

D2L

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING:

How to Design Courses for Student Success in Higher Education



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Over the past 50 years, the profile of higher education students has undergone a remarkable transformation. The modern student body is more ethnically diverse, gender-inclusive and representative of various walks of life and age groups. This shift reflects broader societal changes, including the impact of the women's movement and increased access to education for underrepresented groups.

We've also witnessed a significant increase in the number of non-traditional students, such as working adults returning to education, part-time students and those balancing education with family responsibilities.

The percentage of students aged 25 and older has increased to 40% of the total college population.

This diversity brings a wealth of perspectives and experiences to the classroom, enriching the learning environment for all students.

Despite a **decline in overall enrollments at traditional higher education institutions, the demand for online courses** continues to surge. Statista, a global data and business intelligence platform, predicts that the global online education market will reach nearly **\$400 billion by 2026** (up from \$200 billion in 2019), driven by the flexibility and accessibility it offers. This growth is a testament to the evolving needs of learners who seek education that fits their lifestyles and career aspirations. Interestingly, while **traditional enrollments decreased by 15% from 2010 to 2021**, online course enrollments have grown by **900% globally since 2000.**

These demographic changes have significant implications for higher education institutions, which must adapt to meet the needs of a varied and evolving student population.





Why Online Courses?

According to edtech expert and consultant Phil Hill, the institutional move towards online courses is partly driven by the need to recover lost tuition revenue. Online programs enable colleges to reach learners living anywhere. They also appeal to working adults who cannot travel to a physical campus, or who may not have time to take on a hectic course load. The need to find and retain students has become crucial for many higher education institutions, especially as the number of college-age students is decreasing—a trend known in the industry as the “demographic cliff.”

Patrick Creggan, formerly a senior solutions engineer at D2L, has noticed the change. Staff at the higher education institutions he speaks with share that there’s a growing appetite to reach online learners, many of whom fall in the non-traditional student category. Engaging these learners is important because their needs differ from those of in-person, full-time students. Digital content has to be engaging enough to keep online learners interested enough to complete their courses.

“Institutions are really trying to think about how content can be interactive, engaging and visually stimulating,” he said. “Because not only do they want these part-time learners to finish the courses they’re currently enrolled in; they want them to return and take more.”

To understand what makes an online course truly effective, we consulted a diverse group of experts, including instructional designers, learning experience designers, faculty, former administrators and solutions engineers. Their insights reveal that great courses are built on principles of engagement, interactivity and practical application, all of which contribute to better student outcomes.

While we acknowledge the value of in-person and hybrid learning environments, this guide focuses on the unique challenges and opportunities of online course design. Our goal is to equip educators with the strategies needed to create compelling, interactive content that meets the needs of today’s diverse and dynamic student population.

Why Online Course Design Is Important

Strategic course design is a crucial factor for student success across all learning environments, but online learning presents unique challenges. Keeping students engaged online can be more difficult due to the plethora of distractions available at the click of the button and the lack of facetime with peers and instructors. So, understanding how to design online courses specifically is critical.

One thing course designers can do is incorporate creative and interactive content elements. Doing so can significantly enhance the learning experience, making it more engaging and stimulating.

Key elements of interactive content in online courses

include multimedia components such as videos, animations and simulations, which cater to various learning styles and make complex concepts more digestible. Interactive quizzes and gamification techniques, like badges and leaderboards, motivate students and foster a sense of achievement. Real-time collaboration tools and discussion forums also play a crucial role in maintaining student interest and promoting a sense of community.

Research shows that student engagement in online learning environments is significantly enhanced by interactive elements and strong instructor presence.

Students who participate in interactive activities, such as discussion forums and multimedia resources, exhibit higher levels of engagement and better academic performance. Additionally, **maintaining regular communication between students and instructors** is critical for fostering a supportive and collaborative learning environment.

We'll explore additional tactics in online course design further down, but the design portion is just one part. Understanding your student population and what they're looking for is also crucial.

Many non-traditional students taking online courses are increasingly looking to upskill and reskill to meet the demands of a rapidly changing job market. The **World Economic Forum**, to take just one example, is working with more than 350 organizations in a bid to provide one billion people with better education, skills and economic opportunities by 2030. But unlike traditional students, many adult learners cannot afford to attend school full-time due to work and family commitments. They seek flexible, job-ready skills that can be acquired through online courses.

MJ Bishop is the vice president for integrative learning design at the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC), a distance education branch of the University of Maryland. Bishop's department is responsible for designing and developing all the learning experiences, which are largely online and asynchronous. The institution mainly serves goal-driven adult learners.

"They come in knowing that they want to create a better life for themselves and their families, or because their employer has told them they need to upskill in order to keep their job or to get the promotion," says Bishop.

"Or they've decided, 'I've been at this [job] for a few years, and I don't think I like what I'm doing, so I want to change gears entirely.'"

According to Bishop, there's been an uptick in learners coming to UMGCC who are looking for a very skills-forward experience. That may or may not include earning a full degree (in many cases, a micro-credential or a certificate would suffice.)

This shift necessitates a rethinking of course delivery methods by higher education institutions. It's not enough to transfer in-person lectures to an online format; courses must be designed with the unique needs and constraints of adult learners in mind.

It's worth noting that good online course design benefits all learners, not only non-traditional ones, part-time students, or those seeking a specific credential for a job promotion.

Melissa Wells is a manager of learning experience at National University, a higher education institution that offers a number of online programs. She cited the example of chunking (in course lingo, it's the process of breaking down larger pieces of content into smaller, consumable bits for ease of knowledge consumption), as one application in online course design that could be beneficial to all students.

“Chunking has been around for a long time,” Wells noted. “But does it only apply to online learners? No. There are many types of learners who could benefit from being able to access content in bite-sized chunks.”

Understanding the importance of strategic online course design is the first step. However, creating great online courses is challenging due to several factors, which we'll explore in the next section.



The Challenges of Great Course Design

The road to success in any industry is rarely smooth—and online course design is no different. Throughout our research and interviews, we came across several challenges individuals encounter when it comes to creating and scaling exceptional course content:



FACULTY TIME

“The biggest challenges we hear institutions tell us is that faculty don’t have a lot of time and are hesitant to learn,” said Creghan. Faculty members often juggle multiple responsibilities and have limited time to dedicate to course design.

There’s also the increasingly common scenario of working with instructors with varying backgrounds. Wells, of National University, shared a bit about the breakdown of their course authoring team.

“Sometimes, our course authors are full-time faculty, sometimes they’re part-time faculty, sometimes they’re external,” said Wells. When the pool of instructors has varying amounts of time and expertise to invest in course design, it becomes more challenging to create a consistent learner experience.

No matter the background or experience level of the instructor, this time poverty can lead to less innovative and engaging course content, ultimately affecting student outcomes.



LACK OF RESOURCES

A lack of resources is another critical barrier to effective course design.

“A small school may not have dedicated instructional designers. On top of that, their faculty don’t know how to use instructional design tools, which could require knowledge of HTML coding and other things,” Creghan said.

And while many universities and colleges have centers for teaching and learning, they’re not always able to work through the finer details.

“One of the things that I’ve noticed across institutions is that their centers for teaching and learning, while they exist, they’re usually not resourced to be able to create a course with instructors. They can provide an overview, and that high level advice on learning objectives and instructional methods. But they’re not always equipped to build the course out,” said Kevin MacLeod, a learning experience architect with D2L.

Without access to specialized support and resources, faculty may struggle to incorporate best practices in course design, leading to less effective learning experiences for students. The absence of institutional support can also hinder the adoption of new technologies and pedagogical strategies that could enhance course quality.



A CHANGING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC

The modern post-secondary learner has diverse needs that must be taken into consideration when it comes to course design.

Today's students include working professionals, parents and caregivers who require flexible learning options to balance their studies with other responsibilities. Some students may need to study at night or in short bursts throughout the day, while others may require accommodations for disabilities or learning preferences.

Shane Strup is a senior director of learning experience design at National University, an institution that offers a number of popular online graduate programs for educators who work full-time.

"If you're a teacher, you're going in early, working all day, you may have a family, you might be coaching, you're doing other things."

Strup noted that it's not uncommon for teachers to want to move into administrative roles. But becoming a principal typically requires earning a master's degree. "So, to do that, you've got to be able to find a school that is flexible and provides that content, where you can digest it on your own terms."

Designing courses that cater to these varied needs is challenging but essential to optimize learning and engagement. To stay relevant, **institutions must recognize and address these differences to create inclusive and effective educational experiences.**



ONLINE LEARNING VS. REMOTE LEARNING

Many people still confuse online learning with remote learning, a misconception that was exacerbated by the pandemic. During the crisis, institutions rapidly transitioned to online formats without adequate time for thoughtful design, resulting in a temporary, often suboptimal solution.

"Remote learning is like a lifeboat in an emergency, whereas fully online learning is like a yacht crafted to meet individual needs," says **Gemma Stafford**, a senior learning designer at Nottingham Trent University.

From her perspective, students often think they aren't getting their money's worth by shifting to online learning as they've been conditioned to conflate online learning with the remote learning they experienced during the pandemic, which was that emergency type.

"There is so much more to [well-designed and structured online learning.] It's not just the academic who delivers the material from the front of the classroom. There is a learning designer working to create and design materials. A lot of time and thought goes into creating activities that are pedagogically sound and fit for purpose."

Unlike in-person learning, which benefits from immediate interaction and physical presence, online learning requires deliberate strategies to foster engagement and community. Explaining these differences and the need for strategic design to stakeholders remains a challenge, as many still view online learning through the lens of emergency remote teaching.



TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology in online learning, particularly learning management systems (LMSs), presents both opportunities and challenges.

While the right LMS can enhance the educational experience, **the process of learning and integrating new technologies can be a significant barrier for faculty.** Many instructors are reluctant to invest time in mastering new systems, viewing it as an additional burden on top of their existing workload.

From an administrator's perspective, there is also resistance to adding more technology to already complex and bloated LMS platforms. Balancing the need for effective technological tools with the practical constraints faced by faculty and institutions is a delicate task.



SUSTAINABILITY, SCALABILITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

According to Dr. Cristi Ford, chief learning officer at D2L, quality assurance, sustainability and scalability of course design is what institutional administrators and leaders are focused on. Faculty have their own individual ways of teaching, which makes sense. But this can result in a lack of consistency within courses.

"Administrators are always thinking 'How do we get the maximum reach but keep the same high-touch engagement for all the students that we're serving?'" she said.



How to Design Online Courses for Student Success

We've discussed why strategic online course design is important and shared some of the main challenges. But what are the solutions? Where do faculty, staff and administrators begin?

According to Ford, there isn't a silver bullet. **"I think of this as a symphony—it's really about multiple parts,"** she said. **"As a conductor begins, they require all the sections of an orchestra to work in harmony to produce something beautiful."**

It's clear that no single technique, trend or product can address every challenge we've outlined above. What can work is a holistic, collaborative and strategic approach to learner-centered online course design. With that in mind, let's cover the things that our experts say are working.

PERSONALIZE LEARNING TO SUIT THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS

Every expert we spoke with emphasized the importance of remembering who you're teaching before you start building a course and any assessments associated with it. Personalized learning has been around for a while but with an increasingly diverse student population, it's more important now than ever.

Personalized learning means different things for different learners. For some, it might mean delivering a course in bite-sized chunks over weeks or months, and offering multiple types of assessments (e.g., video recordings instead of essays). For others, it could mean putting the entire curriculum online from the start so that students can plan ahead.

Mandi Singleton is a learning and training specialist at the Regional Transportation District in Denver, Colorado. She previously worked as a faculty developer and adjunct faculty member at the University of Denver and has co-authored a chapter on [Humanizing Online Learning](#) in the popular pedagogy book [Designing For Care](#).

In her role as a faculty developer, Singleton worked with staff to design courses for part-time online learners. In one instance, she worked with an instructor who wanted to release course material week by week, rather than all at once. But this caused a lot of anxiety and stress for students who wanted a clear idea of what to expect over the duration of the course. Singleton mentioned that one of the students was pregnant and wanted to know what was happening over the full quarter so that she could plan in advance.

"I think in an adult online learning space, let them work when they want to work," Singleton said, noting that it's important to treat online learners like the adults they are and to allow them autonomy and some degree of control over how and when they study.

Another example is offering flexible deadlines for assignments, which can help students who are balancing coursework with full-time jobs or caregiving responsibilities.

Personalized learning shouldn't stop at content creation. It's also important for assessments.

Nicolas Pares currently works in the user assistance and training department at Oracle but has a background as an instructional designer in the higher education space and has also worked in the K-12 industry. He's also the co-author of the chapter [Humanizing Online Learning](#).

"In all of my [higher ed] courses, I would always do differentiated assessments," Pares said. "There would be rubrics for all major assignments. And they would all be different. Students could send me a video, a poster, they could do a presentation, write an essay or paper. It was differentiated in whatever format they felt most comfortable or willing to do."

Pares noted that this approach took more effort. “I had [to take] the time to figure out how to create rubrics that would work for all those scenarios so that I could accept different assignment types.” The technology he used was also instrumental in allowing students to submit videos, documents, or other file types. Ultimately, Pares wanted to think about how he could best serve the student and provide a truly personalized learning experience.

Dr. Emma Zone, senior director of academic affairs at D2L, shared that having proper ways to evaluate feedback is important for administrators too—especially when it comes to considering student engagement.

“Let’s use a course called English 101 as an example. [As an administrator], if I look at all sections of this course, how could I pinpoint if something is working because of the content, or if it’s because a faculty member never engages with the students? That’s a huge challenge,” Zone said. “If there’s no well-defined assessment strategy around the work pertaining to this fabulous, innovative content that has been created, then there’s not a lot to stand on in terms of the efficacy other than student surveys saying it was fun and engaging.”

At its core, personalized learning is about adjusting content and assessments to meet the diverse needs of learners.

MAKE ONLINE LEARNING HUMAN

It’s important not to lose sight of the human aspect in online learning.

Humanizing learning involves creating a sense of connection and community among students and between students and instructors. This can be achieved through regular video updates, personal anecdotes, interactive office hours and transparent communication.

For instance, an instructor might share weekly video messages summarizing key points and addressing common questions, which helps students feel more connected to the course and the instructor. Incorporating peer review activities can foster a sense of community and collaboration among students.



“Going back to some of my early educational experiences in K-12,” says Pares, “I was teaching math at a dropout high school and the more authentic I was with them, the richer our connections, the more often I saw them in the classroom, the less problems we had.”

Though not the exact same environment, that authentic approach can also be applied to online learning for adults. “Creating space for them to share and make connections with each other and the instructor makes a world of difference.”

MacLeod has heard students say “Well, I submitted my assignment, but I really don’t have an idea of how I’m engaging with faculty.” The student-instructor connection, he says, is still important—perhaps even more in online environments.

MacLeod cited an example case where course instructors were using video lectures as a replacement for traditional lecturing spaces. There were no interaction points for students, which resulted in a disengaged learning experience.

“What’s missing is the conversation and rapport you would develop if you were in a classroom,” MacLeod said. “Those kinds of things have to be intentionally designed into online learning experiences. If they’re not there, students feel that gap.”

Peer to peer connection is also important. As Singleton discussed in [the chapter](#) she co-authored with Pares, having a space for students to connect with each other and discuss where they’re from, their hobbies, etc. is important.

“Think about what would naturally happen in an in-person classroom environment and try to create a space for that,” she said. “It could be a virtual discussion board, a meet-up group, a Zoom session, or an informal get together at a coffee shop, if possible. But creating that time and space for connection goes a long way.”

IMPLEMENT MULTIMEDIA ELEMENTS

Many people we spoke with shared that learners appreciated when course materials were varied and broken up into smaller pieces. Singleton shared that she used a range of material types to build out courses while at the University of Denver.

“I tried to make sure that courses I designed involved different media sources for students to access. Some students would really want an article, while some really wanted to talk about the podcast.”

Singleton also advises people to keep videos short.

“A lot of our instructors wanted to do these hour-long lectures in their online classes because that’s what they would do in-person,” Singleton explained.

And while she wasn’t against it, she did advise them to keep everything short.

“I would say ‘Look, you’re making yourself do a lot of work for what we see on the backend.’ I could see the analytics of how long students were watching the courses. And I think one minute and 51 seconds was the average time a student spent watching a video. In the age of TikTok, shorter video clips are more effective.”

USE TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Studies have shown that digital tools can enhance student engagement, provide real-time feedback, and support personalized learning paths. However, the challenge lies in selecting the right tools and ensuring that faculty are adequately trained to use them.

For example, using an LMS that supports interactive elements like quizzes, discussion boards, and multimedia content can make a course more engaging. Institutions must balance the need for effective technology with the practical constraints faced by faculty and administrators. Providing training sessions and ongoing support can help faculty feel more comfortable and proficient with new technologies.

MacLeod discussed approaches and tactics to interactive content above and says it's really a combination of the right tactics and tools to generate that interactive content.

"When you get boots on the ground, you need a tool. Whether you're authoring in HTML or if you're using something else, you must figure out how the student is going to click on a button to make a choice to engage in the content?"

MacLeod shared that **D2L's Creator+** and **H5P** are amazing tools for content creation.

"Students need opportunities to connect with the content. Every time they recall that information, every time they have to answer a multiple-choice question to evaluate it, you're cementing the learning."

But does interactive content, replete with multimedia and knowledge checkpoints actually work to cement learning?

MacLeod shared an example scenario from the medical field.

"Let's say there's a patient who has a diagnosis. [As a course designer or instructor] I can start with that diagnosis in text format, but I can also use multimedia to present a patient's chart, so what I'm reading off the chart is like what I would see in practice," he said.

"After we've seen the chart, we can do a video interview with a patient. We could use a branching scenario to walk through the interactions that we have with the patient and think about 'What types of questions we should use?' We can do multiple-choice questions or insert another interactive practice assessment. If we do the latter, the learner must make a choice based on the interaction they've had with the patient. All of this is just stitching together multimedia and interactive elements to create a holistic and practical learning experience," he said.

"Now, I could have done all that by writing a few paragraphs—but which one's more engaging? Which one will the student feel like they've been a part of?"

No matter what platform or tools you use, it's crucial to remember that technology is not meant to replace solid pedagogy, great teaching or evolution.

"Often when we talk about innovation, people immediately think about technology," Dr. Zone said. **"But innovation can and should be happening way, way earlier. Technology empowers it."**



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

Transforming Adult Education at South University With Data-Driven Insights

Despite investing countless hours in learning via online courses at South University, numerous students were struggling to attain satisfactory grades. Educators pinpointed text-heavy content as the root cause of this issue. Thankfully, they were able to harness the power of Creator+ from D2L to craft more immersive and learner-centric courses. This transformative initiative not only rekindled student engagement but also catapulted academic performance to new heights, significantly elevating student scores on critical assignments.

[Read More](#)

CONSIDER A FRACTIONAL TEAM AND PRIORITIZE COMMUNICATION

Another pain point with creating great content is the lack of resources available for building and designing courses.

This is where a fractional team can help. Teams composed of instructional designers and other experts can work on a temporary basis to uplift courses or handle general design work. This approach allows institutions to benefit from specialized knowledge without the need to hire a full-time team. For example, a fractional team might be brought in to redesign a series of core courses to improve their online delivery, ensuring that the content is engaging and accessible.

National University partnered with D2L's Learning Services team to ensure over 10,000 courses were ADA-compliant.

"Clients may understand accessibility, but they don't have the capacity and the workflows," said Jeff Salin, senior manager of learning experience at D2L. **"We [D2L] do this day in and day out. We're really efficient at it. We create automation tools to solve these problems."**

As for the future, Salin thinks the need for the work his team does will only grow. "Higher education institutions will need to uplift thousands of courses and create hundreds of new ones and many don't have the scalability on their side to do this."

Wells mentioned that collaboration and communication were also keys to success.

"Every course is a little bit different, but I do think some of the best courses develop via true collaboration. I'm working on a course right now with a wonderful course author. He is very knowledgeable in his field of expertise. And we kind of feed off each other. When he's backing his ideas, it's based on him being the content expert. When I'm backing my ideas, it's based on an LXD and together, we determine the best approach forward. The best courses are built when that collaboration's truly there."

Pares echoed the collaboration point, sharing that open communication was key. "We would do design sprints when I worked at the University of Maryland. The idea was that we could lean into each other and gain wisdom from what other faculty members were doing." Relationships like that, Pares said, are really powerful. "Seeing someone else have student success usually leads to others having it."

LEVERAGE TEMPLATES WHERE AVAILABLE

When it comes to design, you don't have to reinvent the wheel—you can use templates, if you have access to them. Templates save time and ensure consistency across courses. They provide a starting point that can be customized to fit specific needs, making the course design process more efficient.

For example, a template might include a standard structure for weekly modules, with placeholders for lectures, readings, and assignments. This helps instructors focus on content rather than format, streamlining the course creation process.

“We know administrators are invested in quality assurance,” says Ford. She believes there are opportunities for institutions to partner with thought leaders and vendors that take the guess work out of online course design.

“With Quality Matters, the whole rubric is based on research. That group gets together regularly to review new literature and then make adjustments to the rubric based on what they've learned. It's a systematic review of research and literature to develop that rubric.”

HARNESS THE POWER OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI tools can assist educators with creating personalized learning experiences, automate administrative tasks, save time on grading and provide real-time feedback, among other things. However, it's important to use AI ethically and transparently, ensuring that it complements rather than replaces human judgment.

“A lot of people have access to AI, but not everybody's comfortable getting quality product from it,” MacLeod said. He shared that his team is working to ensure that the ways they're interacting with AI results in quality content that suits learners. **“We don't want a wall of text that is not curated or designed to be effective when it comes to learning.”**

“There is an intentional need to take a step back and redefine how we're looking at the ways we engage students in courses with the advent of generative AI, full stop,” Ford said.

Perhaps Dr. Ford's sentiments around how educators, learning designers and administrators should think about content are most appropriate.

“It's no longer an educator standing at the front and telling students what they know. Learners can go find that on the internet. Where are you really creating these opportunities for them to grapple with the content and the learning and have their own aha moments in ways that really impact them?” It's a tall order, but not impossible. It's also worth noting that despite the challenges, faculty are excited. “There is a huge desire for integrating innovative learner-centered design into courses,” Zone shared.



Areas of Focus for Online Course Design for 2025



INCREASED USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

AI will continue to revolutionize online education

by providing personalized learning experiences tailored to individual student needs. AI-powered tools can analyze student data to identify strengths and weaknesses, recommending specific resources and activities to optimize learning outcomes. Additionally, AI can automate administrative tasks such as grading and attendance tracking, freeing up educators to focus more on teaching.

MacLeod shared that AI is helpful in some cases. For example, using AI tools to do a first pass of a course can take a huge load off of instructors.

“Giving them a draft that they can mold is a huge development,” he shared.

“It’s also useful for ideation. Rather than having somebody author it from scratch, we’re doing that heavy lift at the beginning of creating the original content. Then we mold it with [the instructors] to create the course and learning experience.”

“I remember sitting in a faculty meeting where some professors were worried about students using spell check,” said Melany McNew, a manager of learning experience design at National University. “I think we’re well beyond that.” She believes that AI is another augmenting tool that humans will use to improve content, but the initial challenge is getting buy-in. “How do we get around that? We show them what we can do,” McNew said.



MICRO-CREDENTIALS, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION (CBE) AND SKILLS-BASED LEARNING

As the job market evolves, there is a growing demand for short-term, skills-focused programs that allow professionals to upskill or reskill quickly.

Micro-credentials offer flexibility and affordability, enabling learners to complete certifications in weeks or months instead of years. These programs focus on in-demand skills making them highly relevant to current career needs. Studies indicate that micro-credentials can enhance employability and career advancement opportunities.

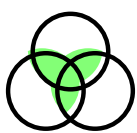
“There are all sorts of changes [happening] in higher education to try to accommodate to the dropping enrollments,” Salin said. “It’s based on learner preferences these days as opposed to an antiquated model of how credentials are offered at institutions. If you go look at the Netherlands, there are, I think 16 universities that are all focused on taking learning away from the model of 15 weeks down to as little as 4 to 6 weeks.”

“It’s hard to call competency-based education a trend because it started so long ago, but there’s almost a second wave of it,” MacLeod said. “We’re seeing a resurgence because the first time it came around was theoretical. Now it’s coming around because it’s documented to connect student learning with professional life beyond the ivory tower.”

McNew noted that students are sometimes frustrated when they pass a course with good grades but then wonder if they have any applicable career skills.

“National University has been very focused on authentic assessments,” McNew said. “I tell my students ‘I don’t think this multiple-choice exam is a great indicator of your performance when this is a hands-on skill that you’re supposed to be learning.’” McNew noted that students are echoing this as well. “Their thinking now is ‘If I’m going to spend this money and time, I really want to make sure I can do something when I leave.’”

Zone agreed that the workforce – higher ed partnership piece was crucial. “There is cross-functional collaboration within institutions, but there’s also the community partnership side. [Institutions are now asking] ‘How are we sure that what we’re serving up is relevant to their needs?’”



AN EMPHASIS ON ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY

Online education is increasingly prioritizing accessibility to ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstances, can access quality education. Advancements in adaptive technology, such as screen readers and speech-to-text tools, are making online courses more accessible to students with disabilities. Additionally, offering courses in multiple languages and ensuring mobile-friendly platforms support learning on the go are crucial steps towards inclusivity.

“Accessibility is a huge component on our team,” said Wells. “We want all students to be able to access our courses.”

Zone echoed the enhanced focus on accessibility and inclusion as a topic she and Ford have been hearing at conferences all year.

“Accessibility is no longer an afterthought for people, because they’re recognizing the importance whether there is a person with a disability or not,” she said.

“We know that the way people are consuming content has shifted. People might be listening to a podcast that’s in their course on their way to work or reading an article on the train. So, when we think about how people are consuming content, that’s also about accessibility piece.”

Zone said it’s crucial for institutions to move away from thinking of accessibility as an afterthought. Instead, it should inform design on the front end.

“We know that it can help all these other learners, whether they’re in that defined category or not,” Zone says. “And that’s hugely beneficial to the entire learner population.”



CENTERING THE INSTITUTIONAL MISSION AROUND LEARNERS

Zone and Ford also highlighted the importance of administrators and leaders keeping their institutional mission at the center of their work.

“You’re creating a menu where you’re showing all these different options around both design, assessment, all these pieces we’ve just talked about,” Zone said. “Ultimately, when we talk about intentionality or when we talk about the fact that there has to be personalization for each learner, it’s important to also connect that to the institutional mission. Because that is what every single accreditation visit, any accreditor is starting with. If you cannot connect your finances, your teaching and learning strategy, your student services, your careers to the institutional mission, and if your faculty can’t echo that, the visit’s going to be very unpleasant,” Zone said.

These areas of focus highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of online course design in the higher education space. By staying informed and adapting to these changes, universities and colleges can create more effective, engaging and inclusive learning experiences for their students.



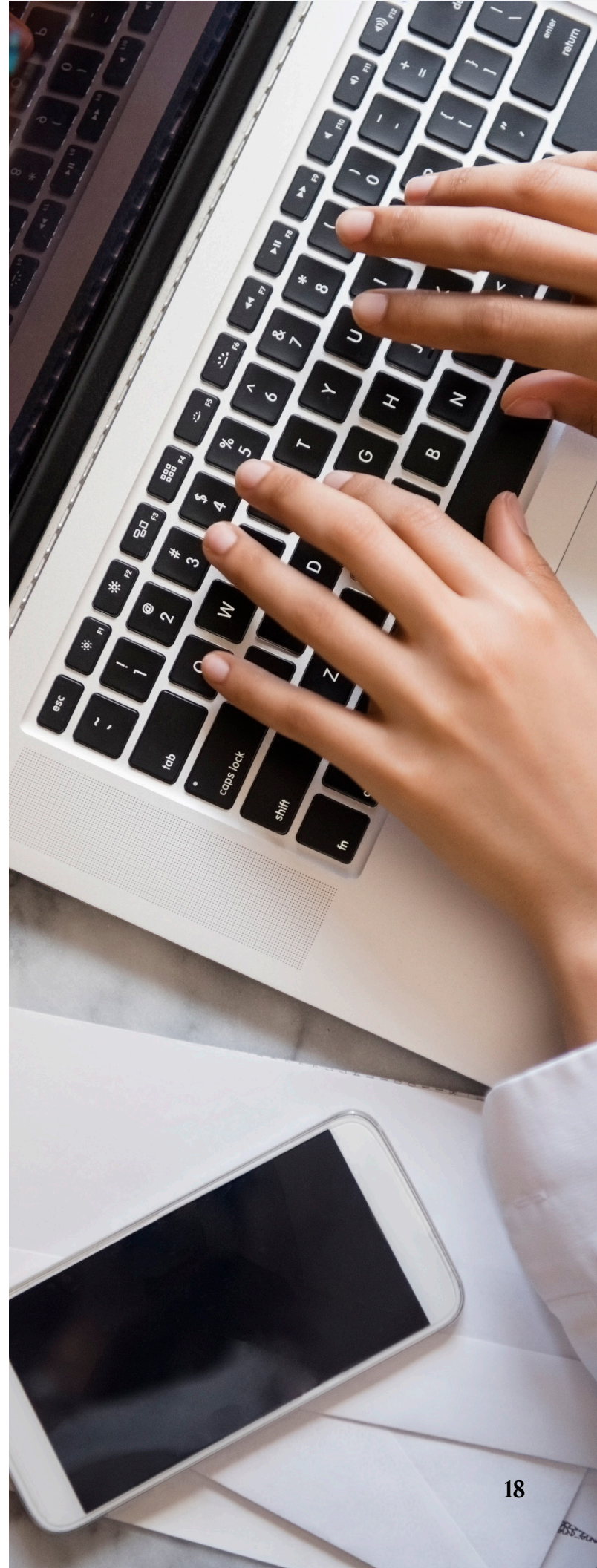
The Path Forward for Online Course Success

As we look towards the future of higher education, the landscape of online course design is both dynamic and full of potential. The evolution of the student profile over the past 50 years has brought about a diverse and technologically adept learner population, necessitating innovative approaches to education. Despite the decline in traditional enrollments, the surge in online course participation underscores the growing demand for flexible, accessible learning options that cater to the needs of modern students.

The challenges of great course design are multifaceted, encompassing time constraints, resource limitations, and the diverse needs of students. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. By adopting a strategic approach to course design, educators can create engaging and effective online learning experiences. And by staying on top of themes like skills-based learning and generative AI, universities and colleges can continue to provide high-quality education that meets the evolving needs of their students.

No matter how you decide to approach it, keeping learners in mind is key.

“We think a lot about the elements of a good course. What we don’t think as much about is being intentional around the student experience,” MacLeod said. “I think putting ourselves in the student’s shoes and trying to understand what they’re coming in with and what they need is a really great lens to develop content from. And more than what they need, it’s about what will engage their curiosity and their attention because that’s what will serve them best.”





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