

HGA



# REIMAGINING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN A HYBRID LANDSCAPE

Insights from HGA's 2020 Exploratory Study



# INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges and universities were facing formidable enrollment and financial challenges. There was grave concern about decreasing enrollment and an approaching “demographic cliff” in 2026, when a sharp decline in the number of traditional college-aged students in the U.S. would become a reality. Fewer students meant greater competition among institutions to attract and retain students, and further reductions in tuition revenue. For public universities, financial challenges have been exacerbated by long-declining funding from state governments. For some institutions, the traditional higher education business model could be unsustainable.

However, one potential bright spot to improving enrollment in higher education has been the consistent growth in online learning. An annual survey conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group found that by the end of 2016, online education enrollments had increased for the 14th straight year. Flexibility to attend class and complete work on one’s own schedule is the main advantage of online education, and the primary reason for consistent increases in online enrollment over the past decade. A growing number of higher education institutions have been considering how online learning could assist in overcoming enrollment and financial shortfalls. After the 2019-2020 school year, online learning has clearly become an important part of making higher education accessible, equitable, and affordable.

---

*This report aims to examine the role of accelerated online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, what higher education leaders have experienced and learned, and how this may impact online learning and the campus environment in the future.*

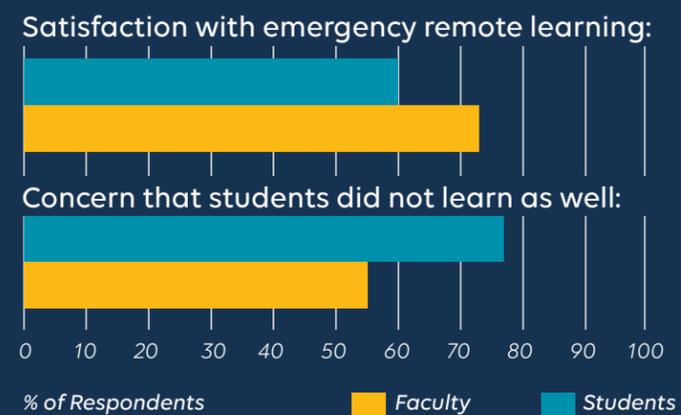
---

## Enter the COVID-19 pandemic.

When stay-at-home orders were instituted across the country in March of 2020, college students were sent packing. Most U.S. colleges and universities shifted overnight from in-person learning to emergency remote learning. Few higher education institutions were prepared for this major shift in instructional delivery and its consequences for learning.

Contrary to popular belief, emergency remote learning is not the same as online learning.

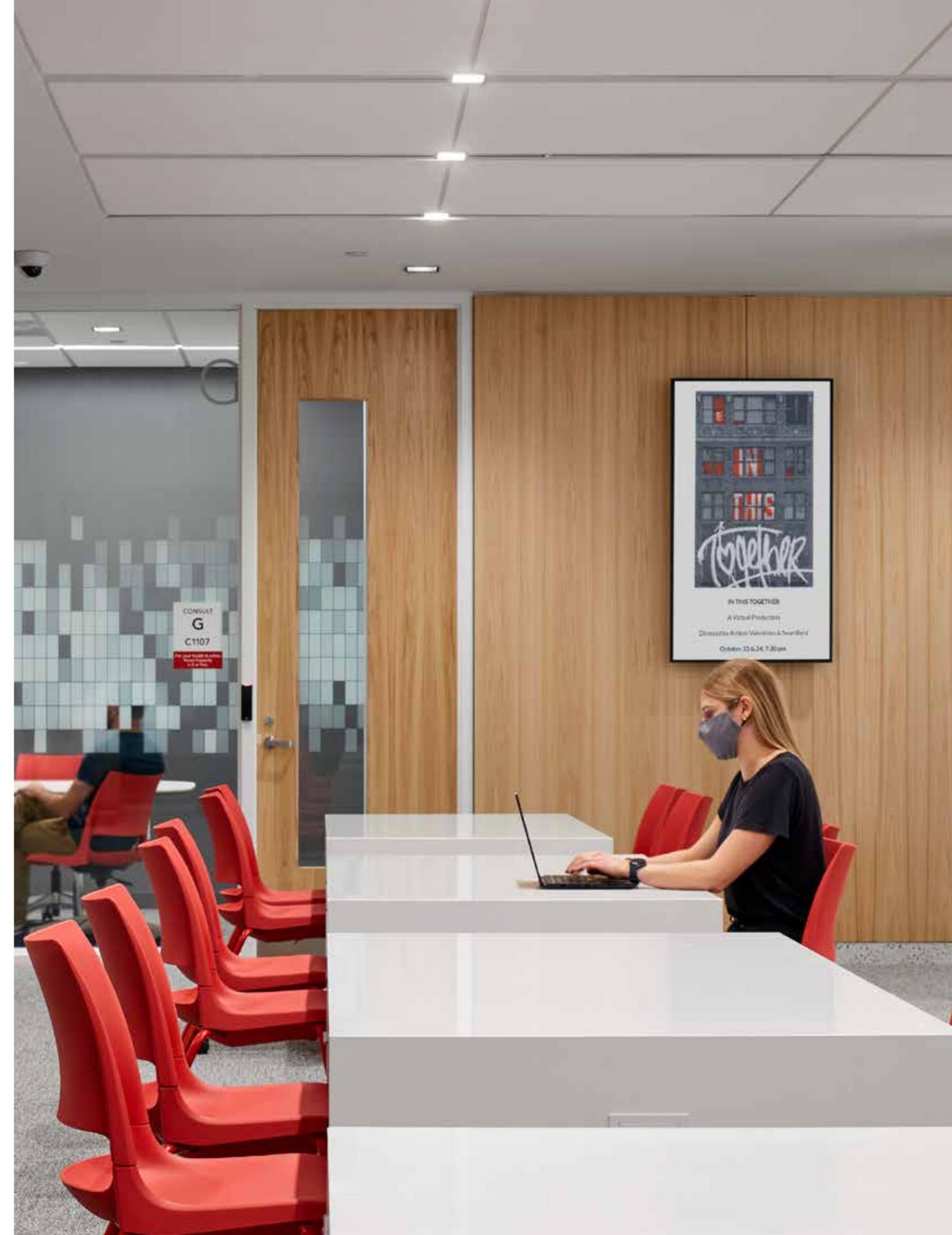
Comparing emergency remote learning in Spring 2020 to past terms, students and faculty expressed:



Source: Wiley Education Services, Pandemic Response Survey (Sept. 2020)

Moving into fall semester of 2020, higher education institutions had to clarify with students and parents that emergency remote learning provides temporary access to courses during a crisis whereas online learning is intentionally planned and designed to be delivered online from the start.

The pandemic has magnified and exacerbated several demographic trends in higher education and made clear the need to carefully define and measure different online learning approaches and related outcomes.



*Although HGA findings and secondary research suggest hybrid pedagogy could be a new norm, higher education institutions are tracking data and predictive analytics to assess its potential impact.*



**100%**

*of higher ed leaders interviewed in 2020 agreed that the campus now has a universally broader definition to offer more opportunities for learning.*

Source: HGA Exploratory Study and Survey of higher education Leaders (2020)



# DEFINITIONS

## EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING (ERL)



Emergency remote learning (ERL) involves a temporary shift away from face-to-face or hybrid instructional delivery to fully remote learning due to crisis circumstances (e.g., COVID-19). The primary goals of ERL are to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick and reliable during a crisis, and to return to face-to-face or hybrid instruction once the crisis has ended.

## ONLINE LEARNING



Online learning at post-secondary institutions typically refers to the delivery of all course content and student assessments via a web-based platform, as opposed to traditional courses presented face-to-face. Online learning is intentionally planned and designed to be delivered online from the start.

## HYBRID LEARNING



Hybrid learning combines face-to-face instruction with online course delivery. While hybrid learning requires the physical presence of faculty and students for certain activities, the online component enables student control over the timing, location, path, and pace of other activities.

# THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all sectors of the economy and higher education is no exception. As a result, college and university leaders are being forced to radically reshape their thinking and rewrite the book on pedagogical approaches and learning scenarios. To begin to understand these changes, HGA proactively partnered with five different higher education types ranging from community colleges to public universities to private four-year colleges.

5

HIGHER EDUCATION  
INSTITUTIONS

12

HGA DESIGNERS, PLANNERS  
& SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

12

CAMPUS FACILITY AND  
PEDAGOGY LEADERS

22

SECONDARY  
RESEARCH STUDIES

## WHAT WE DID



### INTERVIEWS

Between summer and fall of 2020, HGA conducted qualitative research via interviews with 12 education and campus facility leaders. The goal of this exploratory research was to understand how moving from emergency remote learning in the spring to online and hybrid learning in the fall impacted student and faculty experiences and the built environment. Virtual interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo®, a qualitative analysis software tool, to identify relationships and themes in the responses.



### SECONDARY RESEARCH

A literature search was conducted to understand the terms associated with online learning and changing adoption of online learning among higher education institutions before and during COVID-19. Additionally, case study examples of online learning best practices and innovations were documented. Interview data, in combination with secondary research, yielded several key insights, which are detailed in this report.



### DESIGN WORKSHOP

Key insights were presented to an interdisciplinary team of HGA researchers, designers, architects, planners, and social scientists in a design thinking workshop; design implications, solutions, and follow-up questions were generated to inform next steps.



### PARTICIPATORY FEEDBACK

In December 2020, HGA hosted two feedback workshops with institutions that were originally interviewed to refine and confirm preliminary findings and insights, and to determine if the insights were still relevant going into Q1 of 2021.

# DESIGNING FOR COMPLEXITY: BALANCING NEEDS

As the study results were analyzed, key insights focused on student and faculty experience began to emerge, including navigating online learning platforms, equity and access, and social connection. The study findings also clearly reflect the many complexities to implementing quality online learning and the need to balance competing needs during the process.

---

*This study revealed the key to reimagining the learning experience in a hybrid landscape starts with understanding the human experience.*

---

## EXPERIENCE INSIGHTS



### NAVIGATING PLATFORMS

A standard, single online platform provides consistency for student learning and experience, but limits faculty autonomy and identity.



### EQUITY IN LEARNING

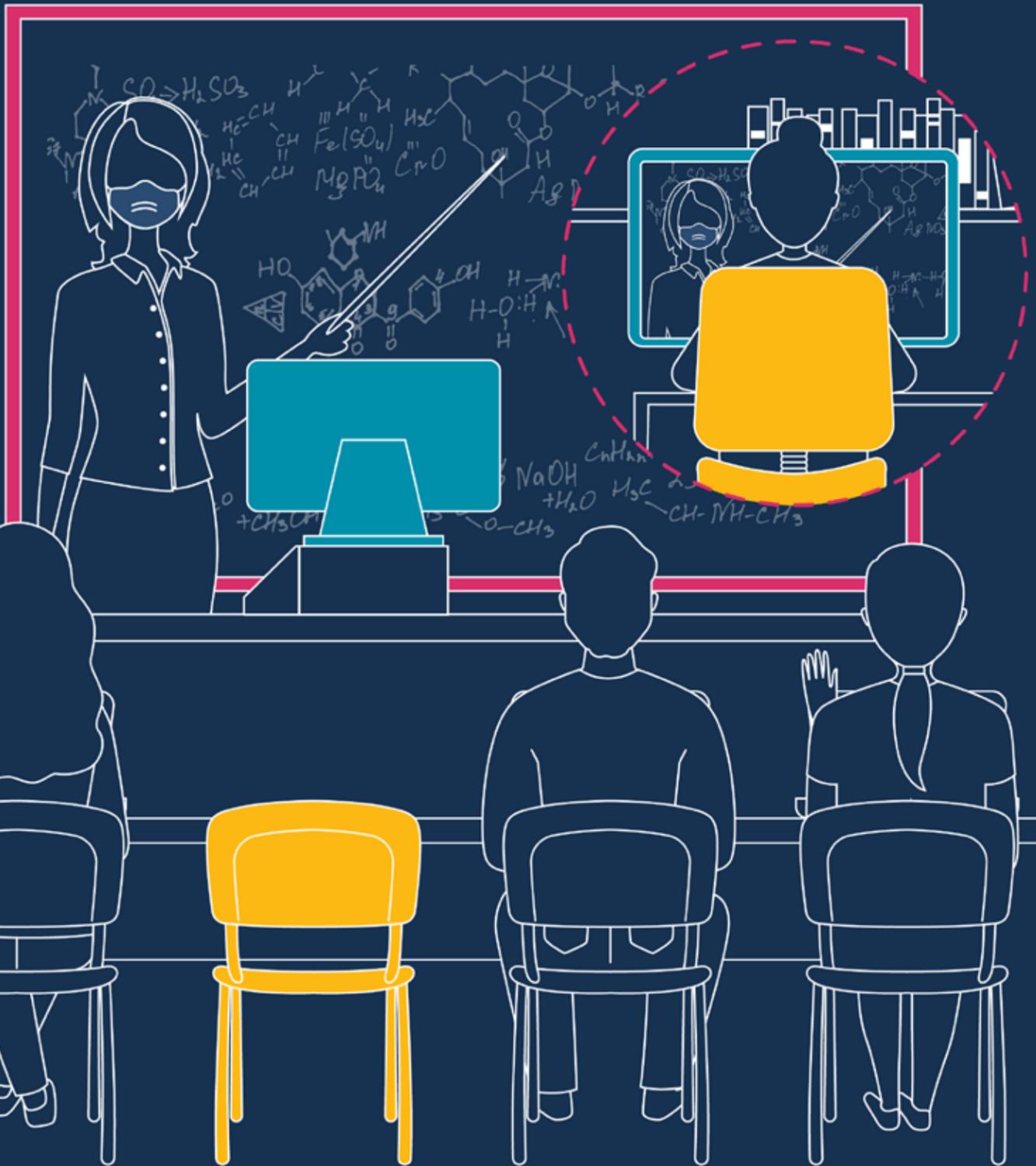
Online learning supports students who learn better through online courses. However, additional campus resources are needed to bridge inequities for those who are disadvantaged by online instructional delivery.



### SOCIAL CONNECTION

Online learning provides access to new educational opportunities, yet it limits social connection and a sense of belonging for both students and faculty.

# 1 NAVIGATING PLATFORMS



---

*A single, standard online platform provides consistency for student learning and experience, but limits faculty autonomy and identity.*

---

Higher education institutions are grappling with issues related to user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) in online learning. The goal of user interface design is to anticipate what people need to accomplish on a platform and to provide elements that make those actions easy to access and understand. User experience is focused on whether interactions with the platform are positive or negative.

While a single, standard online platform provides consistency for student learning and experience, it may restrict faculty to specific teaching tools and styles.

Faculty need the autonomy to use various platforms and applications (apps) to accommodate their curriculum and their in-classroom teaching style. Students, on the other hand, are experiencing “app fatigue” because there often is not a single, integrated platform for classes, grades, and other institutional information. Each new platform means another interface to learn and navigate.

Looking forward, it will be important to standardize platforms within institutions as many lecture-based courses that were offered online during spring emergency remote learning will likely remain online for the indefinite future. While faculty are struggling to project their teaching style and personality with online learning, a hybrid solution may help provide the balance between face-to-face and online course delivery many faculty are seeking.



**42%**  
*of higher education leaders acknowledged that certain students' grades increased during the pandemic as online learning supported their diverse learning styles.*

Source: HGA Exploratory Interview Research (2020)



# WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN FOR CAMPUSES?



## IDENTIFY ROBUST SUPPORT FOR FACULTY & STUDENTS

Both faculty and students rely on clear and consistent training and support for online platforms, troubleshooting, and content creation. Faculty should not be burdened with also being the help desk for students struggling with technology. Identify and develop dedicated areas on campus for integrated in-person and online tech support. Clearly communicate when and where students and faculty can go for help.



## SIMPLIFY ACCESS TO STUDENT SERVICES

The shift to online service delivery models presents an opportunity to simplify access to a variety of student services via an online, on-demand one-stop shop. The design of physical one-stop student service access points can recreate a seamless online experience by consolidating, simplifying, and centralizing access for students from all backgrounds, whether online or in-person.



## PRIORITIZE ONLINE INSTRUCTION STUDIO

Faculty would benefit from spaces and tools that help them project their teaching personality to online students. Investment in a studio production space with state-of-the-art lighting, audio, and video interfaces allow faculty to create dynamic course content similar to a "live" learning session. Instructors' body language and style are clearly communicated and line-of-sight can be maintained using these new online teaching tools.



# KEY QUESTIONS

TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING YOUR FUTURE CAMPUS

## *How might we (or how can we)...*

Research and understand what student and faculty will need for a seamless and successful online learning strategy?

Understand how our online learning platform can maximize student engagement while supporting faculty autonomy and diverse teaching styles?

Rethink student support services to match current customer expectations?

Create or improve, a program to support training and teaching our faculty and staff?

Support faculty attraction and retention through hybrid learning pedagogy?

Coordinate a community of diverse departments to solve problems and optimize online learning?

# 2 EQUITY IN LEARNING



---

*Online learning creates an equity juxtaposition between learning styles and learning environments.*

---

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions have had a crash course in integrating online learning and emergency remote learning across pedagogies while facilitating equitable access for diverse learning and lifestyles.

For some students, the transition to online learning is a good fit, providing a sense of control and choice. When done right, online learning strategies can support diverse student learning styles and improve access to educational opportunities. However, additional campus resources are needed to bridge inequities for those who are disadvantaged by online instructional delivery.



---

*Online learning creates flexibility and freedom for students; they appreciate being able to package their education experience themselves.*

---

However, some students may experience hardships when learning remotely due to technological barriers or stressful living situations. In-person learning on campus creates equitable places for students and faculty who otherwise do not have access to supportive learning and teaching environments.

---

*Not all students have home environments that support online learning.*

---



**57%**  
*of higher ed leaders shared their institution had to address inequality in students' access to a supportive learning environment*

Source: HGA Exploratory Interview Research (2020)



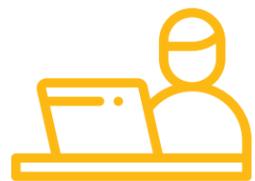
**20%**  
*of students had difficulty maintaining access to technology (broken hardware, connectivity problems, etc.). Students of lower socio-economic status and students of color disproportionately experienced hardships.*

Source: Gonzales, A., Calarco, J., Lynch T., Technology Problems and Student Achievement Gaps: A Validation and Extension of the Technology Maintenance Construct (August 2018).

Ultimately, online learning can create an equity juxtaposition between learning styles and learning environments.

A hybrid approach may help to balance the needs of different learners while providing a variety of environments on campus that support both online and in-person instruction.

# WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN FOR CAMPUSES?



## DIVERSIFY YOUR STUDY SPACE

Access to distraction-free, acoustically appropriate, heads-down focus spaces on campus becomes increasingly important with hybrid and online courses. Provide a variety of spaces that accommodate students' unique needs for collaborating, studying, making, and learning.



## EXPLORE FLEXIBLE AND MULTIMODAL CLASSROOMS

Hybrid learning offers opportunities to cater content to learners of all styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Multimodal classrooms help support various learning styles by offering a variety of settings in which to teach and learn. Focus on learning environments that allow learners to move between these various forms of learning.



## FOCUS ON THE LIVE-LEARN CAMPUS EXPERIENCE

As lines blur between where and how students learn, residential housing can become an extension of the on-campus learning environment. Consider integrating additional learning spaces into residential facilities to foster a more seamless transition from living to learning.



# KEY QUESTIONS

TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING YOUR FUTURE CAMPUS

## *How might we (or how can we)...*

Measure equity in student learning during the pandemic?

Better understand what supports and hinders diverse learning styles in both in-person and online instruction?

Better accommodate different learning styles and what could we do better?

Design an equitable workplace experience for staff and faculty working on campus or remotely?

# 3 SOCIAL CONNECTION



---

*Online learning provides access to new educational opportunities yet limits connection and a sense of belonging for both students and faculty.*

---

Since experiencing the pandemic, higher education institutions and students alike are more aware than ever of the social value of the physical campus environment. For students, the campus environment fosters a sense of belonging, connection, and community with other students. Social connectivity with faculty helps students to build and navigate future career networks. For faculty, opportunities to promote and participate in students' success are central to job satisfaction.

---

*As faculty struggle to recreate their teaching personalities in an online environment, they feel less connected to their students' learning success, which is typically a great source of joy for educators.*

---

Additionally, teaching online removes opportunities for serendipitous encounters between faculty and students, resulting in a further loss of social connection.

Hybrid learning models can provide a balance between the flexibility of online learning and the social connectivity of in-person learning. However, the physical campus environment will need to change to simultaneously support both instructional models.



**42%**  
*of higher ed leaders expressed that lack of connectedness and sense of belonging with online learning was problematic for both students and faculty*

Source: HGA Exploratory Interview Research (2020)



**100%**  
*of surveyed institutions shared that faculty is struggling to project their personality and teaching style in an online environment*

Source: EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research, Study of Faculty and Information Technology (2017)

# WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN FOR CAMPUSES?



## LEVERAGE THE CAMPUS ECOSYSTEM AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL

Student experience is based on interconnections between people and places on campus. Social connections also happen on the pathways to and from the buildings. Consider how each place—from the library to the gym to the cafeteria—serves to build social connections that complement the learning experience.



## TAKE CLUES FROM CO-WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

Online learners still seek in-person collaboration and connection. Institutions could offer satellite spaces that provide an opportunity for online learners to come together to share ideas, resources, and strengthen learning outcomes within their community.



## DESIGN FOR RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

Look for existing hot spots on campus that offer clues about where and how social capital is being built. Identify opportunities for interaction between faculty, staff, and students by studying circulation patterns and understanding why interaction happens where it does. Intentionally recreate these conditions in new and renovated spaces.



# KEY QUESTIONS

TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING YOUR FUTURE CAMPUS

## *How might we (or how can we)...*

Strengthen faculty and student relationships in a hybrid and/or all online learning environment?

Measure the social value of the on-campus experience?

Rethink our value proposition for on-campus learning?

Support various learning models in our campus space?

Research and understand how and where students are learning in a hybrid model on our campus?

Repurpose space for additional revenue to support new business models?

# CONTRIBUTORS

Rebecca Celis, AIA  
Principal

Cristianne Peschard, AIA  
Project Manager

Adaheid Mestad, M.A.  
Design Anthropologist

Kara Freihofer, PH.D., NCIDQ, EDAC, LEED AP  
Director of Research

Lou Ann Bunker-Hellmich, PH.D., EDAC  
Design Researcher

Naz Bilgic  
Research Support

Teri Firkins, Jullianne Medrano  
Graphic Design

# IMPACTS ARE EVOLVING

While there is much discussion suggesting that hybrid pedagogy—a combination of online and in-person learning—will most likely become the “new normal” at many higher education institutions, leaders are tracking data and predictive analytics to assess potential impacts and feasibility. The “best” future of hybrid learning will look different from institution to institution. Creating the best future for students and faculty will not mean immediately having all the answers but instead asking compelling human-centered questions to navigate the complexities of reimagining higher education campuses.

The rapid rise of online and hybrid learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact on the campus experience continues to shift. There will certainly be more to learn and report as COVID-19 vaccines are deployed and the world returns to more in-person learning.

Given this, HGA is continuing to conduct research and share findings, encouraging higher education institutions to take a human-centered, experience design approach in considering the following questions:

1. Are student and faculty experience metrics included in campus planning?
2. How are student and faculty experience being measured?
3. Are experience and engagement data used in strategic planning?

To learn more about HGA's on-going research or questions, please contact:

**REBECCA CELIS**  
RCelis@hga.com

**ADAHEID MESTAD**  
AMestad@hga.com