



TOWARD THE HYBRID



FUTURE



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Hybrid learning is among the strongest trends in higher education as we emerge from the global pandemic. Institutional leaders are focused on how to add options for learners that combine in-person and online courses, while simultaneously adopting new technologies and improving support for students and faculty. **In this whitepaper, we explain the factors driving the growth of hybrid offerings, define the range of current options for hybrid courses and programs, and provide guidance for leaders looking to transform their institutions in order to serve students effectively across mediums.** In particular, we recommend matching offerings to the needs of specific student audiences and their learning goals, promoting evidence-based instructional practices, and ensuring coherence and integration across curriculum, pedagogy, and technology.



The Arrival of Hybrid Learning

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid learning has become one of the highest priorities for colleges and universities. The opportunity to deliver programs across diverse learning modalities offers substantial benefits to both institutions and the learners they serve, but also brings uncertainty and risk. As higher

education is often the case with the adoption of new methodologies and technologies, leaders face significant challenges when attempting to implement hybrid learning systematically. These challenges can be traced to the longstanding problem of siloed academic units and the lack of sufficient quality assurance for academic offerings, as well as the rapid pace at which learners' preferences are changing and new tools are emerging for delivering education. Even more fundamentally, the definition of "hybrid learning" is ambiguous and subject to different interpretations. Taken together, such barriers can make it difficult for leaders to decide how to commit to hybrid transformation.

For some institutions, "going hybrid" simply means adding partly or fully online courses or programs alongside traditional in-person offerings. However, this approach barely scratches the surface of what is possible with hybrid learning.

education leaders grapple with what this development means and how to respond to it, innovative institutions are identifying strategies and building the capacity to serve students in new ways. We call the process of adopting this new approach "hybrid transformation," through which an institution undertakes a systematic effort to evolve its offerings.

For some institutions, "going hybrid" simply means adding partly or fully online courses or programs alongside traditional in-person offerings. However, this approach barely scratches the surface of what is possible with hybrid learning, and can easily lead to fragmented, poor-quality learning experiences. Further, technology-focused solutions, centered on convenience and flexibility,

rather than instructional quality and programmatic coherence, fall short of hybrid learning's true potential. For example, "hyflex" offerings, where online and in-person students are present in the same class session, prioritize flexibility for students but can create barriers to equitable participation and a cohesive learning experience.

To avoid these kinds of outcomes, institutions can choose delivery modalities based on student demographics and pedagogical goals. This means allowing the needs of learners, along with evidence-based instructional practices, to drive curriculum and technology choices. Institutions that take these approaches will create more competitive programs that generate superior outcomes for their learners.

The transition to hybrid learning is becoming a necessity. As a new frontier, it provides a rare opportunity to bring about systemic improvements to the learning experience that higher education institutions frequently avoid. Institutions that focus on educational quality when undertaking hybrid transformation can enhance the value of their offerings, their brands, and the credentials they provide. At a time when enrollments are dropping and public opinion of higher education is in decline, adopting high-quality hybrid learning is an opportunity to counteract this prevailing narrative. Institutions that wish to distinguish themselves from their peers will commit to implementing exceptional learning experiences across modalities.

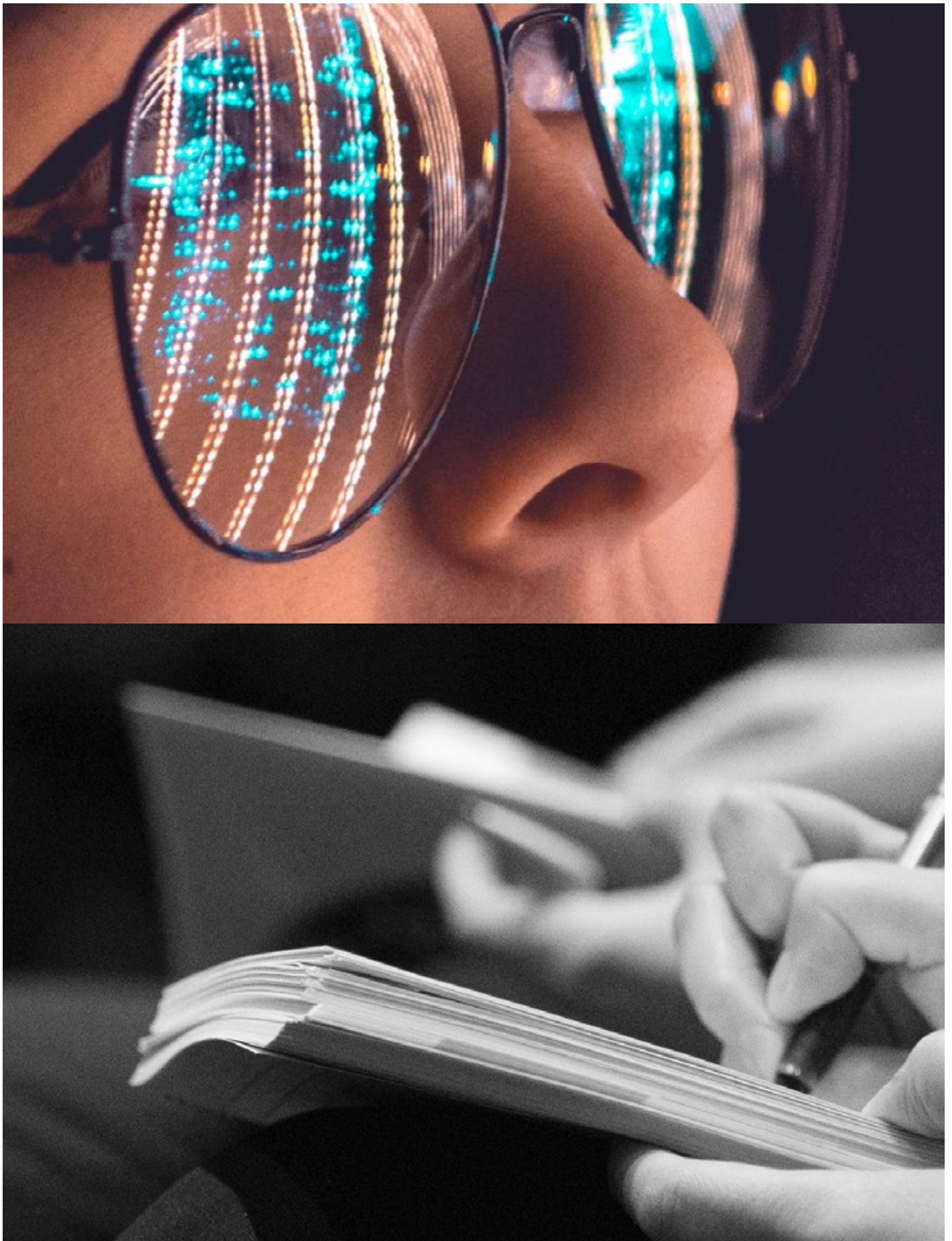
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The Path to Hybrid Learning

During the past two decades, online learning has emerged as an important — and problematic — alternative to traditional, in-person education. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the vast majority of online courses were delivered entirely asynchronously, which allowed students to complete work at their own pace, rather than attend classes at fixed times, prioritizing individual flexibility and program scalability. This promised to make education substantially more accessible by leveraging the power of technology to replicate the learning experience across time zones and geographies, at a fraction of the cost of in-person instruction.²

However, asynchronous courses have many limitations, including a pervasive lack of quality pedagogy given their focus on recorded lectures and exams, and the minimization of social learning. These are among many factors leading to low completion rates, which were measured at only 7% in a pre-pandemic study.³ In addition, online programs are often operationally separated from campus-based programs, leading to inconsistencies in both content and instructional quality between distinct offerings.

During the pandemic, most institutions were forced to close their campuses and shift to online instruction, almost overnight. Because there was no time to plan or redesign courses for this different modality, the default for many instructors was to deliver their same in-person courses synchronously over video conferencing platforms. Like asynchronous online learning, this approach has met with mixed results. Many instructors struggled to adapt, and lecture-based pedagogies that are ineffective in person were equally poor, or worse, when delivered online.⁴ However, another result of the pandemic is that nearly every student, teacher, and education leader has had firsthand experience with online learning in one form or another, and has developed opinions about its benefits and limitations.



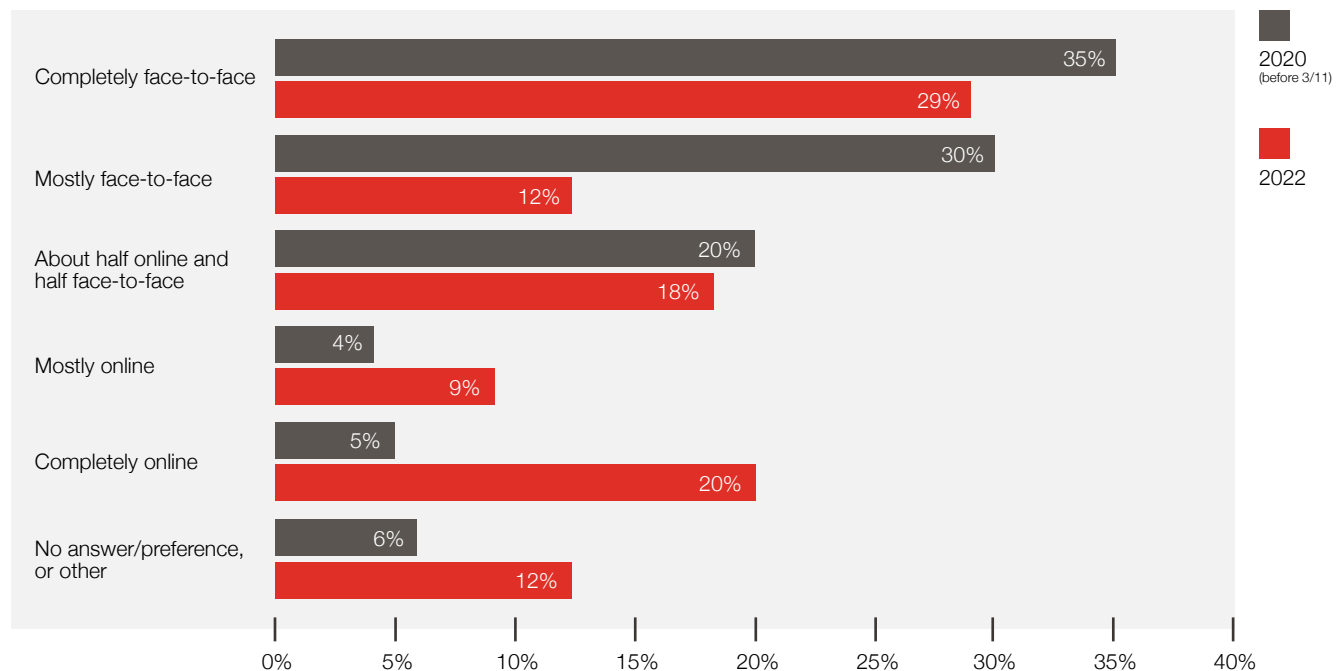
The Needs of Modern Learners

Exposure to online learning during the pandemic has had a substantial impact on preferences for learning modalities. As the world emerged from pandemic shutdowns, 41% of undergraduates in a 2022 survey preferred mostly, or entirely, in-person instruction, down from 65% in 2020.⁵ Conversely, the same survey also reported the proportion of students who prefer to take courses mostly or completely online increasing from 9% to 29%.

Other surveys have shown similar results.⁶ It is now clear that the market

is demanding hybrid offerings. This has led to increasing interest in a hybrid approach that offers both online and in-person instruction, as well as courses and programs that blend the two, prompting institutional leaders to recognize that a strategic commitment to hybrid offerings is required to remain relevant and competitive. As students' lives become further intermediated by technology, it stands to reason that they will expect this from their educational experiences as well.

MODALITY PREFERENCES



Source: Educause, Students and Technology Report: Rebalancing the Student Experience.
<https://library.educase.edu/resources/2022/10/2022-students-and-technology-report-rebalancing-the-student-experience>

Definitions of Hybrid Learning

For purposes of this discussion, we define “hybrid learning” as an approach that combines in-person and online instruction at the course, program, or institutional level. To avoid confusion, we choose not to use the term “blended learning”, which is more commonly used in K-12 education. In-person learning can take various forms, including classroom-based meetings, labs, and project-based or experiential learning that takes place outside of traditional classrooms. Online learning can be either synchronous, asynchronous,

A further category of hybrid learning includes “hyflex” courses, which combine online and in-person learning within the same class session, by having some students physically present in the classroom, and others joining online. This approach allows instructors to reach wider audiences through the participation of students, who would otherwise be unable to attend in-person classes, and in some cases gives students the ability to choose how and where they attend class from session to session. For a variety of reasons, this approach is very difficult to implement effectively. To ensure high-quality, equitable learning, hyflex courses require expensive classroom hardware, as well as expert instructor facilitation. When students have the choice of how to attend each session, uncertainty complicates planning for instructors and can lead to inefficient use of classroom space. While we will refer to the hyflex approach below, it is not our primary focus because of the substantial implementation challenges it presents.

Hybrid learning is an approach that combines in-person and online instruction at the course, program, or institutional level.

or a mix. According to our definition, a course that is delivered entirely in-person, even if enabled or supported by technology (e.g., using interactive tools for polling, collaboration, etc.), is not hybrid, and neither is a fully online course, even if it has both asynchronous and synchronous components. The key to hybrid learning is that it involves both online and in-person modalities.

Hybrid programs may have some courses that meet entirely in-person, and others that meet entirely online (synchronously, asynchronously, or both), and may also include hybrid courses

that blend in-person and online instruction. Likewise, a **hybrid institution** can combine different learning modalities in a variety of ways, and each institution will want to develop a unique profile of offerings to match its strategic goals.

As is evident from the below definitions, hybrid learning offers a variety of distinct ways to engage

students across instructional modalities. These differences are important, as each comes with unique opportunities and challenges, potentially making one or the other better suited for specific learner audiences. There is no single correct approach to mixing modalities when implementing hybrid learning. Instead, effective implementation requires providing options that are appropriate to learners' needs. Doing this in an integrated and cohesive fashion can result in a continuum of learning opportunities that share a set of core instructional practices.

There is **no single correct approach** to mixing modalities.

Learning Modality	Definition
In-person	Courses are conducted at a physical location, such as a traditional classroom, lab, or experiential learning site
Asynchronous online	Online courses with no live meetings; students complete learning activities and assessments at their own pace
Synchronous online	Courses with live class sessions hosted on a virtual platform
Hybrid Structure	Definition
Course	A course that combines in-person and synchronous and/or asynchronous online learning
"Hyflex"	A course where students can join synchronous class sessions either in-person or online
Program	A program that combines in-person and online courses, and possibly hybrid courses as well
Institution	An institution that offers students a mix of learning modalities, including both in-person and online courses or programs



Strategic Drivers and Risks for Hybrid Transformation

While it may be clear that hybrid learning presents many opportunities for educational innovation, it is not always as obvious how these opportunities coincide with the primary strategic priorities for higher education institutions. For example, many discussions of hybrid learning focus on benefits to institutions such as operational flexibility, improved cost models, and the ability to reach new audiences of learners. Hybrid offerings can allow institutions to expand their enrollments without constructing new buildings, hire remote instructors and staff, and strengthen their resilience against prolonged campus closures due to extreme weather events or public health crises like the Covid

pandemic. These benefits are significant, as they can have a direct impact on an institution's bottom line, through increased revenue or cost savings.⁷

However, while economic drivers for transformation are important, they come with risks. Creating new options for delivering education will not necessarily improve the efficiency of operations or replace the need to support traditional operating models. Students will expect that both traditional and newly created options are effectively delivered and well supported, likely requiring an overall increase in infrastructure and resources. This is especially risky for institutions that add online offerings in an ad hoc fashion, choosing the fastest and least costly options for implementation. While they may find new paths to increasing short-term revenue, competitors who focus on higher-quality learning experiences will eventually overtake them.

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Focusing on the quality of the educational experience when adopting hybrid learning provides the opportunity for universities to differentiate by creating distinctive programs. For example, a hybrid institution can offer global immersions that combine experiential learning with online courses taught by faculty based at the institution's home campus. Likewise, hybrid offerings can target working learners, who may not be able to participate in campus-based courses some or all of the time. In addition,

online programs during summer or winter terms can keep students engaged during gaps in the traditional semester schedule, potentially reducing melt and accelerating time to graduation. By supporting a broad range of offerings via flexible learning modalities, institutions can position themselves to attract a diversity of learners with varying needs, justifying the investment in new approaches and the infrastructure and training needed to support them.

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Implementing Effective Hybrid Learning

Given the potential strategic benefits of adopting hybrid learning, how can leaders undertake an effective transformation effort at the institutional level? We recommend focusing on three key pillars for implementing hybrid learning at scale. First, choose appropriate learning modalities for student audiences and learning goals; second, promote evidence-based instructional practices, and third, intentionally integrate curriculum, pedagogy, and technology.

What each of these pillars shares is an institutional commitment to providing high-quality learning experiences. Without this commitment, a hybrid transformation is likely to fall flat, producing outcomes that are ultimately worse for both the institution and its students.

KEY PILLARS FOR IMPLEMENTING HYBRID LEARNING



Choose appropriate learning modalities

Consider the specific needs of your student audience

Identify the best modalities given program learning objectives

Utilize multiple learning modalities within a course or program where appropriate



Promote evidence-based instructional practices

Design curricula to implement spaced practice to reinforce learning

Provide professional development support for faculty to learn about student-centered pedagogical practices



Ensure integration and coherence

Promote consistent use of technology across programs and modalities

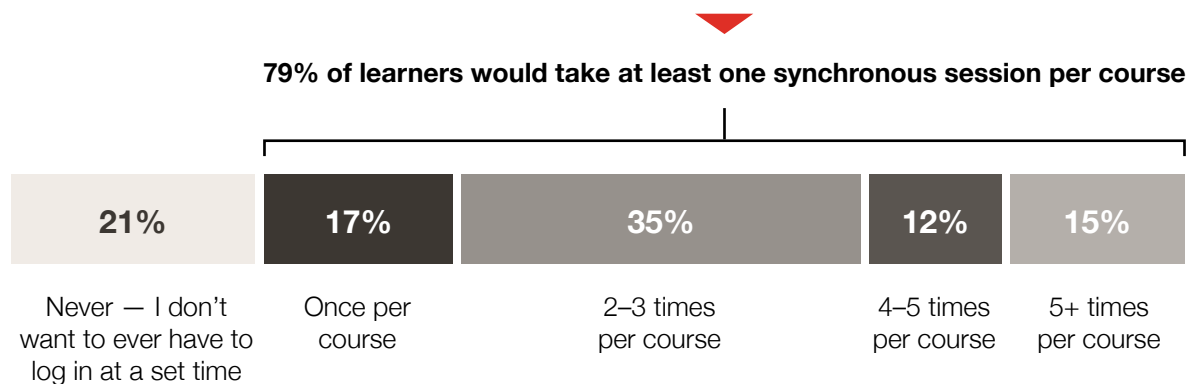
Encourage a shared commitment to active learning pedagogy among faculty

1 CHOOSE APPROPRIATE LEARNING MODALITIES

The first key to an effective hybrid transformation strategy is creating options that map to the needs of different learner demographics and learning goals. Conventional wisdom during the past decade has been that in-person, campus-based programs are ideal for traditional students (18–24-years old, attending full time) and that online programs work best for adult and working learners, who need the flexibility of self-paced courses to fit in around their other

responsibilities. However, this simple categorization ignores recent findings that over 70% of college students are “nontraditional,” in that they are unwilling or unable to attend college full-time, regardless of age.⁸ Undermining the dichotomy further, traditional students can benefit from online learning, and nontraditional learners welcome opportunities for synchronous learning with peers and real-time access to instructors.

How often would you be willing to log in at a specific time to join a required discussion or virtual lecture with your instructor and classmates for each class that you attend?



Source: Wiley University Services: Voice of the Online Learner 2022: Shifting Preferences in Post-Pandemic Online Learning.
<https://universityservices.wiley.com/voice-of-the-online-learner-2022/>

And while still a relatively small percentage overall, the number of traditionally-aged undergraduate students who are interested in fully online programs has tripled in the past five years.⁹

At the institutional level, **serving different kinds of learners** with distinct preferences should be a high priority.

At the institutional level, serving different kinds of learners with distinct preferences should be a high priority. This means offering both in-person and online options for those students who prefer to stick to a single format while taking a more nuanced approach for those who are interested in the benefits of a hybrid approach. By designing courses and programs based on defined learning goals, institutions can reap the pedagogical advantages of each modality and curriculum type.

For example, the flipped classroom approach uses asynchronous learning to expose students to new information, via readings or recorded lectures, because this allows students to review material at their own pace and repeat difficult sections as needed. It also reserves synchronous learning for applied practice, so students can receive instructor feedback in real-time and engage in collaborative problem-solving with peers.

For programs that are designed to provide access and opportunity to geographically distributed learners, the online modality has tremendous advantages. However, over-reliance on asynchronous courses misses the opportunity for social learning, real-time feedback, and guided facilitation from an experienced instructor. By combining asynchronous and synchronous modalities institutions can achieve better overall results for learners.

While synchronous learning can be delivered in person or online, physical classrooms provide opportunities to interact with computer hardware, laboratory equipment, art and design studios, and other tools, enabling students to learn techniques or apply concepts that may be more difficult online. More broadly, experiential learning enables students to apply skills and concepts in more realistic settings outside traditional classrooms, such as project-based challenges sponsored by companies, non-profits, or government agencies.

For example, the [Bachelor in Transformational Leadership and Social Innovation](#) at the Esade School of Business offers synchronous online courses to teach foundational skills through active learning together with in-person courses utilizing Socratic discussion, as well as experiential learning in maker spaces, innovation labs, and via private-sector partnerships.

OPTIMAL USE CASES FOR DIVERSE LEARNING MODALITIES

Modality

Optimal Use-Cases



Online learning

- Courses for students who are unable to come to campus or who want the flexibility to study remotely
- Study abroad or coop/internship programs
- Summer or winter terms when campus is closed

Fully-asynchronous

- Independent self-paced work
- Exposure to information via readings and recorded videos
- Class preparation using a flipped classroom approach

Fully-synchronous

- Peer learning and social network building
- Instructor facilitated discussion in large and small groups
- Practical application of skills and concepts with real-time feedback

Asynchronous + synchronous

- Flexible scheduling balanced with opportunities for social learning and instructor interaction
- Cohort-based professional development and executive education



In-person learning

- Deeper social connection and hands-on collaboration
- Applied practice in science labs, maker spaces, art studios, etc.
- Experiential learning with private-sector partners



Online + in-person learning

- Limiting the number of days students need to be on-campus via online or hybrid offerings
- Low-residency programs with only occasional in-person learning



Hyflex learning

- Providing access to in-person courses for remote learners (e.g., international students), with appropriate infrastructure and facilitation

2 PROMOTE EVIDENCE-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Beyond the addition or expansion of online offerings, adopting hybrid learning offers the opportunity for institutional transformation that reinforces the core mission of universities: preparing students for successful lives through effective teaching and learning. It is well documented that traditional instruction methods, in particular lectures, are ineffective for learning, increasing failure rates by 55% relative to courses that use active learning.¹⁰ Yet, these methods persist throughout higher education. When courses move online, their worst aspects are frequently perpetuated in the form of recorded lectures or passive slide presentations on video-conference platforms.

Hybrid transformation provides a unique opening to break from the status quo. As faculty adopt new modalities and technologies, they have the opportunity to implement evidence-based pedagogical techniques that can be utilized regardless of course format. Techniques such as spaced repetition (reinforcing concepts and skills over multiple sessions and assignments), interleaving (varying subject matter), formative feedback (providing targeted advice for improvement), peer instruction (activities that involve student-to-student teaching), and many others are easier to adopt when faculty are already making changes to their teaching approach. Moreover, an institutional transformation effort provides the opportunity to cultivate communities of practice, where faculty collectively implement effective teaching techniques and provide mutual support for overcoming challenges.

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However, generating broad faculty buy-in for the switch to active learning is not an easy task, especially given competing incentives to focus on research instead of updating one's teaching methods. Creating a change management strategy that provides support, and appropriate compensation, for faculty to learn and adopt new approaches is a critical component of effective hybrid transformation. When classes went online during the Covid-19 pandemic, some institutions such as [Cornell University](#) helped maintain a quality learning experience by providing faculty with resources focused specifically on evidence-based instructional practices, rather than simply relying on technology recommendations. Systematic efforts to implement these approaches across programs can raise the quality of teaching and learning throughout an institution.

Educational quality is an end in itself, given the profound interest every university should have in student learning. It also has the potential to improve universities' retention and graduation rates, bolstering their reputations and their bottom lines. To achieve these kinds of results, an intentional transformation effort should champion the broader adoption of best practices, and universities can employ instructional design expertise and team teaching to encourage consistent adoption. Incentivizing these changes not only improves the learning experience for students, it can also boost key outcome metrics, for example, lowering failure rates for students who may be more at risk of adverse outcomes.¹¹

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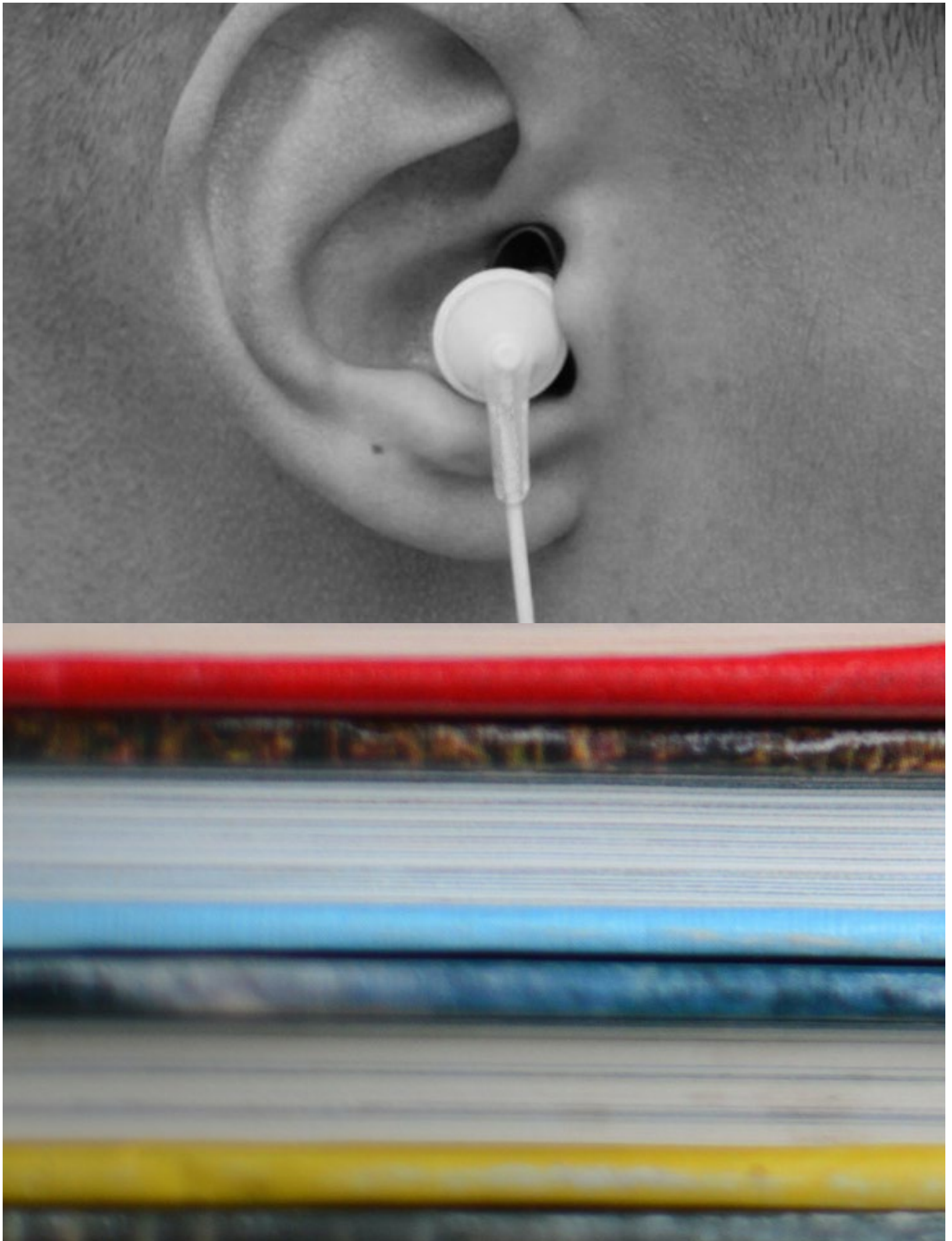
3 ENSURE INTEGRATION AND COHERENCE

The final pillar of effective hybrid transformation concerns how its various components integrate into an institution's existing offerings and practices. At its worst, online course adoption creates a fragmented experience for students, with different instructors and departments offering drastically different pedagogies and technologies. Beyond challenges related to ensuring quality, the mere existence of different approaches puts a strain on students to make sense of various offerings, adopt separate technologies, and understand institutional expectations.

Institutions should take a cohesive approach to teaching and learning across modalities, through the consistent use of learning technologies and a shared commitment to effective

pedagogical practices. This means carefully considering how students will access content for in-person, online, and hybrid courses, and being sensitive to the strain placed on both faculty and students when adopting technology platforms. For example, by using a proprietary learning platform, [Forum](#)[™], Minerva University was able to consistently implement active-learning pedagogy across all its programs. While a one-size-fits-all approach to technology is sometimes inappropriate, committing to a single, or core set of learning technologies — which can be supplemented when required — creates a much better overall experience for students and is much easier for faculty and administrators to support.

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Optimizing Hybrid Transformation

Even with a solid strategy for adopting hybrid learning, leaders need to develop institutional knowledge and resources, as well as strong alignment among faculty and staff around undertaking a substantial change.

To ensure success, leaders should invest in the following key areas:

1

Align stakeholders around the purpose of hybrid transformation.

Adopting new approaches is never easy, particularly given the inertia of traditional institutions and faculty who have not been exposed to the evidence about student preferences and effective teaching practices. Nevertheless, most faculty are thoughtful about the challenges presented when a learning experience lacks coherence, and they generally want the best for their students. In order to orient teams around educational quality, leaders should incentivize collaboration. Faculty teams can help establish goals, shared commitments, and the principles governing the design and creation of new courses and programs. At USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, Dean Willow Bay engaged a broad group of program leaders

and faculty in the decision to deliver their DEIA-focused [Managing Complexity in Diverse Organizations program](#) in a synchronous online format, as a required component of both online and in-person Master's degrees. By gathering feedback on the rationale for the choice of modality, Dean Bay ensured that program leaders understood and bought into the concept, and were able to add their advice for implementation.

2

Develop hybrid leadership, expertise, and knowledge sharing.

Whether by elevating in-house experts or bringing in new leadership, leaders should ensure that transformation efforts are led by those who are recognized for their experience in program innovation, instructional design, and learning across modalities. However, expertise should not be overly centralized. Providing professional development opportunities, particularly by creating cohort-based peer communities, will build broad support for innovation. Any lessons learned should also be shared broadly, as Stanford University recently did in creating a [report on teaching and learning practices during the pandemic](#).

3

Use technology as a means, not an end. Constraining a hybrid transformation effort within technologies that are convenient and familiar, or adopting new solutions that are generating market buzz, is a terrible handicap for implementing new hybrid offerings. Technology solutions, whether existing or new, should be adopted because they solve a defined problem. For example, [Yale University guides faculty on technology options for specific pedagogical needs](#), rather than fitting pedagogy into a prescribed platform choice. Technologies that are designed as solutions for many different use-cases (such as traditional Learning Management Systems) can lead to divergence and fragmentation in course and program design, rather than coherence. Choosing an ecosystem of digital tools that support specific active learning and authentic assessment approaches, rather than those that make it convenient to record lectures and set up high-stakes exams, will support the consistency and coherence of pedagogical and curricular approaches across programs.

4

Commit to testing hypotheses and measuring impact with data. It is impossible to get everything right when undertaking major educational reform. By investing in both quantitative and qualitative data collection, and defining specific ways in which findings will be used to make improvements, institutions can effectively measure the impact of new approaches, find out what is working, and determine what needs to change. For example, at [Minerva University](#), 83% of all students report that they can apply the skills they learned in the classroom to real-world contexts, signaling the effectiveness of the institution's approach to applied learning.

Conclusion

Higher education has gone through tremendous changes in recent years, due to the emergence of online learning and the shared experience of the Covid pandemic. The pace of transformation is only accelerating. Between the arrival of new technologies and the increasing realization that traditional approaches are ineffective, college and university leaders are concluding that their institutions must evolve to remain relevant. Hybrid learning will be at the forefront of this evolution, and institutions that invest in adopting hybrid approaches thoughtfully, with their institutional mission and the needs of learners in mind, will have a substantial advantage over those who pursue convenient solutions and short-term efficiencies.

The key success factor will be changing faculty members' mindsets to focus on how students learn best across modalities, rather than

simply adding new options. By choosing appropriate modalities for their learners, promoting evidence-based instructional practices, and ensuring integration and coherence in the learning experience, institutions can break free from traditional practices that fail to deliver the value that higher education promises. This choice prioritizes investment in long-term institutional success, rather than short-term revenue growth, and demonstrates a strategic commitment to the importance of superior student learning and outcomes. The path to change will not be easy, but those leaders who can rally their fellow educators around the benefits of this transformation will chart a course to the next era of higher education.

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ENDNOTES

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