The Online Program Experience: Exploring Student Experiences and Staff Perceptions

Summary of Findings from an InsideTrack-UPCEA Survey

Written by Jim Fong and Dave Jarrat

Overview

According to the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, over a third of higher education students were enrolled in at least one online course during the 2017 fall semester. Since 2017, online program enrollments have continued to grow as overall higher education enrollment has declined. Institutions across the country are rapidly expanding existing online offerings and launching new programs to meet the growing demand. This trend may accelerate as colleges and universities adjust to student preferences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and welcome more Gen Z high school graduates with a greater affinity for online learning.

As online learning goes mainstream, institutional leaders are grappling with how best to evolve their student support functions to be more inclusive of online students. To provide effective support, they must first understand the needs and preferences of these students, and assess how aligned the current perceptions of student facing staff are with these realities.

To provide new data and insights into how best to support online students, UPCEA's Center for Research and Strategy partnered with InsideTrack to survey 5,771 students and 496 staff members from 25 public and private institutions to gather information about online students' challenges and perceptions of the support services at their institutions, as well as staff member's perceptions of the needs of their online learners.

This data was collected from September to December of 2019 and reflects the views of students and staff involved in programs intentionally designed for online delivery, versus those forced to move online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As institutions look ahead to a future, where online learning becomes part of most students' higher education experiences, it is more important than ever that institutions understand what factors contribute to student satisfaction and success in online programs.

For more on the importance of making student support inclusive of online learners, see "Future Proof: Student Affairs for Modern Learners", a white paper publication commissioned by InsideTrack, UPCEA, and NASPA.

SURVEYED

5,771 Students
496 Staff

FROM 25 PUBLIC
AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Key Findings

STUDENT SATISFACTION IN ONLINE PROGRAMS IS HIGH

Only 4% of online students said that they were not very or not at all satisfied with their online program, with 74% saying they were very or extremely satisfied. Students who chose their program based on faculty or student services quality were most likely to be extremely satisfied at 40% each. Students who chose their program based on location or affordability were least likely to be extremely satisfied at 23% and 27%, respectively. 34% of students attending online programs at private institutions were extremely satisfied versus 24% of those at public institutions.

CONNECTING TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR NEW ONLINE STUDENTS

51% of student respondents said that connecting to their institution's community was a somewhat or very difficult aspect of beginning their online program. This compares to 46% for financial aid, 28% for technology, 28% for choosing courses and 25% for course registration.

TIME MANAGEMENT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE TOWARD COMPLETION

90% of student respondents cited time management as a key challenge to online program completion, with 52% citing it as their single biggest challenge. When asked about the quality of support they received in this area, only 28% rated their institution as very supportive.

ONLINE STUDENTS AND STAFF HAVE DIFFERING VIEWS ON WHAT CAREER SERVICES SHOULD FOCUS ON

48% of student respondents cited support with career exploration as their top priority for using career services, more than double the 23% who said applying for jobs and 19% who said changing jobs, and more than four times the 10% who said finding internships. 38% of staff respondents also prioritized career exploration, but applying for jobs was close behind at 34%, with changing jobs and findings internships coming in at 21% and 7%, respectively.
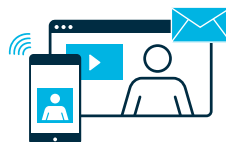
ONLINE STUDENTS FIND ALL MODALITIES OF COMMUNICATION USEFUL

When asked about which communication modalities they found useful for engaging with staff, all six modalities presented — emails, on-demand digital resources, video/virtual meetings, phone calls, in-person meetings and text messages — received favorable ratings from at least 80% of student respondents.

ONLINE STUDENTS AND STAFF HAVE DIFFERING VIEWS ON WHAT CAREER SERVICES SHOULD FOCUS ON

STUDENTS

- 10%
- 19%
- 48%
- 23%

STAFF

- 7%
- 21%
- 38%
- 34%
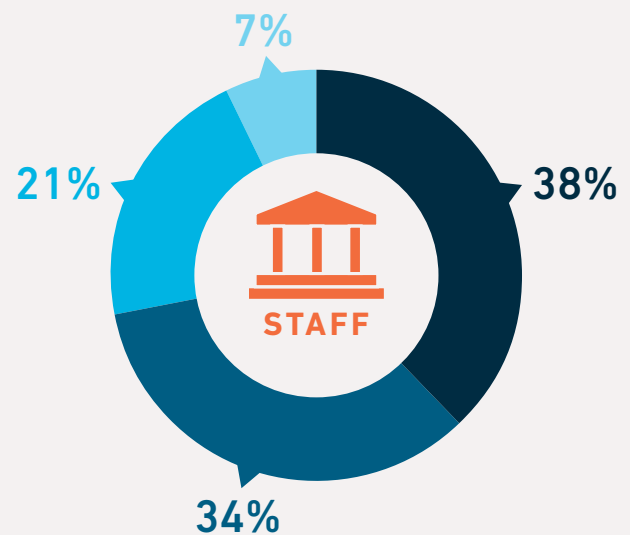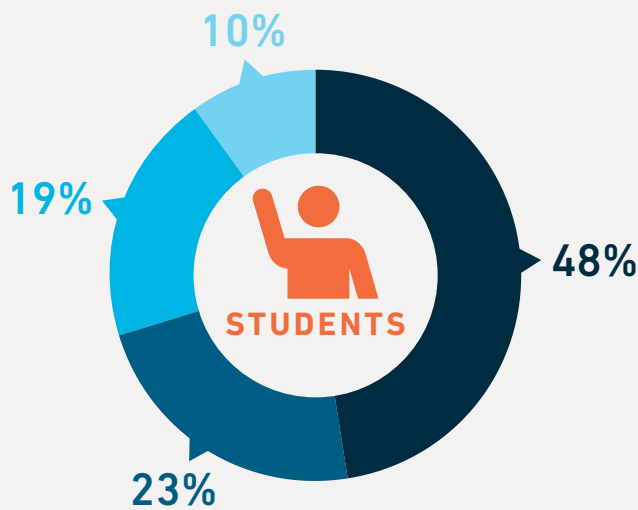
● CAREER EXPLORATION   ● CHANGING JOBS

● APPLYING FOR JOBS   ● FINDING INTERNSHIPS

Takeaways

While there is much analysis yet to be done and additional data collection needed, here are a few simple takeaways from the findings:

+ Demand for online programs is growing and students find them satisfying, even more so when institutions invest in high quality instruction and student support.

+ Getting students connected to the school community should be a primary focus of the enrollment process.

+ Supporting students in developing their time management skills and eliminating time-wasting process and requirements should be a primary focus of student-facing staff.

+ Career services should have more emphasis on career exploration and less on job placement.

+ Staff supporting online students must be versatile in all modalities of communication.

Methodology

+ In collaboration with InsideTrack, UPCEA's Center for Research and Strategy launched two parallel surveys in September 2019 to gather information about online students' perceptions about the support services of their institutions and institutions' perceptions about the needs of their online students. Data was collected from September to December 2019.

+ Students and staff were asked the same questions on the same topics. Specifically, they were asked for each topic to share their opinion of the biggest priority, the biggest challenge and the quality of current support.

+ In total, 5,771 students and 496 staff from 25 institutions responded to the survey request.

+ For the staff survey, institutions were asked to select any staff member tasked with providing support services for online students such as academic advisers, online support specialists, enrollment management, registrars and administrators within colleges of online and continuing education.

+ For the student survey, students from any discipline or program level had to be enrolled at a college or university and in a program that was at least 50% online. Students in programs that were mostly or completely on-campus were excluded.

+ InsideTrack and UPCEA intend to expand the survey to additional institutions in fall 2020.

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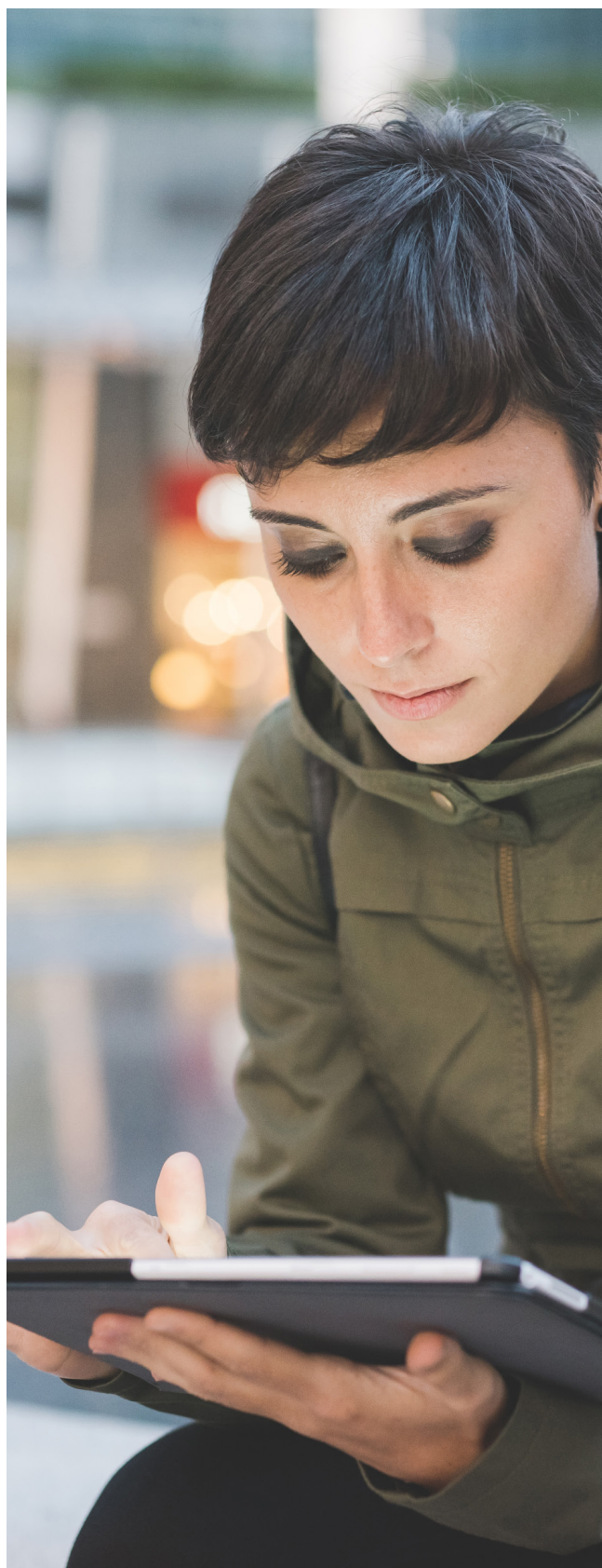
About Jim Fong

Jim Fong is the Chief Research Officer for the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and founding director of the UPCEA Center for Research and Strategy. Prior to joining UPCEA, Jim was the Director of Marketing, Research and Planning for Penn State University Outreach where he helped with the launch of the University's World Campus. He also teaches marketing strategy in Framingham State University's MBA program.

About Dave Jarrat

Dave Jarrat is a member of the leadership team at InsideTrack, where he directs research, marketing and industry relations activities. He's authored numerous papers on issues related to student success and higher education trends, and has appeared in popular media outlets including *NBC News, US News, the Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed.*

About InsideTrack

InsideTrack is passionate about student success. We partner with institutions and organizations to improve enrollment, persistence, completion and career readiness. Our student support methodology uncovers first hand feedback about student goals and challenges. Through strategic guidance, staff training and student coaching, we help institutions turn this feedback into actionable insights that drive better student outcomes. As a nonprofit member of the Strada Education Network, we offer partners access to a comprehensive range of student success solutions as well as the latest research and insights on student success. We've supported more than 2 million students since 2001 and currently serve over 4,000 programs. Join us and the leading institutions, foundations, and others working to bring the transformative power of education to all individuals. Visit us at www.insidetrack.org and follow us on Twitter @InsideTrack.

About UPCEA

UPCEA is the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. Founded in 1915, UPCEA now serves the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. The association supports its members with innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities, and timely publications. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA builds greater awareness of the vital link between adult learners and public policy issues. Learn more at www.upcea.edu.

Special thanks

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