Online Learning: What Today’s Students Want — and Expect

No question about it: Online learning is here to stay — and, for many students, it’s becoming the education modality of choice. That’s due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced millions of educational institutions worldwide to move classes online in 2020 and 2021. In fact, according to our recent Student Wave Survey, 71% of current students want to continue with at least some form of online learning, even post pandemic, when the COVID-19 vaccines will be available to all¹.

That interest extends to future college students as well, with 86% of prospective students surveyed indicating their openness to some form of online learning.

Those are among the key findings of the research conducted by Ipsos on behalf of Google. The survey collected responses from more than 2,700 current and prospective students nationwide. Respondents included those enrolled in or considering traditional college degree programs as well as non-degree options such as online short courses, boot camps, and certificate programs.

The findings add up to three key takeaways that higher education organizations must understand to remain competitive in the shift to online learning:

1. Educational brands and reputations matter more today than ever before.
2. Current and prospective students increasingly expect convenience and quality throughout their educational journeys, from initial enrollment to classroom engagement to job placement.
3. Demand for flexible online learning options, such as short courses and certificate programs, continues to expand, with strong interest in offerings that can ultimately be applied toward academic degrees.

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¹ Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Study, US, April and May 2021, n=1521 Current Students
Becoming a Household Name

According to the research, 74% of prospective students believe it’s “very” or “somewhat” important to enroll at institutions with strong national reputations — even in cases involving those short courses, certification programs, and “boot camps” in addition to traditional degree programs. In other words: Attracting students, at any level, requires becoming a household name.

So how can higher ed institutions stand out in a sea of sameness?

Quality is one clear factor. Many prospective students view reputation as synonymous with quality. For 38% of those we surveyed, quality of academics overall is a key reputational factor; for 21%, it’s the quality of online offerings in particular.

However, having high-quality academics — regardless of how they’re delivered — is largely seen as table stakes today, so it can be difficult to differentiate on that factor alone. Yet with the majority of students (74%) considering at least three schools, and a fifth of those (about 20%) choosing between five or more schools, any organization seeking to set itself apart from the pack must still burnish its own academic reputation.

Three areas where higher education organizations can start to distinguish themselves from their peers are:

1. Ensuring financial accessibility.
2. Having a specific value proposition — that is, something that a particular institution is known for and promotes with pride.
3. Offering strong career development and job placement resources.

In the Student Wave Survey, relatively small percentages of survey respondents cited those three factors as important (just 10%, 9%, and 8%, respectively). But researchers say that when extrapolated to the overall pool of more than 39 million prospective U.S. students, those percentages represent significant levels of demand, providing strong opportunities for organizations to differentiate themselves in one or more of those areas.

2. Source: Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Survey, US, January and July 2021, Prospective Students, n=672
3. Source: Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Survey, US, July 2021, Current Non-Degree/Short Course Students; n=386
4. Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Study, US, April and May 2021, n=352 Prospective Degree and Non-Degree Students
5. Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Study, US, April and May 2021, n=746 Prospective Degree and Non-Degree Students
Providing High-Quality Experiences at Every Touch Point

Higher education leaders have talked for years about the need to modernize student enrollment, but it’s increasingly important now for one major reason: Students overwhelmingly want to make that journey online. According to the survey, 73% of students prefer self-service online enrollment; another 17% would rather have online enrollment with assistance from chatbots⁶.

In other words: Students want to be able to register, apply, and enroll on higher ed websites without human assistance. But an anecdotal review of the landing pages on several major players’ websites indicates that most drive to lead forms requiring telephone calls to complete such transactions. That clunky approach clearly represents a disconnect from what students and prospects — who are already experienced online consumers — want and expect.

Meanwhile, many students believe that digital learning still needs improvement. Forty-eight percent of those surveyed say the experience feels fragmented⁷. Many cited other technical limitations to the online approach⁸, including their ability to:

- Converse with classmates (56%).
- Engage with instructors (42%).
- Understand their class progress and grades (30%).
- Easily access the class online (26%).

The good news: Technology can help address such barriers. Data integration and cloud infrastructures are two key tools that can help institutions create 360-degree views of their students, which, in turn, can help drive online course enrollments and increase retention.

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7. Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Study, US, April and May 2021, n=1521 Current Degree Students
Learning channels are expanding to create more access and affordability. We’re seeing growth in alternative paths like short courses, certificates, and boot camps, particularly online. This is an opportunity for schools to consider new avenues for growth and expanding their student bases.” — John Farrar, Industry Director, Higher Education at Google

Looking Ahead: Building Future-Oriented Learning Options

Student interest in new, flexible paths for degree completion has been heating up for the past decade. According to the survey, 59% of current and prospective degree students will consider enrolling in an online short course if it can be used for transfer credit or otherwise be applied toward a degree⁹. Meanwhile, students are still turning to university providers first for such options, indicating that, in the long run, academic degrees still matter.

Factors fueling those alternative pathways include greater employer acceptance and growing student opinion that such options provide a strong return on investment. Twenty-nine percent of students surveyed say short online courses open doors to new career and job opportunities, while 23% say such classes allow them to advance in their current roles. In addition, convenience matters here as well — 41% of students cite flexibility as the major reason for enrolling in such classes¹⁰.

For all those reasons, forward-thinking higher ed institutions have begun offering a variety of digital learning options designed to help students develop employment-ready skills and improve job placement.

Online Short Course Enrollment
59% of current and prospective degree students will consider enrolling in an online short course if it can be used for transfer credit or otherwise be applied toward a degree

Benefits of Alternative Pathways
29% of students surveyed say short online courses open doors to new career and job opportunities
23% say such classes allow them to advance in their current roles
41% of students cite flexibility as the major reason for enrolling in alternative pathway program

Google/Ipsos, Student Wave Study, US, April and May 2021, n=3001 Current and Prospective Students