



DRIVERS AND SUPPORTS FOR ONLINE LEARNERS

Prepared for State University of
New York College at Old Westbury
(SUNY OW)

May 2022

In the following report, Hanover Research presents best practices for expanding and supporting online learning at higher education institutions. In addition to an examination of professional and scholarly literature on the general subject, Hanover examined strategies specific to SUNY OW's target populations.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of secondary literature, Hanover recommends that SUNY OW should:



IMPLEMENT REQUIRED ORIENTATIONS AND OFFER DIGITAL TRAINING TO ALL NEW ONLINE LEARNERS

Underestimation of the rigors of online learning and a lack of technical proficiency are major barriers to student success in online learning. First-generation, low-income, and immigrant students are particularly likely to lag their peers in terms of digital acumen. Experts suggest that mandatory orientations and opportunities for training in necessary digital technologies can help support these students and potentially close the gap between them and their peers. Similarly, robust faculty training in digital tools and online learning strategies is integral to the success of any initiative aimed at improving the success of non-white online learners.



INCREASE ONLINE LEARNER INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS AND FACULTY.

Experts agree that peer-to-peer interaction and a sense of community are essential to the success of all online learners. This is especially true, however, of transfer students and first-generation college students. Similarly, other target populations—notably Hispanic and Black students—have improved performance when they have increased interaction with instructors. Offering digital fora for discussion boards, hosting online office hours, and considering expanded synchronous or hybrid offerings can all assist in boosting necessary human interactions.

FAST FACTS



25%

Share of online graduates for whom educational costs presented the biggest challenge to completion (2022).



27%

Share of online students for whom more instructor contact would improve online course quality (2018).

KEY FINDINGS

The number of students enrolling in online learning has grown steadily since 2012. In 2018, the number of students enrolled in any amount of online education was 35 percent—up from only 26 percent in 2012. This number has only increased with the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, online learners have grown more diverse, with white students accounting for only 59 percent of the total in 2022, down 10 percent from 2017.

The most common motivation for online learning is scheduling constraints as a result of work and familial commitments. When evaluating potential online programs, students consider cost and institutional reputation most heavily. Other key benefits that students seek from or associate with online learning are a short time to completion, employer tuition assistance, and a streamlined credit-transfer process.

The top challenges faced by all online learners include misconceptions about the rigors of digital education, social isolation, familial conflict, ill-equipped faculty, organization, and a lack of technological savvy. Experts recommend that institutions train their faculty in proper online teaching techniques, require orientations and digital training, and build opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions. Other helpful institutional efforts include cost transparency or reduction efforts and accepting more transfer credits.

In addition to these strategies, target populations are most supported through strong course organization, varied course materials, and faculty engagement. While SUNY OW's target populations would also be served by technological training and community-building efforts, their unique challenges require some unique solutions. Strong course organization and clear, repeated expectations can help learners stay on track, especially Hispanic, Black, and transfer students. These same populations prefer variety in the format and content of course materials, which helps them stay engaged. Finally, all target populations benefit substantially from increased interactions with instructors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

The State University of New York College at Old Westbury (SUNY OW) seeks to expand its current online enrollment numbers. In addition to general expansion, SUNY OW is interested in attracting specific populations, principally those from groups underrepresented or under-supported in academia. To further this effort, SUNY OW has partnered with Hanover Research to explore both what motivates students to pursue online education and what challenges they face during their study—and what strategies may best assist them in overcoming these challenges.

Hanover conducted a broad review of current literature from secondary sources to provide a discussion of the experiences, desires, and difficulties faced by online learners both within and without SUNY OW's target demographics. This exploration was supplemented with a more targeted approach focusing on strategies to improve the performance, support, and retention of targeted populations.

SUNY OW'S TARGET COMMUNITIES

First-Generation
Students

Transfer Students

Black Students

Asian Students

Hispanic Students

Indigenous
Students

Immigrant
Students

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



Why do students pursue online education?



What are the key challenges and pain points that online learners face?



What are the best practices for supporting online learners, especially those from SUNY OW's target backgrounds?

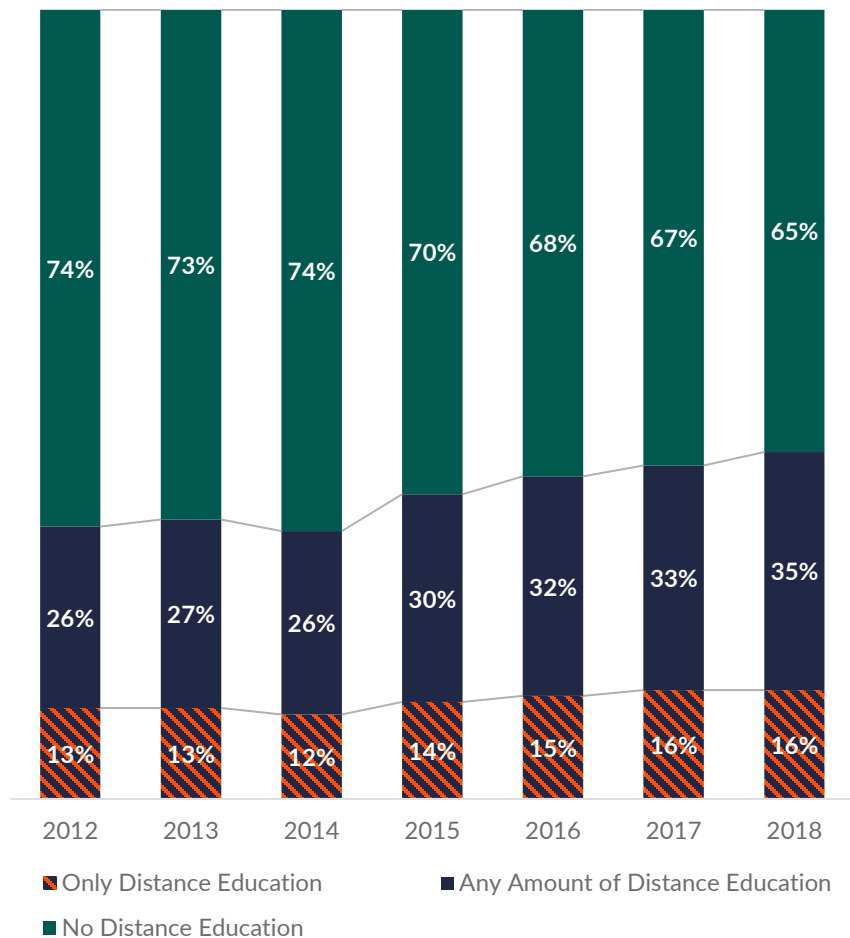
BACKGROUND & TRENDS

Online learning growth, demographics, and drivers and detriments

GENERAL TRENDS

HISTORIC GROWTH OF ONLINE LEARNERS

The percentage of students enrolled in distance education, by academic year (2012-2018)

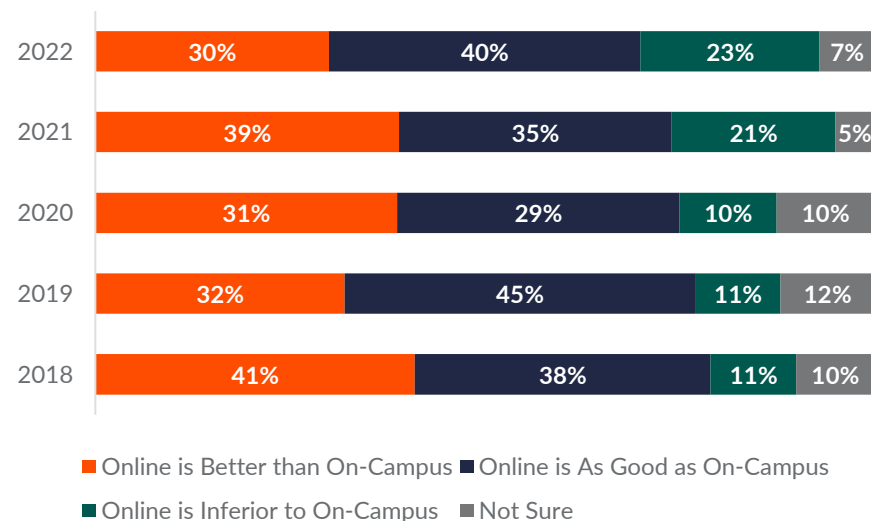


Source: [American Council on Education, 2020](#)

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of students enrolled in some form of distance education grew steadily. In 2018, 35 percent of students participated in at least some distance education, up from only 26 percent in 2012. Student satisfaction with online learning has been unstable in recent years, likely driven in part by the influx of students thrust into online environments as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2018, the majority of students viewed online learning as equal or superior to on-campus learning. Only 11 percent saw online education as inferior, but this share has increased substantially in recent years. As of 2022, nearly one-quarter of students believe that online learning is inferior to in-person education.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON ONLINE LEARNING

The percentage of students holding opinions on online education, by academic year (2012-2018)



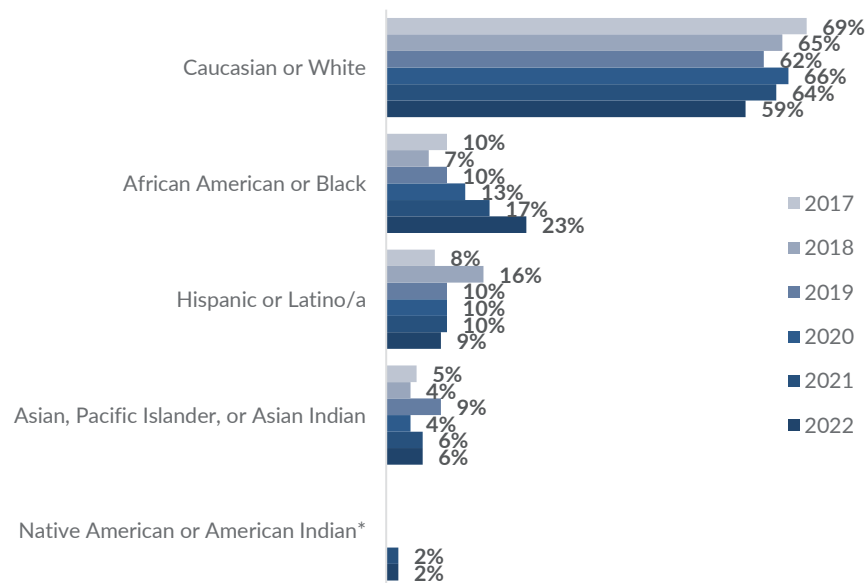
Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#). Note that 2020 results for the data drawn from the Best Colleges 2022 Online Education Trends Report do not reflect the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic as the survey was conducted before lockdowns began.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Online learners have generally grown more diverse and wealthier over the past six years. Though the share of online learners that identify as Caucasian spiked in 2020, by 2022 it had dropped to its lowest value in six years. Black students, meanwhile, have grown to make up nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of all online learners. In 2021, there was a large spike in high-income online learners, reflective of COVID-19-mandated virtual learning. Even so, the percentage of learners in the lowest income bracket has steadily declined while those in higher brackets have risen—though students with a household income between \$25,000 and \$49,000 remain the largest share of learners.

ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF ONLINE LEARNERS

Self-reported ethnicity, by academic year (2017-2022)

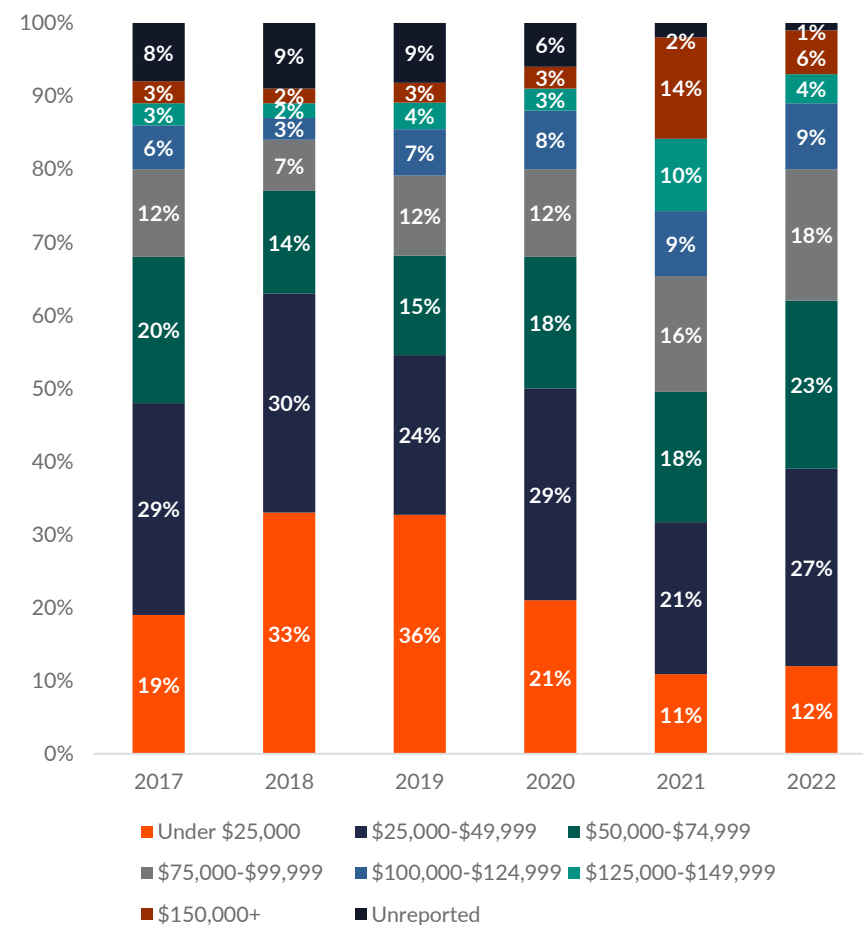


Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#). Note that some minor categories are excluded, meaning the total does not add up to 100 percent for each year.

* Category only included starting in 2021.

ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF ONLINE LEARNERS

Self-reported annual household income, by academic year (2017-2022)



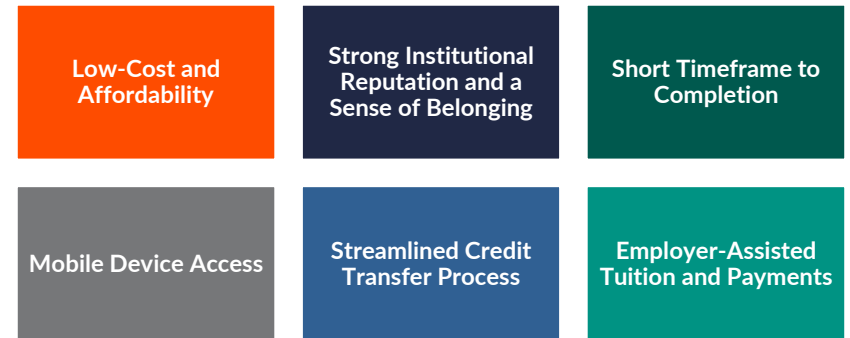
Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#).

STUDENT MOTIVATIONS

Students principally identify scheduling constraints as a result of existing commitments as their chief motivation for online learning. Though the share of students selecting this driver dropped substantially since 2020, this is likely due principally to the addition of new COVID-related rationales, which cannibalized much of the scheduling motivation as students were forced into online learning. Nonetheless, 2022 has seen existing work and family commitments rebound as the top motivator. When evaluating online programs, prospective students most commonly cite affordability as their most important consideration, followed by institutional reputation. Other key features students seek from online programs include short timeframes, streamlined credit transfer processes, and mobile device access (as shown right). Employer-assisted tuition can also be a key consideration, and 12 percent of 2022 students noted it as their primary motivation for online learning.

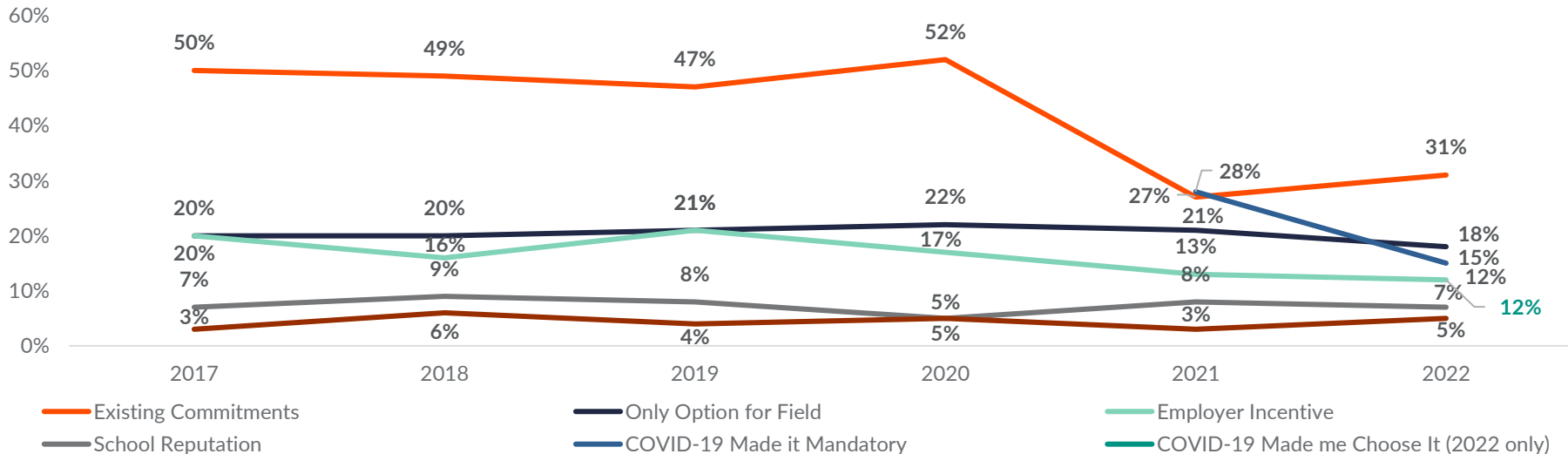
STUDENT PREFERENCES AND DESIRES FOR ONLINE LEARNING

The top things students seek in and from an online learning program, based on the results of a [2020 Wiley Education Services report](#).



CHANGES IN ONLINE LEARNING MOTIVATORS

Most important motivators for students to choose online learning over face-to-face, 2017-2022



Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#).

CHALLENGES TO COMPLETION

Students consistently consider the financial burden of education to be the strongest barrier to online program completion. While access to technology has also increased as a barrier, its major spike in 2021—the first year COVID-19-related online learning was represented in this data—likely indicates this challenge to be more pandemic-driven than endemic for most students. That said, issues such as time management and personal issues also proved to be consistently challenging for students to complete their degrees. Experts agree with familial or social obligations as being significant barriers to online learning, alongside the lack of interaction with peers and ill-trained faculty. Student underestimation of the rigors of online learning is also noteworthy and may have a bearing on the traditionally poorer academic performance observed among online learners when compared to their on-campus peers, especially among [minority students](#).

EXPERT-IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

The top challenges to educational success faced by online learners, drawn from secondary scholarship



[Misconceptions](#) and underestimations about the challenges, rigors, and requirements of online learning



[Family](#) commitments and social obligations



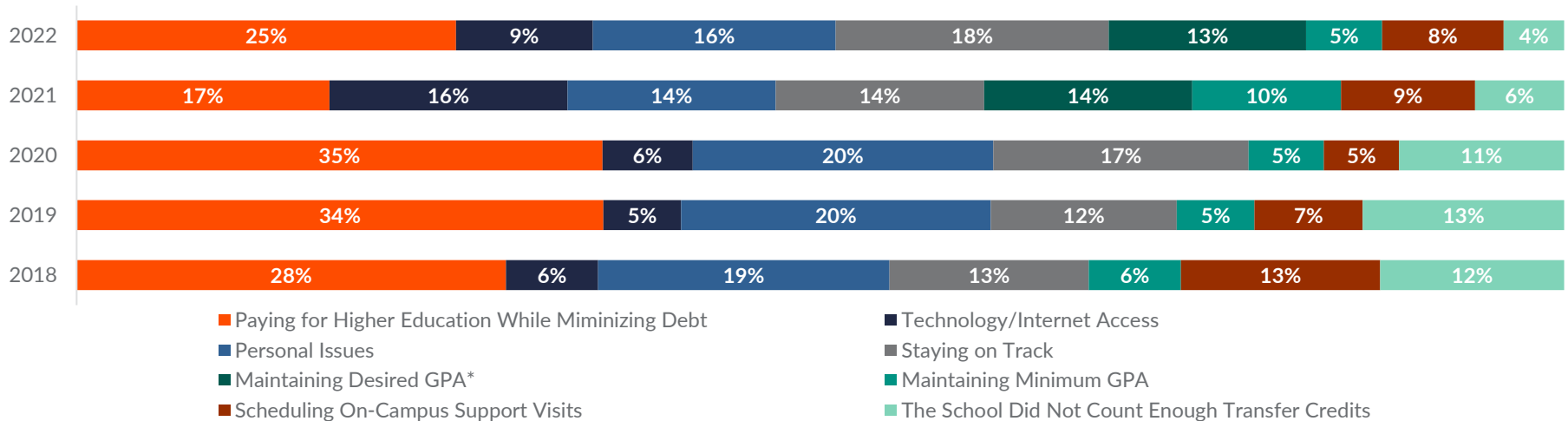
[Ill-equipped](#) and untrained faculty



[Lack](#) of personal interaction and relationship-building

STUDENT-IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES TO COMPLETING ONLINE PROGRAMS

The principal challenges online graduates identified to completing an online program, annually by challenge (2018-2022)



Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#). * Category only included starting in 2021.

CONCERNS ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING

Across the board, students are primarily concerned about how to balance online education with existing obligations. Prospective online students generally have a greater concern for school-life balance than those actually in online learning, and they are also more concerned with how online learning will be viewed by employers in the future. Notably, they are substantially less concerned than those in online learning (or graduates) about the difficulties of adjusting to online learning and the challenges of using technology, likely indicating a lack of awareness of how significant these challenges are.

BIGGEST CONCERN ABOUT THE ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE, BY STUDENT TYPE

All Online Students	Online Learners	Remote Learners	Online Program Graduates	Prospective Online Students
<i>Perception of online education or courses by employers</i>				
10%	9%	8%	11%	12%
<i>Quality of instruction and academic support</i>				
16%	15%	17%	17%	15%
<i>Being part of a learning community or interaction with professors and classmates</i>				
12%	15%	11%	11%	9%
<i>Challenge of using technology and software to access and participate in my classes</i>				
11%	12%	12%	10%	8%
<i>Accessing support services provided by my college or university</i>				
8%	9%	7%	8%	8%
<i>Adapting to an online or remote learning environment</i>				
14%	14%	15%	13%	7%
<i>Balancing education with work, family, and household obligations</i>				
25%	22%	25%	25%	30%
<i>Other concerns</i>				
<1%	<1%	0%	0%	6%
<i>No concerns</i>				
5%	5%	4%	4%	6%

Source: [Best Colleges, 2022](#). Note: Remote Learners refers to students either forced to take online courses because of the pandemic or who are taking synchronous courses that approximate the in-person classroom.

HIGHER EDUCATION

STRATEGIES

*Best practices to improve the online learning experience,
for both general populations and SUNY OW's Target Demographics*

GENERAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Key practices for promoting the success of online learners revolve around faculty training, technological and education orientations, community building, and institutional supports. [Studies](#) and [real-world examples](#) show that faculty training must undergird any effort to improve student performance; properly educated faculty are much more likely to apply any given strategy in their classes, thus improving its impact on students. Classes should strive to allow students opportunities for peer and faculty interaction, which, in turn, boosts their investment and performance. Institutions should also strive to create a streamlined and regulated onboarding process for new students, including training, credit transfer opportunities, and cost reduction strategies. Relatedly, being [direct about costs](#) is important to students and may affect their decision to pursue online study. Required orientations and technology training, including in novel technologies, can help ensure all students begin on a solid footing.

“ There is, in short, no way that an effective college education can escape from the need for productive human interaction as a core part of the instructional process...But this need not imply that all of that human interaction needs to be face-to-face. ”

- [Sandy Baum and Michael S. McPherson](#)

PRINCIPAL STRATEGIES FOR ALL STUDENTS, FROM THE LITERATURE



Mandatory
Orientations
and
Technological
Training



Community-
Building
Opportunities



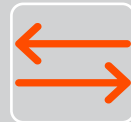
Increased
Faculty
Training



Cost-
Reduction and
Cost-
Transparency



Technological
Innovation



Streamlined
Credit
Transfer
Process

FACULTY TRAINING

Interactions with faculty support student persistence and provide emotional support. A 2018 [study](#) found that a professor's presence and interactions with online students boosted their persistence. As instructors cannot be physically present with students, they must instead build a [virtual presence](#) through check-ins, feedback, and targeted support. Faculty interactions also help boost student morale. [Studies show](#) that when students believe that professors care about their performance, their [interest in learning and overall motivation](#) increases. For minority and underrepresented student populations in particular, [faculty engagement](#) can be essential to their success. Effective presence in an online space often requires different skills than in-person learning, however, necessitating [institutional training and support](#) for educators.

Faculty should strive for consistent interactions and provide positive affirmation in feedback. Recent [research](#) shows that consistent student interaction is more important than frequent interaction. To promote regular contact with online students, instructors should identify specific points throughout a course to conduct individual student check-ins and consider offering [virtual office hours](#). Additionally, when giving [feedback](#), online instructors should pair actionable, constructive criticism with positive commentary. Encouraging communication allows students to “minimize stress, modify performance, and provide their highest level of work.”

76%

of online students find **optional virtual office hours** “attractive” or “very attractive”



27%

of online students believe **more instructor contact** would improve the quality of online courses



Source: [Learning House](#), 2018.



HIGHER EDUCATION

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR ONLINE EDUCATORS

Plan for Presence

- Base course schedule on the requirements of in-person classes and engage with students via weekly announcements, discussions, office hours

Be Human

- Infuse writing and online lectures with your unique voice and warmth

Envision the Student Experience

- Design the course to account for student feelings of isolation

Build an Intuitive Course Structure

- Strive for clear, methodical, and intuitive organization, adding navigation instructions and providing quick pointers on the LMS

Add Visual Appeal

- Break up long sections of text and embed relevant images or thumbnail videos

Communicate Expectations

- Produce thorough, yet digestible explanations of course expectations

Use Scaffold Learning Activities

- Break down complex tasks to allow for timely progress and feedback, ensuring students build skills step-by-step

Use Multiple Examples and Explanations

- Offer videos that examine a topic from different perspectives and angles, and consider offering supplemental examples for students

Promote an Enjoyable Environment

- Be engaged and positive, show compassion for busy online learners, and streamline course organization

Ongoing Professional Development

- Participating in available workshops, join discussion groups, and subscribing to teaching-related newsletters

Source: Adapted (sometimes verbatim) from the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#).

TECHNOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While there is more to effective online learning than simply having access to the internet and proper technology, many target students likely struggle with basic access. Ethnic minorities and low-income students, of whom [many](#) are first-generation college students, are particularly likely to lack access to high-speed internet and powerful computing tools. There are, however, [some strategies](#) to address access, such as investing in institutional laptops for students or providing mobile hotspots. In the virtual classroom itself, students generally find a variety of online activities and materials to be most effective in enhancing their learning ability and experience. Beyond the traditional PowerPoints, videos, and textbooks, a large majority of students found interactive media and discussion boards to be particularly helpful—though discussion boards can [alienate at-risk students](#), meaning instructors should allow many contribution methods. Notably, fewer students find synchronous learning to be helpful even though [research shows](#) it to be particularly useful students' success.

FAST FACTS: INTERNET ACCESS



Based on the [2018 census](#), only 24 percent of low-income households have broadband internet and also own or use a full range of computing devices

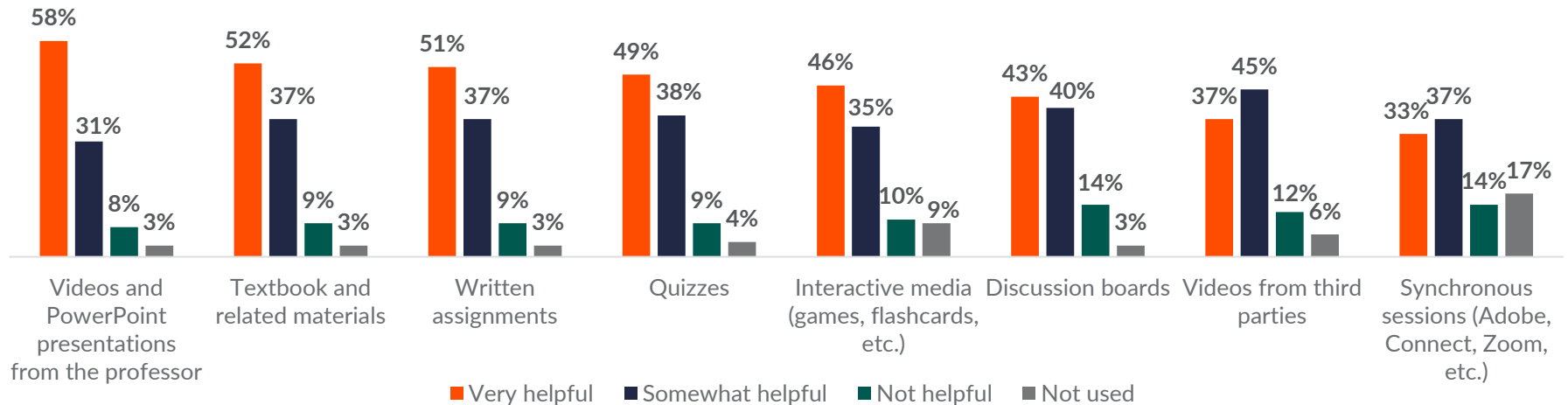


[Non-white](#) racial groups are less likely to be digitally connected, particularly [black and Hispanic families](#), as a result of income inequality.



In [2018](#), more than half of rural adults encounter problems accessing high-speed internet.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF HELPFULNESS OF ONLINE CLASS ACTIVITIES AND MATERIALS



Source: [Learning House](#), 2018.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TARGET POPULATIONS

COURSE MATERIAL VARIETY



[Research indicates](#) that minority students better understood course concepts when they worked with a variety of materials such as diverse media, readings, and web-based learning tools. Existing literature indicates that this is especially true for Hispanic students.

COURSE ORGANIZATION



Minority students have identified strong [course organization](#) as essential to their success in online learning. Organization, along with clear expectations, helps students stay on track and perform more effectively in their assignments. Strong organization can also help with the [self-discipline](#) that is essential to online learning success.

PEER AND FACULTY INTERACTION



Every target audience—including [indigenous students](#)—was proven to benefit significantly from interactions with peers and faculty. This aspect of learning can be particularly difficult in online spaces, but holding virtual [office hours](#), providing timely feedback, and [creating virtual spaces](#) through discussion boards or chat platforms can help create the social supports needed to target population successes. Similarly, [synchronous or hybrid learning](#) may offer a strong opportunity to build connections.

DIGITAL PROFICIENCY



Many younger, first-generation, transfer, [immigrant](#), and other students struggle with technological proficiency. Offering mandatory courses and training, alongside repeated and prominent guides in the courses, can help with online success.

In addition to the widely applicable strategies previously discussed, several strategies and audience-specific challenges exist for SUNY OW's target populations. In general, strategies for the groups below should revolve around providing structure and feedback, faculty availability, community building, opportunities to explore varied content through different media, and training in necessary digital technologies.

- First-generation college students are more likely to have limited technological [access](#) and [proficiency](#)
- Opportunities to build digital proficiency and provide study space or access to technology [help success](#)
- Mental, familial, financial, and social issues affect success; [facilitating](#) peer-to-peer contact and mental health and financial services can help

First-Generation Students

Black Students

- Black students "[reported fewer microaggressions in online classrooms](#)," and many prefer online learning because they feel [less judged](#)
- Lack of professor interaction and limited examples are key [challenges](#)
- Training in technology, a variety of study topics, and hand-held tech all helped [with success](#)

- Transitions to online learning led to a [decline in average grades](#) for transfer students but not for other students
- Making [social connections](#) predicts transfer student success and is especially difficult online
- Assistance in learning new digital resources, prioritizing redundancy in guidance, and allowing peer-to-peer interaction aid [with success](#)

Transfer Students

Hispanic Students

- Hispanic students were more likely to [withdraw](#) from online courses than face-to-face courses
- [Collaborative relationships](#) with faculty and institutional supports (advising, financial aid, etc.) are essential to success, boosting retention
- [Structured courses](#) and variety in lieu of routine help with success

Target Population Strategies

CASE STUDY: WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

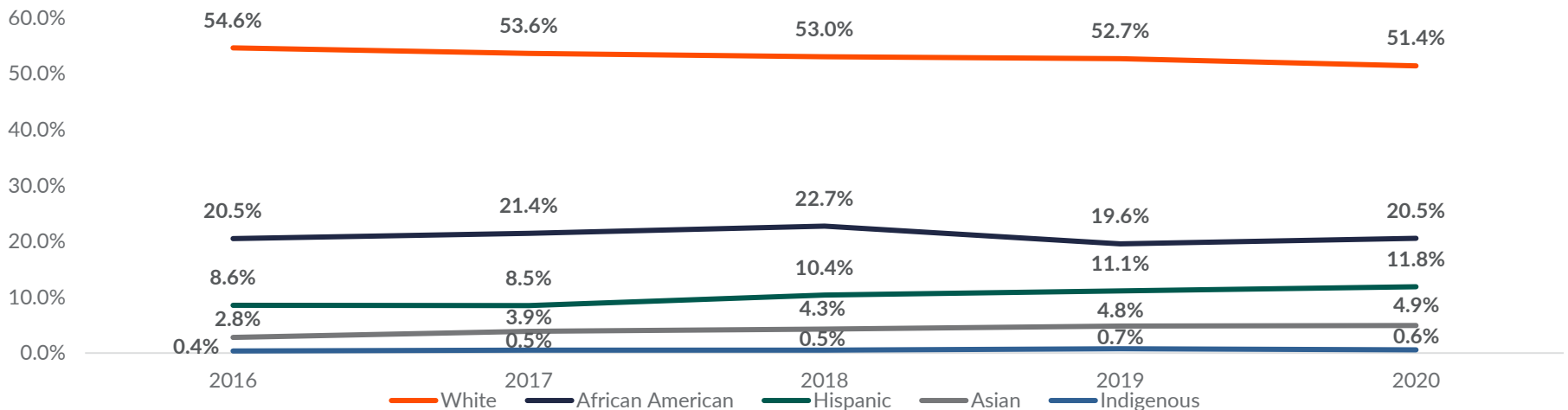
COMPASS Program

Wake Tech's COMPASS initiative represents a strong model for effective implementation of helpful online learning initiatives that boosted minority student performance. Wake Tech, a mid-sized community college in Raleigh, NC, has consistently conferred more than half of all of its degrees through distance programs since 2016. Further, the proportion of distance degree recipients that do not identify as white has also increased during that time, albeit slowly, with African American and Hispanic students making up the largest share. The COMPASS Program (Constructing an Online Model to Promote At-Risk Student Success) sought to implement a three-fold model to increase the number, retention, and success rates of students, particularly those from ethnic minority groups.

Wake Technical Community College

Location	Raleigh, NC
Number of Distance Programs	24
Number of Distance Program Conferrals	4,656
Distance Program Conferral CAGR (2016-2020)	15.3%
COMPASS Website	About Wake Tech

WAKE TECH DISTANCE LEARNING CONFERRAL DEMOGRAPHICS



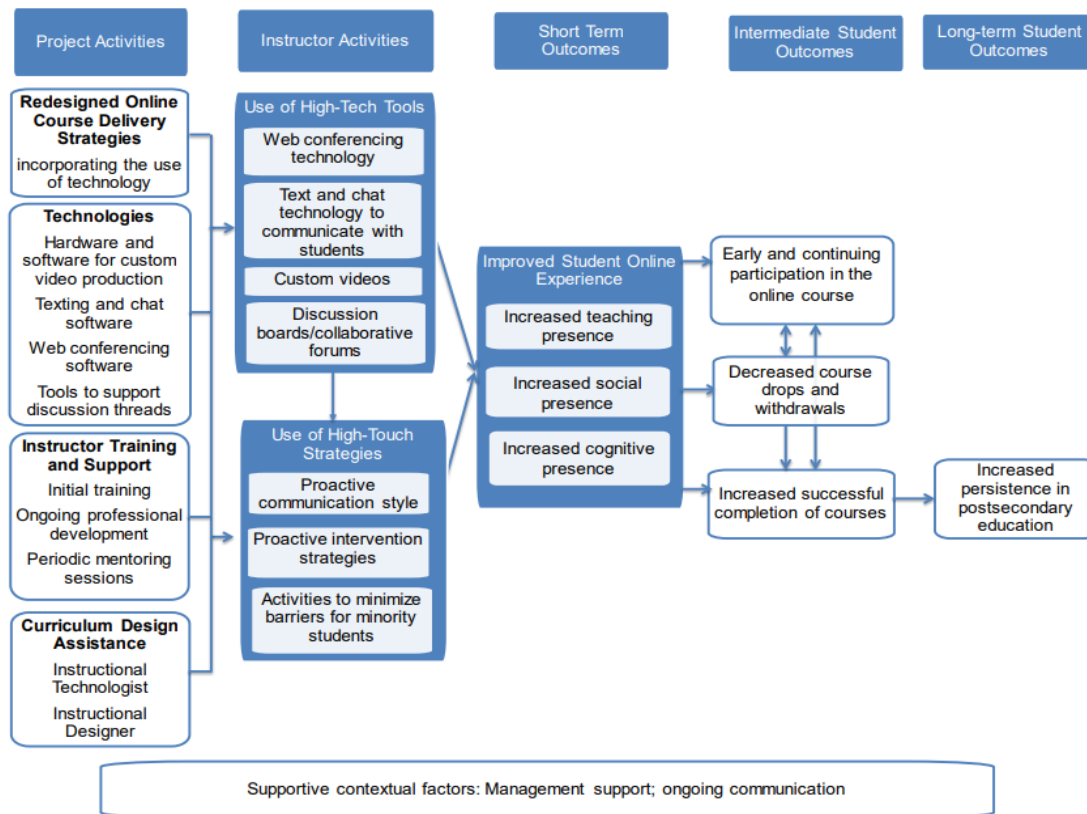
Data on this slide is drawn from [IPEDS](#).



CASE STUDY: WAKE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

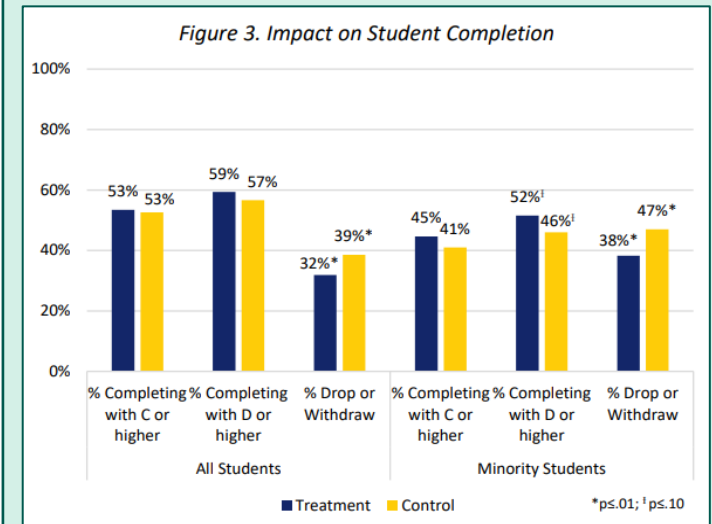
COMPASS PROGRAM LOGIC AND DESIGN

The COMPASS program revolved around three core strategies: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Chief among the planned initiatives were efforts to a) increase interactions between online students and peers and faculty, primarily through new interactive high-tech tools, and b) to boost instructor training in using these technologies and implementing effective online education through high-touch strategies. A general outline of the program is shown below.



COMPASS PROGRAM OUTCOMES

While COMPASS was effective in improving the performance of all students at Wake Tech, it was particularly impactful for minority students. Though minority students continued to underperform the average, the performance gap decreased substantially, and their success rates grew. Beyond performance, the program also successfully eliminated the gap between minority students and the average of all students in terms of persisting in their programs to the following year, raising both rates to 80 percent. Faculty education proved to be particularly effective in boosting student performance. Educating instructors on how to use relevant tools led to a much higher rate of adoption in their classes, in turn leading to higher performance among students.



Source: [Improving Online Learning in Community College Settings](#)




CONTACT

Dana Marrero

Content Director, Higher Education

E: dmarrero@hanoverresearch.com

P: 202-407-9282

 hanoverresearch.com

