work has centered on enabling others' economic and social mobility. She is a regular contributor to *Harvard Business Review*, and her writing has appeared in the Horizon Report and research reports sponsored by the Barbara Bush Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Digital Promise, and Microsoft for Education, among others.

DePaul leads Founders, a remote content agency that serves K-20 education, training and professional development organizations. She previously oversaw the teaching and learning column for EDUCAUSE Review. Earlier in her career, DePaul led marketing communications efforts for global edtech firms, educational consulting startups, and for schools within both public and private higher ed institutions.

She is a graduate of Penn State University's Bellisario College of Communications and the H. John Heinz III College of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University. A native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Kristi lives with her family in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of *Inside Higher Ed*, contributed to this report.

About *Inside Higher Ed*

Inside Higher Ed is the leading digital media company serving the higher education space. Born digital in the 21st century at the height of the internet revolution, our publication has become the trusted, go-to source of online news, thought leadership and opinion over the last 15 years.

Our mission is to serve the entire higher education ecosystem—individuals, institutions, corporations and nonprofits—with the best editorial and marketing solutions in our space. As a truly mission-driven organization, we are proud to have earned the trust and loyalty of our readers by speaking as a fiercely independent voice on the pressing issues of the day.

To learn more about *Inside Higher Ed*, please visit insidehighered.com.

INSIDE HIGHER ED