



CHEPP

The Center for
Higher Education Policy
and Practice

ONLINE BY DESIGN

**How Learner-Centered Higher Education
Design And Delivery Accelerates
Equitable Access And Outcomes**

Introduction

In the United States, a college degree or credential is a leading indicator of whether an individual has economic safety. This makes it incumbent on the higher education sector to support and develop programs that meet as many learners' needs as possible. The higher education sector is shifting towards offering increasingly flexible modalities. While this shift has been accelerated by COVID, its beginnings and much of its growth began before the pandemic sent workers and learners home.

Given the complexity of their lives, it's unsurprising that learners would choose a model/design that allows them to balance their lives and go to school. Of today's learners, 64% are working, 49% are financially independent, 24% are parents, 3 out of 5 are housing or food insecure, 19% are living with a disability, 6% are veterans or active-duty military, and 34% are first-generation learners (O'Sullivan, 2023). Additionally, more than 40 million learners have attended some college but have no degree or credential (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023), indicating a design flaw in the majority of today's program offerings to students.

Traditional higher education institutions were built to serve a narrower population than they do today. Before the first Higher Education Act was passed in 1965, college enrollments were largely comprised of financially secure individuals pursuing a limited number of careers that required a higher education degree. However, a higher education degree or credential is now a prerequisite to enter entry-level positions in a number of fields. These shifting expectations have resulted in more people pursuing higher education, even when the demands of a traditional higher education course load are not conducive to their other responsibilities and financial well-being. This means that more learners need to work while taking care of their family members and attending college in order to make a living wage and succeed in the workforce.

While the pandemic did not create the trend in moving to online education, it did broaden and highlight the use of the modality. Many institutions are maintaining or growing the use of online programs, and students continue to seek the option. As policymakers and practitioners strive to deliver on the promise of higher education as a driver of economic safety and social mobility, it's critical that higher education responds to the evolving needs of learners and their ability to access and succeed in postsecondary education, regardless of modality. The shift in the sector provides institutions with the opportunity to catalyze learner-centered design as part of an online delivery strategy to better meet learner needs and increase persistence — and, in doing so, learner economic safety.

Online by Design: How Learner-Centered Higher Education Design and Delivery Accelerates Equitable Access and Outcomes is the first and foundational piece in a forthcoming series of white papers. It addresses what intentional and learner-centered design and delivery of higher education entails; particularly, considerations related to learner-centered design in an online modality, and how design is core to equity and access.

The Pandemic Accelerated the Ongoing Online Evolution in Higher Education and Highlighted the Importance of Learner-Centered Design

When the pandemic hit the U.S. in March 2020, millions of learners across the country needed a way to attend college without risking exposure to COVID-19. In response, college and university faculty and administrators rapidly shifted their scheduled in-person classes to a digital format. Within weeks, the majority of undergraduates who were originally scheduled to attend on-campus programs began attending college fully online (D'Agostino, 2022). Both the mental and emotional strain of the pandemic left many students feeling isolated and experiencing mental health challenges and learning difficulties (Hu et al., 2022). Large numbers of students were also in desperate financial circumstances – many unable to afford the basic necessities of food and housing due to a spike in unemployment and an economic recession (CBPP, 2022). By January 2022, an estimated million fewer students were enrolled in higher education than before the pandemic (Nadworny, 2022).

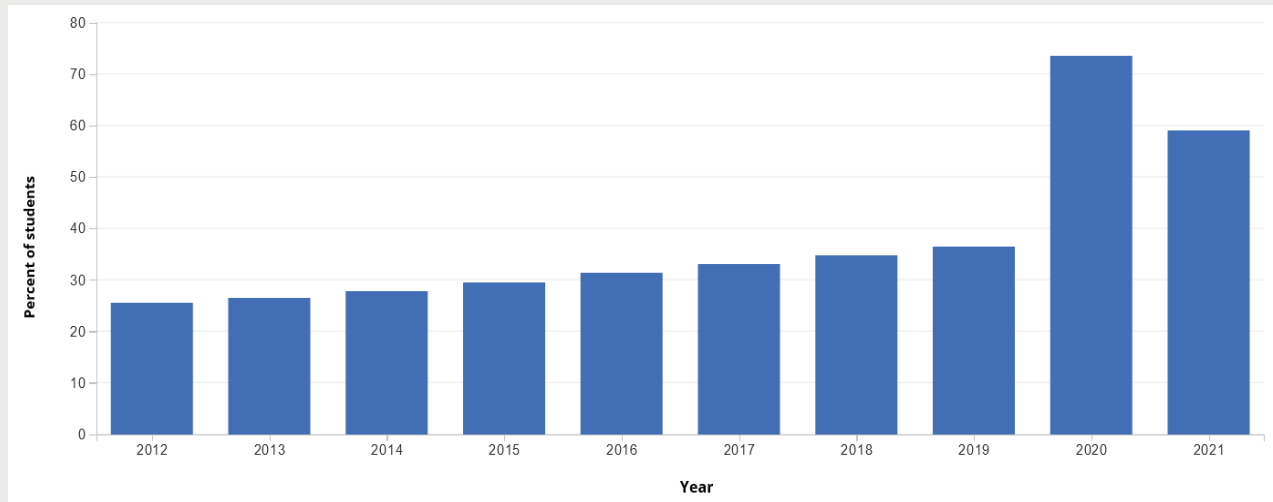
While the pandemic was extremely difficult for learners, faculty, and staff across the higher education sector, it accelerated the move to online learning. However, the types of online education experiences during the pandemic ranged widely from emergency remote learning courses to intentionally designed online experiences with wraparound supports and digital resources designed to meet a range of learner needs. Researchers indicate that it will take decades to unpack the outcomes data associated with different forms of online and hybrid learning, which long predated the pandemic, but what is known is that intentionally designed online programs and courses result in higher quality learner experiences than emergency remote education (Cavanaugh, 2020). Studies and stories abound from the pandemic of learners who were haphazardly shuffled into a virtual environment out of sheer necessity and without appropriate supports, preparation, or resources, and instructors who did the best they could under the circumstances.

Despite the challenges institutions and students faced during the pandemic, many institutions are maintaining or growing online offerings, and students continue to indicate the need for more flexibility – trends that well preceded the pandemic. The decade-plus growth in the online sector reflects shifting learner preferences, including the uptick coming out of the pandemic. Today's learners have been and are seeking flexible modalities, indicating likely continued growth in the sector. While in-person program growth has been either flat or declining among institutions nationally, with an estimated 3% decline in enrollments across higher education from 2012 to 2020 (Diaz-Infante et al., 2022), exclusively online undergraduate enrollments rose from 15% in 2019 to 44% in 2020, and were then 28% in 2021 (NCES, 2022). And according to the National Center for Education Statistics, online course enrollments have been growing steadily over the period 2012–2021, jumping from just under 40% of all higher education learner enrollments to nearly 60% in 2021 (see Sidebox 1 below). Rising costs in higher education, the increasing numbers of learners who are low income and financially independent, and the complex lives of learners contribute to this. Flexible programs, many times online, can enable students to work full time while earning a degree or credential and caring for their families.

In 2012, just 26% of all undergraduate students took at least some of their coursework online (NCES, 2013). By 2018, that number had risen to 34% (NCES, 2019). By the end of 2021, 84% of all undergraduates experienced some or all of their coursework online due to COVID-19 (NCES, 2021). According to a 2022 survey, learner preferences for mostly or completely online courses increased from 9% in 2020 to 29% in 2022 (Robert, 2022). It seems that after undergoing an emergency shift to online instruction because of the pandemic, more students of all ages are now expressing a preference for hybrid or online programs over fully in-person postsecondary experiences. This shift in preferences is likely one that is being driven by the diverse range of needs and circumstances in which today's learners find themselves.

Additionally, many institutions are investing in intentionally online environments that provide robust wraparound supports (e.g., dedicated online advisors and financial aid staff) and dedicated online instructional resources (i.e., ranging from online course and curriculum development, instruction, and technology support). In 2022, the majority of a national sample of surveyed institutions offering online courses reported that they were devoting greater resources to intentional online student support structures (e.g., mental health resources, academic advising, student services, internet access) (CHLOE 7, 2022).

Sidebox 1. Percent of Students Enrolled in Distance Education Courses Among Title IV Institutions in the United States (2012-2021)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment component final data (2012-2020) and provisional data (2021).

To support intentional online course development, the vast majority of a national sample of institutions reported offering faculty incentives like monetary incentives (68%) and release time (38%) (CHLOE 8, 2023). Faculty preferences for teaching online are also shifting. Educause’s “Faculty and Technology” report found that 53% of faculty prefer teaching courses in-person as of Spring 2023, compared with 73% in an earlier survey in 2019 (Muscanell, 2023).

Higher education has a responsibility to adapt its systems and offerings to better meet learner needs and support them as they seek meaningful and purposeful higher education pathways. The acceleration of online delivery across the sector that was expedited by the pandemic provides the opportunity to be learner-centered in the design and delivery of higher education across modalities. Programs that existed prior to the pandemic and were designed to meet the needs of learners not well served in traditional programs can offer lessons to developing programs to meet an array of current and emerging needs for learners.

Designing Higher Education to Meet Learners Where They Are

At its core, learner-centered design means delivering education in a manner that reflects a learner's lived experience, meets a diverse range of needs that support persistence, and provides for economic safety and social mobility. Given the trajectory of learner needs and preferences towards more flexibly delivered options, learner-centered design must include delivery of higher education across a range of modalities. Offering an online option is one of many powerful elements of learner-centered design. It enables flexibility within the current system and can offer curricular advantages to certain, though not all, courses and subjects (e.g., introductory level courses taught online have been found to be advantageous to learners over large lecture hall formats because they offer more instructor interaction through the chat function). However, it's important to note modality is just one part of intentional education design. Much like in traditional models, meeting learners' needs is critical to their success in online programs and this requires shifts to become more learner-centered as a whole.

Creating a high-quality online course or program is not as simple as transitioning in-person classes online, as was commonly required during the pandemic. As higher education shifts toward a more online, tech-enabled future, with multi-modal options as a starting point for many practitioners, the question of how best to deliver online education to enable learners to meet their goals is critical to meaningful progress in this area (Swaak, 2022). This shift requires attention to serving the learner through supporting their individual agency in academic and non-academic services facilitated by an aligned mission, culture, and infrastructure. For example, developing effective online programming requires collaboration with experts in online course delivery and technology, continuous improvement driven by data, professional development for faculty related to intentional instructional design and teaching strategies, accessibility and universal design for learners with disabilities, and ample research regarding engaging learners and creating a nurturing and challenging learning environment using technology (Lockee, 2023).

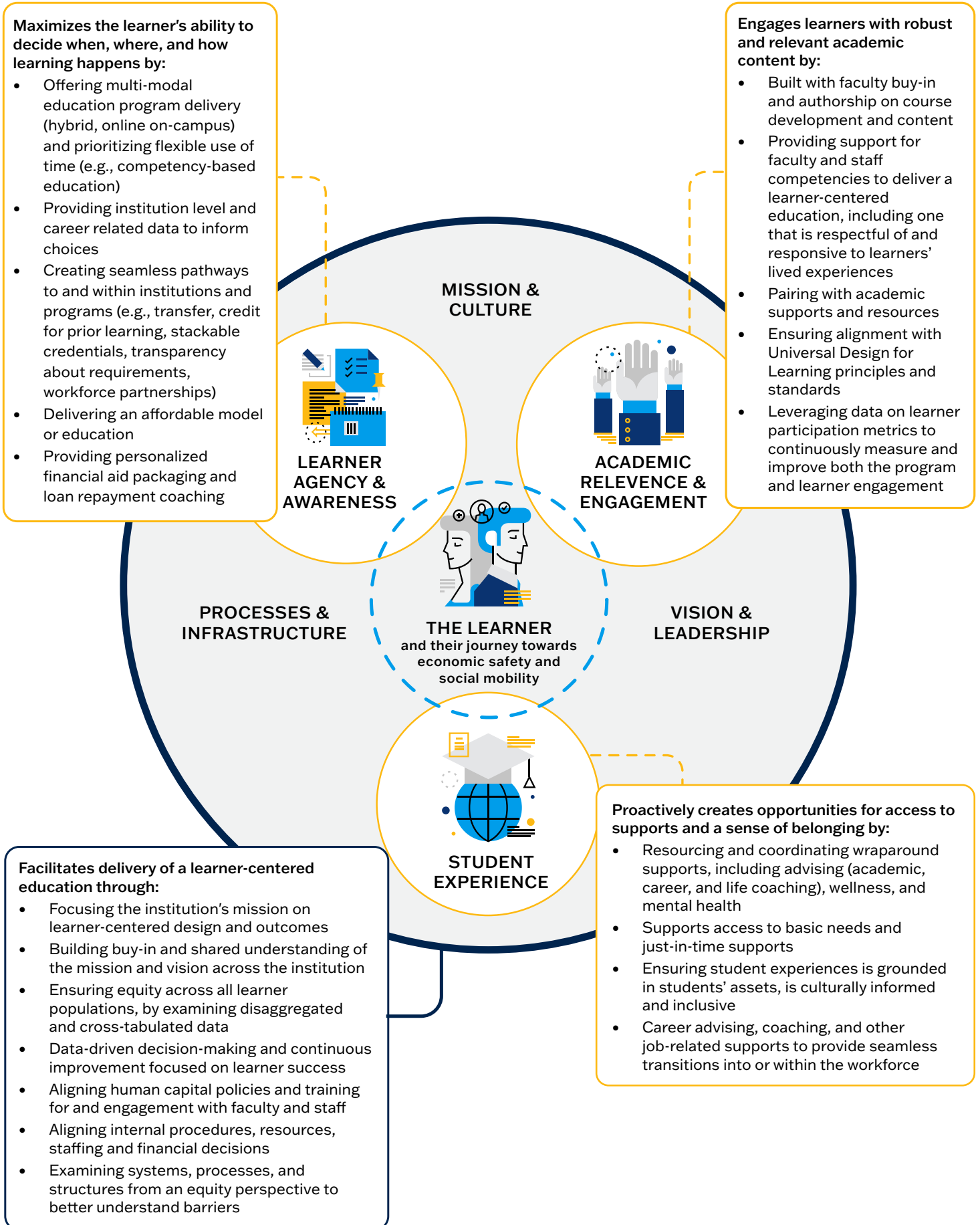
Mission and Culture, Process and Infrastructure, Vision and Leadership

As a starting place – and given the complexity of institutional organization – delivering on learner-centered design requires clear leadership and a vision, including an institutional mission and culture that maintains focus on that vision and aligned goals. Such leadership and culture development is critical for expectation-setting on organizational decisions and building buy-in across stakeholders to deliver on the mission and vision. Importantly, systems and infrastructure must align with the design to facilitate organizational change, whether through budgetary decisions or human capital policies.

Essential to the long-term success of both institution and student is implementing continuous improvement systems to ensure students receive the personalized support they require throughout their postsecondary experience. Some colleges use data to inform advising, investment in digital infrastructure, centralized services for consistency and replicability of quality standards, and other robust student supports. Others rely on cross-system collaboration to implement and maintain supports after finding that working in isolation does not yield the desired results in terms of student success. No matter the strategy, institutions must develop feedback loops and improvement mechanisms, so that student support delivery is up to date and adequately addresses varying student needs. This practice of continuous improvement through data is essential since it empowers institutions to remain nimble as they navigate issues critical to the future of higher education.

Continuous improvement and data-driven decision-making can take hold only in an organization that has a learner-centered mission, vision, culture, and the required leadership support. If institutions can adapt their systems to become more learner-centered, they may also be able to help address key issues facing the broader higher education sector in the process.

A Learner-Centered Design Framework



Sidebox 3. Quality Debates on Student Outcomes for Online Learning

Student outcomes are and should be at the forefront of the national discussion around all higher education modalities, including online learning. Further, any discussion of online education design should include the existing data on outcomes in online education as an important starting point. The debate about “quality” in higher education is long-standing and spans both in-person and online courses. Yet, “quality” is subjective to the individual learner, the program, the modality, the outcomes, and so on. Existing studies on quality are often based on small sample sizes of mostly first-time full-time students attending on-campus programs. These parameters do not work for online models, and comparing the two modalities using the same methodology is a disservice to both.

The postsecondary field has shifted dramatically in the last decade and so too should the studies to measure the quality of online programs, in particular. In fact, very little data is available measuring the quality of intentionally designed online programs that seek to serve today’s learners.

Prior to the pandemic, studies showed online education outcomes to be worse than in-person outcomes (Xu & Xu, 2019). Additional bodies of research demonstrated lower graduation rates overall for purely online courses (Bettinger et al., 2017) as well as higher drop-out rates, particularly among the most vulnerable populations of learners (Bettinger & Loeb, 2017). With this information as a foundation, questions remain about whether online education delivers positive outcomes. For example, since the pandemic, Virginia Tech has significantly increased some of its online class sizes and has received criticism surrounding the quality of learning and subsequent outcomes of these courses, especially in comparison to in-person courses (D’Agostino, 2023). Comparing in-person to online courses tends to gloss over the fundamental design differences between the two and, therefore, skews data to poorly represent online outcomes (Lockee, 2023). Outcomes data in online education lags behind in-person outcomes because there simply are not enough courses specifically designed to operate online and inadequate data to represent those that do exist. Rather, many programs attempt to provide an in-person experience through an online modality, a strategy that is detrimental to the course, the professor, and the student (and perpetuates the comparison between online and in-person).

In actuality, online, blended, and in-person delivery are modalities for learning, not proxies for the quality of instruction, pedagogy, and course design. As an example, some classes, particularly large undergraduate classes with enrollments of over 100 students, are more effective online because, through an online platform, students may ask questions more frequently, receive rapid feedback, and engage with the professor and their classmates more meaningfully than they would be able to in a large lecture hall (Shankar et al., 2023).

Academic Relevance and Engagement

Although online is not the best option for every learner, and some, just like in-person, do fall behind due to a lack of preparedness, resources, and support, there is a great opportunity in higher education to better support students’ individual needs using appropriate technological platforms and engaging learners online through relevant and engaging learning experiences. Online courses, as with most higher education courses, range in terms of rigor. But the best-designed online courses are built with faculty buy-in, authorship, and support for both credits and competencies; are paired with online academic supports and resources; ensure Universal Design for Learning principles and standards; are respectful and responsive to learners’ lived experiences; and leverage data on learner participation metrics to continuously measure and improve engagement.

Designing engaging and relevant online coursework also embraces the added challenges that online delivery poses for learners, such as physical isolation, consistent broadband access, and technology navigation. To take steps to improve online outcomes, providers must develop and implement stronger, more intentional course design coupled with easily accessible, wraparound supports for students. That said, implementing such tools is expensive, requires professional development, and, in some cases, a technological overhaul, none of which can be accomplished if an institution or system is not on solid financial ground. Overcoming cost barriers requires creative solutions, and, importantly, collaboration and buy-in among faculty, leadership, and administration.

Learner Agency and Awareness

Online delivery holds the potential to unlock advantages for specific populations, like those seeking an accelerated degree pathway. According to one study conducted at a public research university, students who took their major-required courses online were more likely to experience an accelerated time-to-degree (Fischer et al., 2021). Additionally, those seeking a flexible course schedule that allows them to maintain their work and caregiving obligations are also likely to benefit from online education. This is particularly true for individuals seeking to upskill or reskill to advance in their careers. There are many learners who would not be able to attend college without online options due to challenges, such as not living within driving distance of a campus, barriers related to a disability or chronic health condition, a lack of transportation, or other unique circumstances (e.g., cultural factors that limit the ability to attend classes in-person). Using an online format allows learners who are in a multitude of different circumstances to obtain a degree or certificate and immediately put learned skills to use in their work and/or personal environments, ultimately building towards a more meaningful and purposeful career and life, as well as increased earning potential. With more learners calling for hybrid and online degree and credential programs, better outcomes are likely to follow as higher education evolves to create meaningful, valuable, and intentional online learning experiences.

Scaling online programs to accommodate larger groups of students with diverse needs can be challenging. As online higher education expands, institutions are taking innovative measures to ensure high-quality online delivery. For example, some institutions are merging with, or acquiring, primarily online providers that already have a successful model in place. Others, like Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), have chosen to separate the online division from the physical campus in an effort to create a more consistent experience across online programs and services. Despite the separation of departments, SNHU offers a single course catalog and allows in-person students to take online courses, creating a hybrid option (and accompanying supports) for those who want it.

Ultimately, offering multiple modalities, including online, is a critical part of maximizing a learner's ability to decide when, where, and how learning happens. Additionally, improving learner agency also requires providing data to make informed program and career choices, prioritizing flexible use of time (e.g., offering competency-based education options), seamless pathways (e.g., maximizing transfer credit, credit for prior learning, stackable credentials, transparent requirements, and workforce partnerships), reducing costs to make higher education affordable, and providing personalized packaging and repayment coaching.

Student Experience

Online wraparound supports must include broadband access, computers and other technology, student services, universal design and disability accommodations, health and mental health services, academic support, IT, financial aid, advising, career counseling, and other components that on-campus students would easily access. Providing online instruction without these elements in place creates hurdles for learners who need flexibility across the entire spectrum of their postsecondary experience. For example, if a student runs into a glitch on their institution's learning platform at 10:00 p.m., the only time they have in their day to complete their coursework, they should be able to obtain tech support right away so that they can continue their learning and advance toward their credential. At SNHU, the advising team has structured its hours to better sync with the schedules of working learners, with online advisors available until midnight Eastern time for this reason.

Consistent broadband access is an obvious key to success in online programs; however, significant technology gaps exist throughout the country. For example, many students in rural areas do not have internet access and are often unable to progress in their courses the way they would be able to if wireless internet were a given. By offering hotspots (and adequate tech support via phone when internet is unavailable) for the duration of a program, this issue could be largely solved. One community and technical college system has seen a trend among their students that demonstrates the need for wider access to broadband

and that further demonstrates the value of online learning. Their students who reside in rural areas without sufficient broadband access choose to take online classes because they fit into their full-time work schedules. To overcome the barrier of internet access, they drive to campus to take online courses in the computer lab. This option is empowering many full-time working rural learners to progress towards a degree.

In a 2022 study, the majority of institutions reported no change in resources for support services like online library services, online career services, and 24/7 tech support for students (Garrett et al., 2022). However, a significant number of institutions reported growth in resources for services including online tutoring services, online mental health services, increased options for internet access, and free/low-cost tech to help bridge the digital divide (Garrett et al., 2022). While some online providers are making headway in creating high-quality, comprehensive learning experiences for students, others have an immense opportunity to invest greater resources in support services in order to meet students where they are.

At SNHU, the student experience team proactively creates opportunities for access to supports and a sense of belonging by investing in a culture of care, relationships, and trust and resourcing online wraparound supports including advising spanning academics, career, student financial services, and life coaching. The institution is also working on how it can better support access to basic needs and just-in-time supports, support overall student wellness and mental health, and ensure the student experience is culturally informed and inclusive with asset framing.

Learner-Centered Design as a Key Element in Addressing Critical Issues Facing the Higher Education Sector

As policymakers and practitioners strive to expand access, meet learners' needs, and improve outcomes, learner-centered design offers a lens to address challenges facing institutions as they shift to new modalities. Such challenges include online accessibility; creating a culture of belonging to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); academic relevance, assessment, and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI); and supporting online learner career success, including considerations of how AI will impact the workforce. While being online as part of learner-centered design is important for meeting learner needs and for helping higher education become more learner-centered, it is also emerging as a key tool in advancing institutional abilities to manage these larger challenges.

Accessibility and Universal Design in Online Environments

While higher education institutions are required by federal law to provide students with disabilities reasonable accommodations to enroll and fully participate in their academic programs alongside their peers, students with disabilities have historically been underserved. In order to truly implement a learner-centered design framework, institutions must think beyond their legal obligations and put learners with disabilities and their needs at the center of their program design. A learner-centered framework requires institutions to meet students where they are, including offering a variety of ways to learn and demonstrate their learning. This can be done using universal design for learning (UDL), where curriculum is delivered through a variety of modalities and assessed in more than one way. When academic programs are more accessible for learners with disabilities, they are more accessible for all learners – meeting different learning preferences and offering flexibility around demands outside of the classroom. As more students seek higher education programs online, institutions must work to ensure that their technology platforms and online curriculum are fully accessible to all of their learners. In cases where accessibility falls short, students with disabilities must be eligible for and have ready access to accommodations to access their program alongside their peers without disabilities.

Creating a Culture of Care and Belonging Online to Promote Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Today's learners have a broad spectrum of needs, and being online by design means delivering on DEI goals and building a culture that fosters a sense of belonging to serve the learner. The diversity of needs among today's learners reflects the importance of flexible online options. Adult learners are the most likely to take online programs and classes across all learner segments (Garrett et al., 2022). For working adults with caretaking responsibilities and other personal commitments that make attending rigidly scheduled courses in person exceedingly difficult, the preference for online degree programs is not new. However, according to a 2022 national survey, "the number of high school juniors and seniors planning to attend fully online colleges has more than doubled since before the pandemic" (D'Agostino, 2022). Online courses and degree programs allow for a level of flexibility that is not typically present on a traditional college campus and provide learners the opportunity to maintain their personal and professional responsibilities while achieving their academic goals. Given both the needs of today's learners and the increasing prevalence of online learning, the ability to attend online courses at times that fit into their lives is the only way that many learners are able to access higher education. According to a recent survey, 42% of currently enrolled online learners had tried in-person college before and stopped out (Wiley, 2023). The personalized nature of higher education delivered online by design makes it a critical tool to not only promote inclusivity among learners, but also to encourage persistence and completion in a way that fits individual learner needs.

Critical to consider when grappling with today's learners are racial and ethnic outcomes disparities that persist in higher education. Though Black and Hispanic enrollments in postsecondary education have grown significantly (while White enrollments have declined), completion rates still lag behind (Mora, 2022). Underrepresented groups including Black and Hispanic students are "less likely to have access to the supports necessary to complete a credential" (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021). To make strides toward a more equitable future, the Postsecondary Value Commission issued a series of recommendations for institutional leaders that include equal access to all programs, reduction of admissions and transfer barriers, and the implementation of robust, culturally responsive support structures that address barriers to completion (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021). Online programs have the unique ability and crucial responsibility to address these issues. Harnessing technology to offer after-hours access to advising, developing seamless low-cost transfer pathways, and issuing targeted supports for students of color in majors where they have been historically underrepresented are just a few ways online can rise to meet these challenges.

Robust and Relevant Academics and Assessment in Online Design

Online courses and programs tout flexibility, accessibility, affordability, and shortened time to degree. Despite potential connotations of these terms, this structure should not translate to less robust or relevant academics. Just because a student can take a course on their own timeline does not mean their learning outcomes will be less comprehensive than they would be in a traditional setting. Maintaining a rigorous curriculum while implementing supportive tools and accommodations that are more accessible in an online format (e.g. built-in extended time for assessments or closed captioning/published transcripts of lectures) better serves all students, not just those who require these elements for academic success. In other words, more inclusive measures are not equal to an "easier" academic experience, but rather a more equitable one that provides accommodations to help level the playing field and ensure transparent access to support resources.

A more recent, and rapidly expanding, component of higher education is AI. As AI continues to evolve in the coming decades, issues of access and questions about how to harness its power will become critical for higher education as it seeks to prepare graduates for a new workforce and revitalize its approach to learning and knowledge creation. As some practitioners and leaders have already begun to understand, AI holds both the power to level the playing field for many learners and the potential to cause harm through bias or misuse. Thoughtful engagement with questions about how to use AI — when, why, and for what purposes — will increase the probability of attaining specific learning outcomes and advance the use of AI as part of a broad set of digital tools, particularly as practitioners consider its value within the context of robust academics and assessment in online environments.

Supporting Online Learner Career Success and Connectivity to Workforce

Over the next decade, evolving workforce needs will require upskilling and reskilling, including on-the-job training that does not lend itself to a traditional on-campus experience. For example, according to recent estimates, up to two-thirds of occupations could be partially automated by AI (Goldman Sachs Research, 2023). Despite the growing diversification of workforce requirements and evidence that many employers are removing a bachelor's degree as a prerequisite for entry, data continues to indicate that the college wage premium is a significant factor in economic mobility. Using longitudinal surveys of U.S. workers, a recent study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research finds that the college wage premium (i.e., how much more a college-educated worker earns than a similar non-college-educated worker) roughly doubles over a worker's lifetime, from 27% at age 25 to 60% at age 55 (Deming, 2023). The negative social and economic mobility implications for those without a bachelor's degree persist, and the promise of online delivery as a mechanism for increasing wages over time, by providing a pathway to degree attainment, is profound.

As the higher education sector considers both emerging and long-standing topics such as these, being online by design keeps the focus on the student and puts online education in a position to be nimble, responsive, and receptive to technological advances and data-driven decisions that lay a foundation for a more equitable and successful postsecondary experience for all learners. This approach is important since the future of higher education is likely to be some mix of online and in-person learning for the majority of students. According to a global survey conducted in partnership with UNESCO, 80% of surveyed students prefer that at least some of their courses take place online (UNESCO-Anthology, 2022). With many of today's learners facing circumstances that require flexible delivery of higher education, multi-modal options are both an inevitable reality as well as an increasing necessity. Offering flexible delivery with intentionality is key to improving outcomes in online learning and across the sector while also addressing critical issues for learners.

Conclusion

The higher education sector is shifting towards a future that will increasingly be online by design by offering flexible multi-modal options and robust digitally accessible supports. It is more important than ever that higher education policy is informed by, and responds to, the evolving needs of learners and their ability to access and succeed in postsecondary education. Because online by design empowers learners to access higher education on their own terms, it is critical for practitioners and policymakers as they look for strategies to address important issues in higher education. In particular, being online by design can promote learning models that emphasize accessibility, inclusion to meet DEI goals, help ensure the use of AI is part of an intentional and broad set of digital classroom tools, create broader initiatives that support reskilling for the rapidly evolving workforce, and expand pathways for learners that support their economic safety and upward mobility.

To help inform policymakers, CHEPP will be publishing a series of white papers that explore the quality, intentionality, and outcomes of well-designed online and hybrid programs that provide effective student supports and how they provide a critical pathway to success for many learners. The following topics covered in the series are intrinsically linked to being online by design and are ones that are critical to the larger discussion of the future of online education. The series will also build on CHEPP's framework for learner-centered design and will seek to engage various partners in the field. As previewed in the section above, the series will cover:

- + Accessibility and universal design in online environments
- + Creating a culture of care and belonging online to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion
- + Academic relevance and assessment in online design
- + Supporting online learner career success and connectivity to the workforce

Online education is growing rapidly and higher education institutions have a significant opportunity to respond to increased demand for high-quality online experiences. Doing so will require intentional course design informed by data and subject to continuous improvement to achieve greater student outcomes. Without wraparound supports available online, however, student success will not be possible. High-quality online learning requires investments in digital access to student services, academic advising, IT, financial aid, and other critical components of today's academic experience. Today's learners are likely working, caring for family, and/or facing unique health challenges, and this requires a high degree of flexibility from their higher learning programs and providers. To have economic safety, learners increasingly need access to affordable credentials and degrees, and higher education must evolve to meet these needs and make the necessary investments to equitably serve students through multi-modal, robust, learner-centered offerings. Policy and accountability measures that reflect learner-centered design, as well as room for responsible innovation efforts in the field to improve current models, are also needed.

We invite you to join us in the conversation and in this series, as we seek to learn about best practices and critical questions that will inform the future of being online by design. To learn how to engage with us, please contact us [here](#).

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