

Is Higher Ed Really Ready to Embrace Hybrid Learning?

New study shows colleges may need to hire more digital experts and better prepare students to learn online.

[Rebecca Koenig](#)



North East View of the Several Halls of Harvard College, by Charles Cutler Torrey

The future of higher education will bring more hybrid learning models—but colleges may not yet have the staff and systems they need to scale up high-quality programs that blend in-person and online experiences.

So believe chief online officers at U.S. colleges, according to a new survey of more than 300 such leaders published today by Quality Matters and Encoura Eduventures Research. It's the seventh edition of the [Changing Landscape of Online Education \(CHLOE\) report](#).

In the survey, chief online officers predicted that by 2025, programs and courses that mix on-campus and online learning experiences will become the norm for undergraduate students, graduate students and adult learners. That vision—of blurred modalities across higher ed—is striking because it contradicts prevailing notions that older students and people seeking a master’s degree want to learn online, while adolescent students want entirely in-person experiences, says Richard Garrett, chief research officer of Eduventures and co-author of the report.

Yet bringing this hybrid vision to life in just a few years’ time would require colleges to change their strategies and also invest more in online education, the report suggests. That may mean hiring more staff who have expertise in digital course design and instruction—and reevaluating whether to pay for help from outside companies or bring services in-house. It may also mean doing more to truly prepare students for online learning.

“You definitely have this tension between this hybrid vision not too far in the future—and all of this messy reality,” Garrett says.

A hypothetical future in which most higher ed institutions go hybrid raises questions about how they would distinguish themselves while trying to compete for students. So before colleges race to spin up and expand hybrid programs, leaders at each institution should think carefully about how to differentiate what they offer, advises Bethany Simunich, director of research and innovation at Quality Matters and co-author of the report.

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—Bethany Simunich

That process should start with identifying specific goals [based on an institution’s mission](#) and the students it hopes to serve, Simunich explains, followed by developing new staff plans for meeting those goals, and then communicating clearly to prospective students about what the hybrid

experience will really be like.

As they look ahead, all institutions should ask a key question, Simunich argues: "How could higher ed ensure better outcomes for all students, especially if all students will have some type of mixed-modal student experience?"

Hiring — or Outsourcing — for Hybrid Instruction

Over the past two years, COOs report that their institutions hired more people with expertise in delivering online courses, including more instructional designers and educational technologists. But the survey shows many institutions still employ very few of these specialists.

This could limit just how much colleges are able to grow hybrid programs.

"There is a concern by chief online officers that online-specific staff are not enough to meet the demand," Simunich says. "If you are intending to develop or maintain fully online degree programs, you may need to make an investment in instructional designers."

An alternative way colleges can build capacity for teaching more students online is paying outside companies for support services. The survey shows that institutions tend to outsource some of these more than others. For example, colleges tend to maintain control of systems that are highly regulated (like financial aid) or highly academic (like recruiting faculty), according to Garrett, and they're likely to outsource operations that require technology they don't have (like exam proctoring) or that benefit from an outside perspective (like market research).

As online learning becomes more mainstream and hybrid programs more mature at colleges, serving online students will become more of a core business function for institutions, Garrett says. That may lead to less outsourcing of services from edtech companies.

“There is an operational window in which a school is ambitious enough to need help but not so mature that they can do it themselves,” Garrett explains. “On either side of that window, opportunity diminishes” for edtech vendors.

Less than a fifth of institutions in the report’s sample (18 percent) work with Online Program Managers (OPMs), companies that build online degree programs, usually in exchange for a slice of the revenue. The study says the pace of colleges signing new deals with OPMs has slowed, and more institutions are looking for options where they can pay fees for services rather than share revenue.

It’s a sign that the OPM industry is maturing into a competitive marketplace, and that only colleges with strong brands yet underdeveloped online programs stand to benefit most from these kinds of contracts, Garrett says. He cited [2U’s recent announcement of lower revenue-sharing models](#) as an example of the pressure OPMs are feeling these days.

Preparing Students to Learn Online

CHLOE 7 is the latest report to suggest that students of all ages are increasingly open to [learning online at least some of the time](#). Yet it also raises concerns about what’s motivating that attitude shift, and whether students really know what they’re getting themselves into when they sign up for a hybrid college option.

Some COOs who responded to the survey expressed worry that students may seek online learning because they believe those courses are easier than traditional, face-to-face courses. That’s a misperception colleges should work to dispel, Simunich says.

“Online learning should not be easier. It should be, in some ways, a little more convenient,” she adds. “There’s nothing wrong with it being high quality, but a little more convenient.”

In fact, there are ways in which online learning can actually [be more difficult for students who aren't prepared](#) for it. Students who learn online need to be more self-directed, more proactive about reaching out if they need help and have better-time management skills, Simunich notes.

But students may not know that. And the report suggests that few colleges require students to undergo training about how to succeed in online courses. Institutions should reconsider that, Simunich says, perhaps through mandatory orientation training for all students.

"It's a dangerous assumption to assume that students are tech-savvy and so they don't need help online," she says. "It does a disservice to all the ways we want to support our online students' success."

Every college seems to define "online" and "hybrid" courses a little differently (so much so that the survey spelled out definitions to make sure COOs shared an understanding while participating in the study). This means institutions should communicate very clearly with students about what to expect from their hybrid programs, Simunich says.

"It's important, in fundamental ways, that students know what type of course they're signing up for and what type of educational experience they should expect. If they don't know it's a hybrid course, they may not know they need a certain level of technological skill to succeed in that course," she explains. "We need to set students up for success."