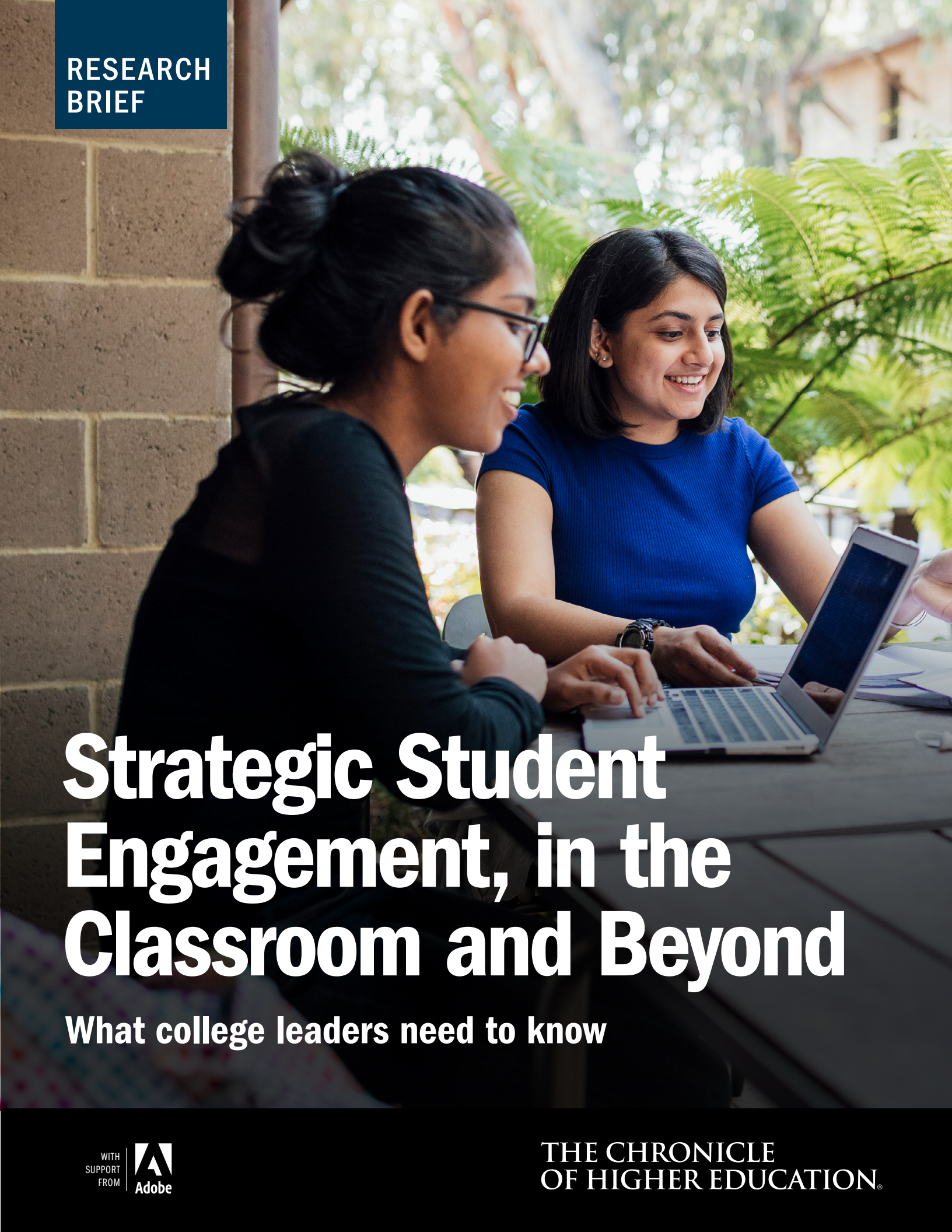


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Strategic Student Engagement, in the Classroom and Beyond

What college leaders need to know

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What college leaders need to know

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Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT



Higher education went virtual in a matter of days two years ago, and what might have taken years to accomplish was, by necessity, compressed into months. Now, as the turmoil of the pandemic seems to be somewhat settling down, students have new expectations about the availability of online learning, just as employees have regarding remote work.

Colleges are grappling with how to use their resources to attract and retain students, and major questions revolve around what has been learned about virtual and online learning and what students want. Most campuses have already returned to in-person classes. Is that the best way forward? Is it to offer more online and virtual classes? Or could colleges offer a mixture of both to satisfy as many



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students as possible while still maintaining high quality in both modalities?

In an effort to understand the different viewpoints of administrators, faculty members, and students, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* conducted a survey of 409 administrators, 413 faculty members, and 414 students in March of 2022. The administrators responding to the survey ranged from presidents and provosts to department heads, from campuses with fewer than 2,000 students to those with more than 15,000. Most of the faculty respondents worked full-time — 68 percent of them tenured — at four-year universities. The students were in the 18- to 24-year-old age group, with 72 percent in four-year colleges and 28 percent at two-year colleges.

For this report, *The Chronicle* also interviewed about 20 people, including professors, department heads, deans, and students, for their insights.

INTRODUCTION

Few will forget mid-March 2020, when — from one day to the next — higher education, along with so much of the rest of life, went virtual. Classes, advising, office hours, faculty meetings, graduations moved from in person to on a screen.

Almost everyone hated it at first, but as the pandemic wore on and most became more comfortable with this new form of teaching and learning, many adapted and some preferred it to learning in the physical classroom.

The pandemic turbocharged a trend that was already growing — of offering some or all classes online, whether synchronous or asynchronous, whether labeling it virtual, remote, hybrid, or HyFlex. And now, even as most colleges have returned to in-person instruction in the fall, administrators and faculty members are grappling with many students' anticipation of far greater flexibility in how and where they learn.

One thing is clear from a recent survey commissioned by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* — the experiences and expectations of students often don't line up with those of faculty members or administrators. One example: Only 3 percent of administrators and faculty

members surveyed thought that online/virtual courses were more effective in helping to learn course material. Twenty-five percent of student respondents believed remote learning was more effective.

And when asked what kinds of classes they thought students preferred (given the option of choosing more than one), the majority of faculty, administrators, and students selected a mix of online and in person. But 2 percent of administrators and 1 percent of faculty chose “all virtual,” compared with 20 percent of students.

These findings represent broad brush strokes; there are wide differences within the three groups depending on individual experience, the type of institution — community college or four-year, primarily commuter or largely residential — as well as the age of the students and their expectations about the college experience.

But something fundamental has shifted in higher education. Once given a taste of the flexibility of online learning, many students — especially those who work or are raising families — want more. Sometimes much more.

That means as colleges develop strategies for attracting and retaining students, they need to consider how much of their already-stretched resources they should

put into improving virtual learning. This is especially true for community colleges, where enrollment dropped significantly during the pandemic, and for small nonselective liberal-arts colleges facing the demographic cliff — the point in the mid-2020s when the population of traditional college-age students begins a long decline. But some selective institutions are also weighing starting or expanding remote-education programs.

To use their resources thoughtfully, administrators must find answers to the many questions raised during the past two years. Why are so many students clamoring for online courses? Are they actually learning as well or better than in person, or is it simply easier to turn on a computer than go to a class? Will parents — who are often the ones paying the high-tuition bills — be willing to pony up for a largely, or even partially, virtual experience? How much of the decision regarding its own teaching modality can an institution leave up to individual departments or faculty

members? What does high-quality online learning look like and what resources are needed to provide it?

Something fundamental has shifted in higher education. Once given a taste of the flexibility of online learning, many students — especially those who work or are raising families — want more.

In many ways it would be easier to snap back to a world pre-Covid, “but we won’t — and can’t — do that,” says Lisa Young, faculty director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Scottsdale Community College, in Arizona. That means “there’s a huge opportunity to change education in a really profound, meaningful, and useful way. We’re really at a crossroads here.”

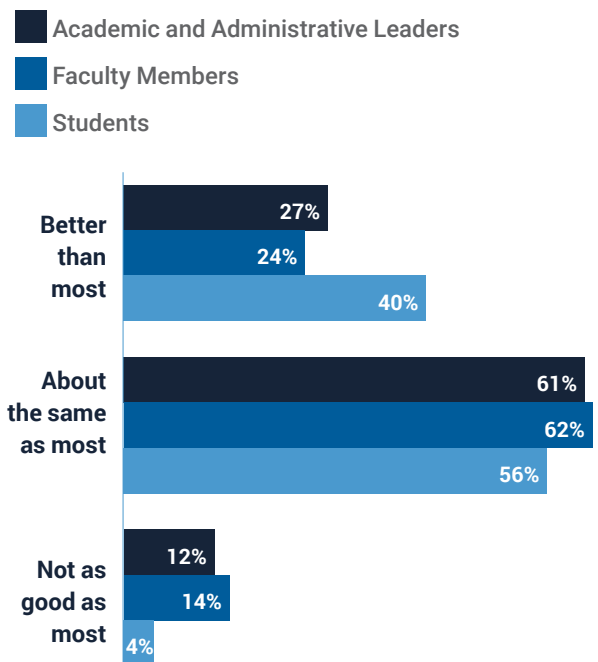


What Students Want

During the past two years, the news was filled with stories about how unhappy students and instructors were with online learning. This was particularly true in the spring semester of 2020, when the shift was so abrupt, and colleges were scrambling to figure out how to educate and support stressed-out students and professors almost 100 percent virtually.

But two years later, things look different. When students were asked in the *Chronicle* survey “how satisfied are you overall with your college’s or university’s digital-learning capabilities,” 40 percent were “very” satisfied and 52 percent were “somewhat” satisfied.

Do you think your college’s or university’s digital-learning capabilities are ... ?



Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey

Forty percent of student respondents also said their college’s digital-learning capabilities were “better than most,” compared with 24 percent of faculty and 27 percent of administrators. Only 4 percent of students thought it was “not as good as most,” compared with 14 percent of faculty and 12 percent of administrators.

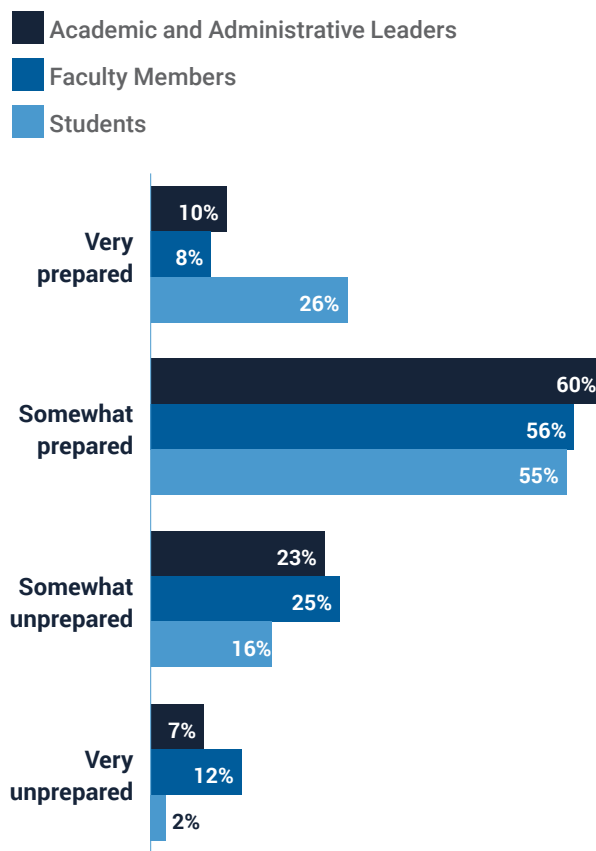
In addition, the *Chronicle* survey found that only 10 percent of administrators and 8 percent of faculty felt they were “very prepared” to teach high-quality virtual courses, while 26 percent of students thought the same; 12 percent of faculty felt “very unprepared.”

Those findings dovetailed with those of Bay View Analytics, which conducted its own survey in the spring of 2021. “What we heard overwhelmingly is that students appreciated, in general, the efforts institutions were taking to cope with the pandemic, even when it wasn’t working,” says Jeff Seaman, the company’s director. “They understood everyone was trying to make the best out of a stressful situation.”

In Bay View’s survey, 47 percent of students, 43 percent of faculty, and 25 percent of administrators gave an A to how well courses met educational needs. Forty percent of students, 33 percent of faculty, and 21 percent of administrators also gave an A to how well faculty engaged with students.

“I’m not surprised by this,” says Young, of Scottsdale. “The students were grateful and gave us a lot of grace because at the beginning it was new to all of us.” Educators, on the other hand, who usually feel like experts in their fields, were thrown into a completely different environment and didn’t always feel they did the best they could, she says. In addition, it was generally the unhappy students that gave feedback, “and I think sometimes we assume those students are speaking for everyone.”

How well prepared do you think instructors on your campus are to teach high-quality virtual courses?



Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey

The question is whether students’ appreciation of online learning during an unprecedented moment means they want it to continue as colleges move closer to a post-pandemic world. And if so, in what way?

Although there are many nuances, students who chose institutions for their full residential, primarily in-class experience — and who fall into the 18- to 24-year-old age group — were often less excited about the online experience than those who attended largely commuter institutions or community colleges.

Kristen Eshleman, vice-president for library and information-technology services at Trinity College, in Connecticut, with about 2,000 students and published tuition of \$47,392, says her institution's population is "self-selecting for a very high-touch environment. What we see generally is an interest in returning to a traditional classroom but incorporating some aspect of technology in a more flexible way."

That is true for many selective colleges. While Hannah Austgen, 21, a senior at Syracuse University, appreciated how well her professors did during a very difficult time, she was eager to return to in-class learning as soon as possible. "I found online lectures challenging — it was too easy to turn off the camera and do something else," says Austgen, who majors in international relations and policy studies. On the other hand, she felt class participation was sometimes livelier online because it could be less intimidating. "Some students were more comfortable clicking the little hand icon or writing in chat boxes, which the professor could read out loud."

But over all, she is not a fan of online learning. "I do think my education was compromised," Austgen says.

Others, especially nontraditional learners, welcomed the flexibility of taking class where and when they wanted to as they juggled careers and jobs. Brian Ysasaga, 27, a sophomore at the Metropolitan State University of Denver studying aerospace systems engineering and technology, says online courses helped him stay in college. He had entered a community college in Texas, where he is from, a few years out of high school, "but I flunked out my second semester because I was a surgical tech and had to be at work five days a week." In addition, the college was relatively far from his home, and there

was no public transportation. "It came down some days to, 'Do I have the gas to try to drive out there?' If I had had more virtual classes, it would have helped a ton."

In fact, he says, "This experience has taught me that I like all-virtual, and I'm looking at doing a master's degree online."

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Virtual, remote, online, hybrid — colleges and students tend to use the terms loosely and define them in different ways. Broadly, remote synchronous, which some specify as virtual, is where instructors and students meet at the same time remotely and can interact with each other. Online asynchronous means there are no scheduled times or days when classes meet — students can review the lectures and material on their own time. Hybrid is defined most loosely — it can mean attending a two-day-a-week class one day in person and one day virtually, or another combination of in person and remote. HyFlex integrates all of these, allowing students the choice to attend each class in person, or remotely, or asynchronously.

While some students favor all in person and some all virtual, most seem to walk a middle ground, according to the *Chronicle* survey. When asked what kind of classes they prefer — and they could choose more than one among the options of all in person, all virtual/online, a mixture of the two, or no preference — 39 percent opted for a mix of in person and virtual/online. That was the greatest percentage; the next-

largest share, 31 percent, chose in person.

The answer was similar when students were asked what kind of courses they thought their peers would prefer: 41 percent — again the greatest — chose a hybrid model. That compared with 78 percent of administrators and 67 percent of faculty who thought their college’s students would choose a combination of in person and online.

What type of classes do you think the students on your campus prefer?

■ All in person
 ■ All virtual
 ■ A mix of in-person and virtual
 ■ No preference

Academic and Administrative Leaders



Faculty Members



What type of classes do you personally prefer?

Students



What type of classes do you believe most students on your campus prefer?

Students



Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey

A Question of Equity

If more college classes are online, more people, including lower-income and nontraditional students, can access higher education. But virtual learning provides its own obstacles.

Disadvantaged and rural students often have difficulty accessing stable Wi-Fi, adequate computers, and quiet learning spaces. But there are other, less concrete barriers as well. The nonprofit organizations Every Learner Everywhere, Global-MindED, and the Equity Project conducted focus groups in the spring of 2020 with 102 underrepresented students from 47 two- and four-year colleges concerning their thoughts about online learning. And what often came up was how much they missed a relationship with both their professors and their peers.

“One thing that we know is important for marginalized communities is being able to feel like they belong in a community. And in a virtual learning environment, that was basically essentially eliminated,” says Jessica Rowland Williams, director of Every Learner Everywhere.

“One thing that we know is important for marginalized communities is being able to feel like they belong in a community. And in a virtual learning environment, that was essentially eliminated.”



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Bay View Analytics did another survey in spring 2021 — this one asking community-college students about their class experiences — that echoed those sentiments. “Students repeatedly mentioned the lack of interpersonal engagement leading to a sense of isolation,” the report states.

A critical question faculty and administrators need to ask themselves and their students is why virtual is increasingly

popular. Is it simply more convenient to have classes where and when they want them? Are such classes easier to cheat in or get good grades? Or do they, indeed, provide a better learning experience?

“There is a convenience factor associated with virtual, and we have to be very careful that we are not maximizing convenience and missing opportunities to engage with students, as humans, as whole people,” says Gary Bennett, vice provost

for undergraduate education at Duke University and a professor of psychology and neuroscience.

Bill Pink, president of Grand Rapids Community College, in Michigan, sees the opportunities online learning can offer his students. Pre-pandemic, about 80 percent of the approximately 12,000 students on his campus took classes in person, 20 percent online. Those numbers flipped in March 2020, when almost all classes went virtual.

“I’ve got a family. I’ve got two, maybe even sometimes three jobs I’m trying to hold down. This now makes it accessible for me.”

In the fall of 2020, Pink discovered something surprising: His college was enrolling students who had never considered higher education because they had too much going on. “What we found out is that there was a group of students who we never really knew about, that are now coming to class,” Pink says. “What they are telling us is that ‘I’ve never been able to access you because you never had this robust level of online classes and

virtual classes available.’” He estimates several hundred students enrolled because of the availability of online classes.

“They’re saying, ‘I’ve got a family. I’ve got two, maybe even sometimes three jobs I’m trying to hold down. This now makes it accessible for me.’”

Pink adds, “If I’m doing more to reach more people, I’m going to get more people in my doors — virtual doors, and actual doors.”

A survey conducted by the college found that 52 percent of respondents said they were very interested in online classes that don’t have scheduled meeting days or times but that have weekly assignments, quizzes, and interaction. That was a higher percentage than those interested in any other modality, including in-person, hybrid, or virtual classes that meet online at a regular time and day.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be back to 80-20, and I don’t think we should ever be,” Pink says. “I think it will probably be more around 55 percent to 60 percent in person.” But he says the goal is to understand the best ways to offer virtual learning; his college is investing some federal stimulus funds into the technology and professional development needed for HyFlex classrooms in an effort to experiment with different ways of virtual learning and teaching.

“We know about students saying, This is what fits my life,” he says. “Now we’ve got to take that and make sure that those offerings are as high quality as possible.”



Balancing the Options

When *The Chronicle* conducted a survey of faculty members in October 2020, many were feeling utterly exhausted. Not only were they dealing with the stress of the pandemic in their personal lives, but the switch to online learning left many of them feeling inadequate and burned out. But more than a year later, many faculty members — although certainly not all — feel teaching online expanded their understanding of what was possible and made them more willing to push the frontiers of digital learning.

Coming off of teaching all online in the spring of 2020, William Haley, a professor in the School of Aging Studies at the University of South Florida, offered in the fall of 2021 a mixture of in-person, live-participation, and recorded sessions — essentially HyFlex. He loved it, and he says his students did too. “I received among the best teaching evaluations of my career,” says Haley, who is 67 years old and has taught at the university level for almost 40 years. “I learned what I didn’t know.”

Others, of course, are less convinced. An associate professor at a public four-year college commented in the *Chronicle* survey that he thinks “students learn best in the classroom. There are too many distractions when learning from home/elsewhere. Students are more engaged and more present when they have to come to class.

Technology is fine as a backup, but as a general rule online classes work for strong students and fail weak ones.”

However they feel, though, “faculty members generally want to be able to use their learning experience — negative or positive — to decide what combination of virtual and in person works for their students. But that is not always the case: Some colleges have put in place institution-wide mandates to teach in person, while at others, individual departments can decide.

“I believe a lot of administrators are not really listening to the people on the front lines, the people who are teaching

the students,” says Barbara Anderson, a professor and head of the department of interior design and fashion studies at Kansas State University. “Administrators feel sure the enrollment crisis requires us to teach everyone in person in the same room. I’m confident most students who are digital natives have no problem learning virtually.”

But administrators say they need to consider competing demands from trustees, accrediting agencies, state governments, instructors, parents, and

students, as well as their own views about what constitutes good teaching. While many students and some instructors want to have more online courses, that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s the right thing to do.

John Putman, an associate dean in the College of Arts and Letters at San Diego State University and a professor of history, says it is now up to each department

at his university to decide teaching modalities, although the dean’s office can make the final determination. The history department is currently requiring all in-person teaching in the fall and spring; summer can be online, he says.

“We need to tell students, ‘We are going to try as best we can to meet some of your desires and demands. But sometimes we have to do what we think is best.’” Putman says he’s now more open to online teaching than before the pandemic, “but I want to make sure the quality is controlled. My concern is it will open the floodgates and undermine the student experience.”

“Students are more engaged and more present when they have to come to class. Technology is fine as a backup, but as a general rule online classes work for strong students and fail weak ones.”

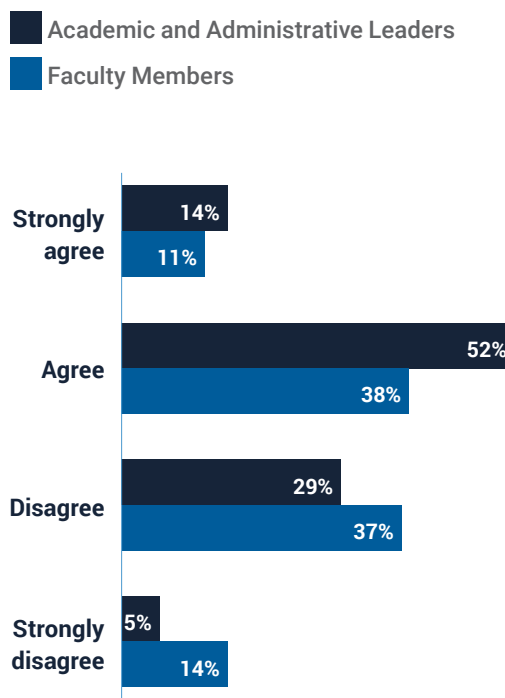
This division between administrators and “faculty members came through to some extent in the *Chronicle* survey: 66 percent of administrators “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “the institution’s leadership and faculty work well together to expand the use of digital learning and the use of technology in the classroom.” Only 49 percent of faculty felt the same way.

While some instructors may not see support for the types of online teaching they want, that doesn’t mean administrators are ignoring its potential; more than faculty members, the *Chronicle* survey found, administrators believe they will have to offer some form of online learning in the coming years to attract students: Forty-nine percent of administrators strongly agreed that “digital learning, including online and hybrid courses, is key to my institution’s future.” Only 32 percent of faculty members answered in the affirmative.

“I do think presidents and provosts are looking at this pretty hard and saying, How do we not waste the capacities we just developed over the last few years going forward?” says Eshleman, of Trinity College. “That was a huge investment of time and money— you just can’t go through something like that and not take the time to figure out what is enduring, or needs to be enduring.”

How much do you agree with the following statement:

“The institution’s leadership and faculty work well together to expand the use of digital learning and the use of technology in the classroom.”



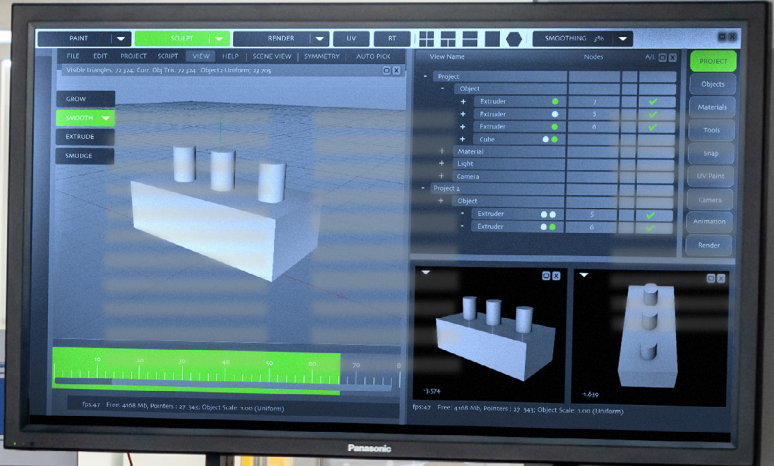
Source: *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey

Investing in the Future

Many agree that there are numerous ways to present classes using online techniques that are as good or better than in person. But it takes resources, training, and a thoughtful approach — just like all teaching.

For example, the underrepresented students interviewed in the focus groups run by Every Learner Everywhere did not necessarily say they wanted to return to all in-person classes; rather they would have liked more intentional ways of connecting online. The most satisfied students in the focus groups said their instructors posted regular virtual office hours; in general, the more faculty promoted innovation and invention, the higher the learning approval and credibility rating from the student.

In the Bay View Analytics survey of community colleges, one student mentioned that he would like to have had a study buddy. Another said, “It would be nice if there were some optional virtual meetings where we can study for a test together.” A third suggested “a channel where you communicate with your peers in regard to assignments you are unsure about.”



Online office hours have been almost universally praised as a better option — or at least as good — compared with in-class office hours, allowing the instructor and the student far more flexibility in how to reach each other. And unlike during the height of the pandemic, children are back in school, and libraries and coffee shops are open, meaning there are more options for where to take classes and study.

The HyFlex model has garnered a lot of enthusiasm. But it's not easy for many colleges to incorporate. It can cost at least \$5,000, says Sheri Prupis, director of teaching and learning technologies for

the Virginia Community College system, to install the necessary equipment in one classroom, including a monitor where the teacher can see remote students, a monitor where remote students can see the teacher, and a microphone capable of picking up the students' voices in the physical classroom, not just the instructor's. One camera is good, but two are ideal to follow the voice of whoever is speaking, she says.

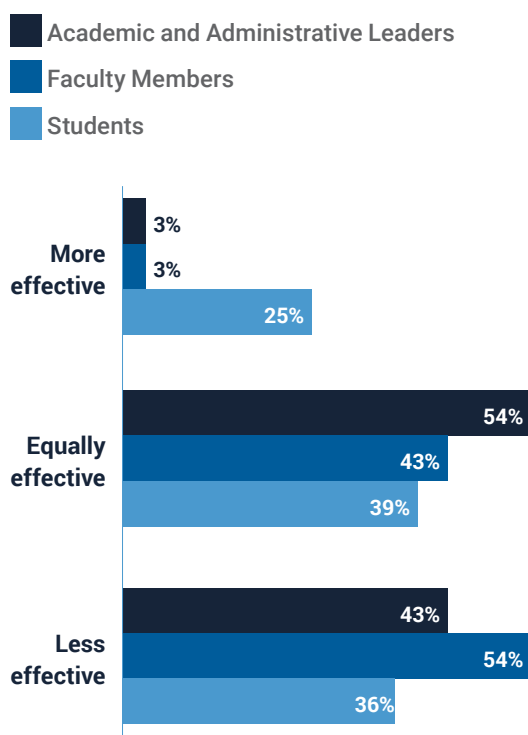
"Then separately, you need professional development for faculty, and it's especially critical for adjuncts," she says. But it's not fair to require an adjunct instructor to do four hours of professional development if their compensation covers only 40 hours of teaching over the semester, "so you need to be able to pay them."

In her opinion, "HyFlex is best for students and a very heavy lift for faculty" and for colleges already weighing difficult choices on where to put their money to support their current needs and future efforts to attract students. "There are so many competing needs, and we have falling enrollment," Prupis says. "Do we invest more in our nursing students, buying software to take practice exams? Or do I spend that money on HyFlex classrooms?"

Some colleges have resources to put behind the effort; San Diego State University invested \$2 million in a Flexible Course Design Institute. The course, created by veteran online instructors, consists of eight modules — five required, and three electives. More than a thousand instructors, or about 60 percent of the faculty, completed the training.

"Now the faculty has a much firmer foundation, in terms of what high-quality online instruction looks like," says James Frazee, the university's senior associate vice president in the Information Technology Division. "And one thing that is really clear is that faculty members are

Compared with in-person classes, how effective in helping to learn course material would you say online/virtual courses are?



Source: Chronicle of Higher Education survey

not going to abandon the technologies that served them well during the pandemic. I think the genie is out of the bottle.”

The University of Arizona employs a visual designer and an Emmy-winning videographer to help create online classes. “My videographer works with the faculty on helping them deliver content whether in the studio, field, or at home,” says Melody Buckner, associate vice provost for digital learning and online initiatives at the University. “They help with light and sound. It’s not so much about the technology but helping people implement the technology.”

That’s what Haley, the professor at the University of South Florida, found out. He gained a much greater appreciation during the pandemic of the difficulties his students faced. That spurred him to choose to teach a HyFlex, or what he calls a “freedom of choice,” course model. With his supervisors’ permission, in the fall of 2021, the approximately 90 students in his undergraduate general-education course on the psychology of aging could take the course in person, remote synchronously, or view recorded lectures.

Students can decide on the day of class if they want to attend in person, participate remotely, or view later online. Those in class could hear what the remote students said, but Haley had to repeat what students in the classroom said for those listening remotely. He hopes to find a fix for that soon, perhaps just by adding a second microphone that could be passed around.

Originally about 50 to 70 students showed up in class; that number declined to about 30 by the end of the term. In a survey Haley conducted after the course ended, which drew 70 replies, students reported participating 29 percent of the time in person, 34 percent live remote, and 37 percent via recorded sessions.

All but one reported they liked the flexible format “a great deal.” The one outlier liked it “somewhat.” And when asked why those who used one of the remote options chose to do so, the most common answer (15 students) included health or mental-health issues. Others noted work or family obligations or commuting issues.

“One thing that is really clear is that faculty members are not going to abandon the technologies that served them well during the pandemic. I think the genie is out of the bottle.”

“The grades were some of the best I’ve had in my teaching career and — one thing I never expected — fewer dropped out for medical or psychological reasons, or because of poor performance, than in the past,” Haley says.

He still sees HyFlex as a work in progress. He doesn’t want to use the various anti-cheating options available for remote learning, so he allowed an open-book, open-notes exam last semester to avoid giving an advantage to those online. But he is thinking of requiring in-class attendance for the exam.

“We were only able to do this because we had flexible administrators who worked with me on this,” he says. “We had tech people we invested money in, and an innovation education design group that helped me learn some tricks to prepare for this. We were all figuring it out as we went along, but honestly if I hadn’t had those supports, I would not have been able to pull this off.”

CONCLUSION

As the world — and higher education — seems to be inching toward normalization in early 2022 and as much as many want to snap back to how things were in a pre-Covid world, that's not going to happen.

For many students and faculty members, that's a good thing. The mandatory move toward online learning — as painful and clumsy as it sometimes was — opened up a whole new vision of what learning and teaching can be. Faculty and students often found it to be at different times adaptable and isolating, innovative and tedious. Professors had to find new ways to teach, students to learn.

There's no doubt that offering more online variants, whether it be synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid or HyFlex, is more inclusive, especially for students managing children or work, who live far from a college and can't afford to move or always pay for the commute, or who are managing illnesses or anxieties that make it difficult to meet face-to-face. But for those same people and many other students, remote learners and teachers can lose out on the very thing education is about — an engaged learning environment in and out of the classroom.

"I think we're asking the wrong question when we're asking about virtual versus in

person," says Williams, of Every Learner Everywhere. "I think the real question we need to ask ourselves is, how do we create high-quality learning experiences in both modalities so that people can have the freedom to choose the way that they want to learn without having to worry about any decrease in quality?"

Most believe the gap can be bridged by combining the best aspects of online and in-person learning. But there's no question it's a big task on multiple levels, and that difficulty shouldn't be underestimated. Because faculty members did it so well during the pandemic, it may seem easier than it really is, says Bennett, of Duke. "That said, when we return to the normal order, we'll have to invest mightily in that space to help to ensure that faculty can deliver virtual and hybrid instruction at a high level."

Simply deciding to go back to how things were before the spring of 2020, however, without considering what has been learned over the past two years, is a mistake higher education can't afford to make.

"You don't walk into Starbucks and just get offered a black cup of coffee anymore," says Buckner, of the University of Arizona. "You have a whole menu of options to choose from, and I think that the success of higher education depends on offering a menu of modality of learning environments and investing in each one of those."



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