

# Thoughts from higher education leaders: Challenges and emerging trends in online education

**The University Professional and Continuing Education  
Association Center for Research and Consulting and The  
NASPA Research and Policy Institute**

**In partnership with** 

**Thoughts from higher education leaders: Challenges and emerging trends in online education**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Most colleges and universities have online programs. Many of these programs grew organically out of academic units who saw a need within their student population or wanted to experiment and innovate. Most senior administrators now agree that online learning is a strategic imperative and are beginning to centralize strategic decision making around these programs. The primary drivers of this centralization are: risk, efficiency, and quality.

We engaged individuals leading these efforts to collect their opinions and advice on how to develop an effective online learning strategy. This report summarizes our findings.

Among other things, postsecondary leaders recommend tapping into existing expertise across the organization in areas such as online pedagogy, organizational models, lean innovation, and post-traditional student success. They also offer advice for how to avoid potential pitfalls involved in scaling online programs and centralizing related decision making and resources. Finally, many suggest that ensuring a good experience for online students benefits all students.

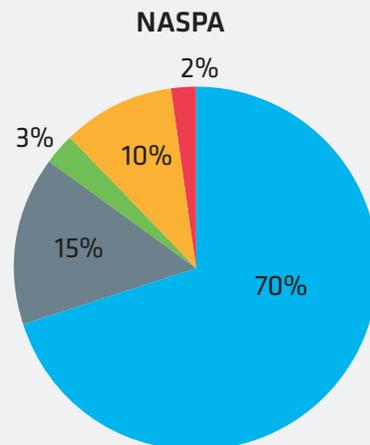
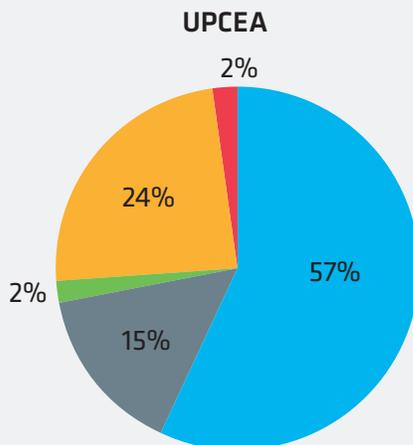
**PROJECT BACKGROUND**

InsideTrack, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education began this effort by

surveying 675 senior administrators at UPCEA and NASPA member institutions to better understand trends in strategic decision-making efforts to support the success of students in online programs. Of the 236 respondents, 112 were chief student affairs officers and 124 were the senior-most administrator in charge of online, continuing and/or professional education. The organizations then jointly presented the resulting data and hosted discussions at 3 national conferences—the Summit for Online Learning and Strategy hosted by UPCEA and the American Council on Education (ACE), the UPCEA Annual Conference and the NASPA Annual Conference. In between conference presentations, the group conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews with several survey respondents and other senior leaders responsible for online learning strategy at their respective institutions. The survey, discussions and interviews each involved individuals from a broad range of institutions representing public and private, small baccalaureate through large research institutions, all regions of the U.S. and all levels of student selectivity.

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**Who owns online learning strategy**



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**THE 'P-SUITE' IS INCREASINGLY DRIVING ONLINE STRATEGY**

The vast majority of respondents from both associations indicated that decision-making about online learning has been elevated to at least the level of the Provost.

Based on qualitative discussions, the three main drivers of this trend appear to be risk, efficiency and quality control.

- **Risk Management:** Centralization often facilitates compliance with state and federal regulations including state authorization laws and the Americans with Disabilities Act. One vice president of online services at a major research university commented, “you have to make sure you have accountability so you can stay out of lawsuits.”
- **Efficiency:** Many respondents highlighted the economies of scale gained by centralizing, enabling institutions to reduce the duplication of resources, staffing and workflow. One respondent noted, “There’s an ebb and flow to the year and merging resources can maximize efficiency. For example, we combined admissions and academic counselors across programs to balance out our staffing.”
- **Quality Control:** A number of respondents commented that consistency in messaging and processes protects the organization’s brand and student experience while creating new opportunities and enhanced ability to track and measure success.

Ultimately, the decision to centralize comes down to a decision about the motivations for pursuing an online learning strategy. One vice president of online learning at a major research university said, “If you see online education as part of your entire operation, then you have to centralize it. But if it’s just a money-maker or about extending access to a program, fine, leave it.”

**INSTITUTIONS ARE EXPERIMENTING WITH A VARIETY OF ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS**

Ownership and configuration of centralized online learning depends on the broader goals and mission of the institution; respondents noted the importance of staying true to the institutional mission and clarity regarding the intended audience for online learning. While other configurations certainly exist, the following four models emerged as the most common in our discussions with senior leaders:

1. **The Online University:** The institution offers online learning through a separately accredited sister institution with the senior-most administrator being that institution’s president.
2. **The Online Campus:** The institution offers online learning through an “online campus” with the senior-most administrator overseeing that campus reporting directly to the president of the institution.
3. **The Online Division:** The institution offers online learning through a dedicated academic unit with the senior-most administrator overseeing that unit reporting to the provost of the institution.
4. **The Online Department:** The various academic units at the institution offer their own online learning programs with an online technology/digital learning department providing support across the units.

Regardless of the administrative configuration, respondents emphasized the importance of involving faculty. In their minds, the goal of centralizing is to put the best technology and resources in front of faculty and let them decide how to use it most effectively to deliver learning outcomes for their field of study.

The vice provost of eLearning at one large public university said, “Our budget process gives each school a lot of control over programming. We saw a need for higher-level strategy for outreach to students, but instructional innovation is in the hands of faculty.”

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**ADVICE FOR AVOIDING POTENTIAL PITFALLS**

Respondents represented online programs in various stages of maturation and shared a variety of challenges and potential solutions. A common theme across all of the discussions was to start by having a clear understanding of the underlying goals for offering online programs, since doing it well requires such a large investment of time and resources.

*“You also need a full cadre of experienced specialists in marketing, instructional design, and online student services from day one, not to mention broad buy-in from the academic side of the house.”*

One respondent noted that over the last several years competition among online programs has increased dramatically, as have student expectations for their quality. “To have even a chance at creating a large and financially self-sustaining online program today, you need tens of millions of dollars in upfront investment, he noted. “You also need a full cadre of experienced specialists in marketing, instructional design, and online student services from day one, not to mention broad buy-in from the academic side of the house.”

Others warned about chasing market trends or ignoring financial realities. They noted that programs with limited appeal on campus are unlikely to fare better online, even if they are in hot subject areas. They also suggested being realistic about the market demand, your unique differentiation and the business model behind every offering.

With this thought in mind, below are several specific recommendations from online learning leaders.

***Don't bite off more than you can chew***

Begin with self-contained programs, such as graduate or degree completion programs. Create an opportunity to model successful online implementation and build interest and support for additional programs that may involve more stakeholders. Allow time for maturation. Scaling programs while maintaining quality takes proper planning and investment with strong leadership at the helm and buy-in throughout the organization.

One vice president of online learning, said, “Graduate programs are a much easier place to start because they’re contained within a single department. You don’t have to figure out general education requirements. Start with degree completion programs that are transfer-friendly within a department that wants to play. As more faculty get comfortable, they’ll start coming out of the woodwork to take programs online.”

***Engage broadly, but don't fight uphill battles***

Include all stakeholders in early discussions to ensure their input is heard and that potential issues or resistance is identified early. Then, partner with the early adopters—those who are excited about online learning and innovation—to launch initial programs and let the success of the program win over detractors.

With faculty in particular, let champions influence their peers and focus on developing the infrastructure that will make them successful. Avoid developing online programs without buy-in from the most immediate stakeholders and don’t waste time and energy trying to change people’s minds with words. Change them with results.

***Tap into existing expertise***

If your institution has had online, distance, or continuing/professional education for awhile, those responsible for these units and their teams likely hold a great deal of valuable expertise. They’ve been operating in an innovative environment outside the mainstream of the institution, one with the student experience at the center. Leverage their experience working with post-traditional students and supporting students in an online environment.

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You may find that ideas and strategies that did not work well previously now prove incredibly effective when implemented within the proper context. In fact, one vice president of online learning attributed her program’s success to hiring the former chief of continuing education and implementing many ideas previously left on the cutting room floor.

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*Hammer out the issues with one program before you try to scale*

If your institution aspires to scale online learning, be sure that the necessary support, processes, and leadership is in place first. Use early programs as a laboratory to work out the kinks and design solutions to the issues that arise with scale in mind. Consider:

- How will intellectual property rights be handled for course content?
- How will online classes be adapted for ADA compliance?
- How will support services be offered to students?
- Will the transactional interface and processes for registration be the same or different?
- How will tech and instructional design support be delivered to faculty?
- How will you ensure academic integrity in the online environment?
- What is the criteria and process for selecting courses/programs to take online?
- What are the quality standards for course content and production value?

The vice provost for academic affairs at one large research institution, said, “Centralizing allowed us to address ADA compliance, state authorization, develop a robust IP description, and support for instructional design, but most importantly, quality control.”

*Define a system for gathering data and assessing performance*

Large scale online education presents a huge opportunity for data collection and analysis, so don't let this be an afterthought. Think ahead to what questions you'll want to answer when online learning is fully scaled and integrated throughout your institution and build this into your plan now. Also consider how such data can inform innovations in the face-to-face learning environment, especially as the line between traditional and online learning become blurred. See online learning as an opportunity to test innovations to maximize student success and learning outcomes across a variety of learning environments.

In fact, the rich data from online learning is sparking a sort of pedagogical renaissance at some campuses. “We asked the ground campus what their learning strategy was and found they didn't have one,” said the vice provost for online learning at a large public university. “Our office is driving the pedagogy conversation on campus, not just online, and that's pretty profound.”

*Recognize that you're looking at a different type of student and need to offer services differently*

Online students are more likely to be adults juggling family and work in addition to school. However, even if they are 18 years old, they don't have the benefit of being able to wander into a support center on campus. They need access to the full suite of services online and by phone, often outside normal business hours.

*“Centralizing allowed us to address ADA compliance, state authorization, develop a robust IP description, and support for instructional design, but most importantly, quality control.”*

Many respondents warned against the assumption that online students somehow don't need high quality developmental support, just because they are often older than their campus counterparts. Some argue that online students may even need more developmental support due to physical distance from campus, the potential for isolation, and more stressful lives juggling work and family with school.

According to the vice provost for online learning at one large public university, “Sometimes you can tap into the ground services if they're easily accessible online, but otherwise you have to build it differently. Career planning and placement tools, financial aid, bursar, etc., those can stay the same, but for others such as counseling, career coaching, tutoring – these need to be tailored [to the online environment].”

The vice provost for online learning at another large public university, said, “Recognize the heterogeneity of [online students] – some just want great instruction with an elegant interface, others, total transformation. It requires a whole new institutional mindset, that support will be different for each student.”

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Because of growing diversity in our student body, “our approach to developmental support is changing,” said the provost of an online university. “We’re embedding coaching, career development, mentoring, and the like through our academic programs.”

**A GOOD ONLINE EXPERIENCE BENEFITS ALL STUDENTS**

Online learning isn’t just for online students. Most face-to-face learning environments now incorporate some form of online interaction. Today’s “traditional” student is a technology native who expects an elegant interface and self-service resources. This is one reason why traditional residential students are increasingly incorporating online and hybrid classes into their programs. The online environment is both familiar and comfortable to them and they too appreciate the flexibility online education allows them. Additional benefits include the ability to incorporate internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research opportunities without slowing academic progress.

As a result, traditional students now expect a unified student support experience that moves with them across their online and on-campus courses. This means that designing excellent support experiences for online students increasingly means addressing the needs of *all* students.

Historically, student services have been added to campuses organically, with information housed in seemingly infinite silos. The development of centralized services for online students accessible from anywhere at any time can serve as an opportunity to finally get control over chaos and confusion.

Online units evolved and innovated in an environment that placed the student experience at the center of everything—customer service in online learning is not only nice, it is necessary. As one vice president of online learning at a large research institution notes, “It’s very different than what you see on campus. [Our students are] just one click away from going somewhere else; they aren’t in town with a lease, so we need to be very responsive.”

**CONCLUSION**

According to the leaders we engaged, the best online learning strategies focus on three things: mission, student-centricity, and leverage.

Start by understanding your goals for offering online programs and how those goals support the overall mission of the institution. Then, refine those goals with a clear understanding of the marketplace and the business model underlying your efforts.

Take advantage of the unprecedented amounts of data now available regarding student engagement, learning and support in an online environment. Apply these insights to improve the experience for all students.

Finally, engage innovation partners across the institution and leverage the expertise of continuing and online education units. Tap your faculty and your institution’s business-minded stakeholders. Work together to create an environment of innovation, financial health and academic excellence.

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