

Top Hat Field Report

COVID-19 Faculty Preparedness

Fall 2020 Edition



TOP HAT

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Preparing for a historic semester

The upheaval that defined the spring 2020 term forever changed the world of higher education. Almost overnight, thousands of instructors across North America were forced to pivot to emergency online teaching. Faculty demonstrated incredible resilience in the face of daunting challenges. While the response was far from perfect, it did achieve its primary goal: ensuring a successful conclusion to the semester.

Now, on the cusp of the fall 2020 academic term, higher education faces a test like no other. Having had more time to prepare, will institutions be able to deliver on students' increased expectations? With so much emphasis on learning online, have the right investments been made in technology, training and instructional design? Have faculty been equipped to feel confident in delivering engaging courses that are both rewarding and motivating to students? Critically important, have instructors been enabled to cultivate the sense of community and connection that is so important to a student's overall college experience?

These are the questions we set out to answer in our survey of more than 800 college and university educators. Although some instructors express quiet optimism in their campus' plans for fall 2020, the effort has been met with mixed results. Many are dissatisfied with the level of clarity and support provided by their institutions. Perhaps more troubling, almost half lack confidence that students will see value in their higher ed investment or find success in adapting to the new teaching modalities on offer this fall.

The importance of technology, community and accessibility

Faculty also express concerns about their ability to motivate students and provide an engaging 'in-class' experience. Instructor training has touched on the principles of online teaching and faculty have invested considerable time on both formal and self-paced training. But when it comes to having effective digital teaching tools in place, the picture is less reassuring. The lack of a technology mandate and standardization on the part of most institutions risks a repeat of the spring when faculty were forced to cobble together whatever was available in order to deliver their courses remotely.

Relying on patchwork solutions this fall will make it difficult to deliver an engaging, connected and human learning experience, which is exactly what students are banking on. Paying full freight to passively consume lectures delivered through video conference is not the vision most have in mind for their college experience. Without the means to make students active participants inside and outside the classroom, institutions may miss a critical opportunity to ensure the learning process is one of connection, collaboration and discovery.

Quality learning is only one, albeit important, ingredient. The success of every student is also determined in large part by the sense of community they share with the people who fill a classroom—virtual or otherwise. Although faculty express confidence in their ability to build connections with students, they are much less upbeat when it comes to enabling students to stay connected with one another. The notable lack of training and tools needed to support collaboration and interaction among students runs the risk of leaving them feeling

just as isolated and disconnected as they did in the spring.

As computer and Internet access become inseparable from learning this fall, student equity has emerged as another potential stumbling block. Many respondents have taken proactive steps to mitigate these issues, but given how much has been asked of faculty, many more have not. Without computer and Internet access—something we often take for granted—along with other critical campus resources, vulnerable students may be left behind.

Reasons for optimism

While uncertainty and concern abound, there are signs of positive momentum. What's especially encouraging is rather than simply shifting what they did in the physical classroom to an online environment, respondents are rethinking the way they teach. For the majority, pedagogies strongly associated with improved student engagement and learning outcomes have, to a large extent, served as the backbone to the training they have received. Understanding how students learn, and when to use synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods are important building blocks. Sustaining investments in this area will pay dividends, not just for the fall semester, but in improving the overall quality of teaching for years to come.

The challenges are sobering. But as respondents have made clear, concern for the student experience has been a powerful motivator. It has spurred a monumental effort as faculty and institutions prepare for yet another historic semester. In reviewing the data and comments, the commitment to student success and delivering meaningful learning experiences is almost palpable. Although a great deal of uncertainty remains, one thing is clear: the months ahead will no doubt shape the role of online teaching in higher education for years to come.

About the Research

Survey responses were collected by Top Hat from 808 higher education faculty and instructional support staff in the United States and Canada from July 13 to 19, 2020. Demographic breakdowns are as follows:

Institution type

4-year public: 45 percent

4-year private: 30 percent

2-year public: 25 percent

Country

United States: 86 percent

Canada: 6 percent

Other: 8 percent

Primary role

Tenured faculty: 35 percent

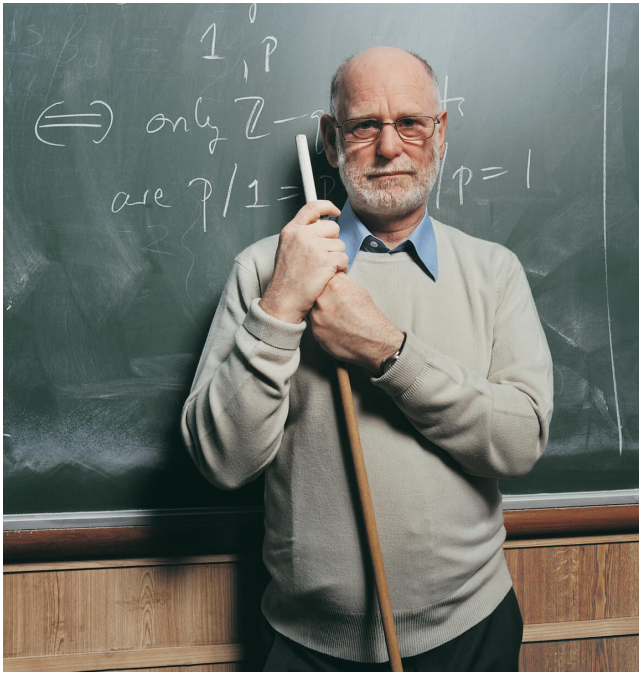
Adjunct or lecturer faculty: 31 percent

Tenure track faculty: 16 percent

Instructional designer/academic technologist: 2 percent

Faculty development staff: 2 percent

Other: 14 percent



Section 1

Planning amidst uncertainty

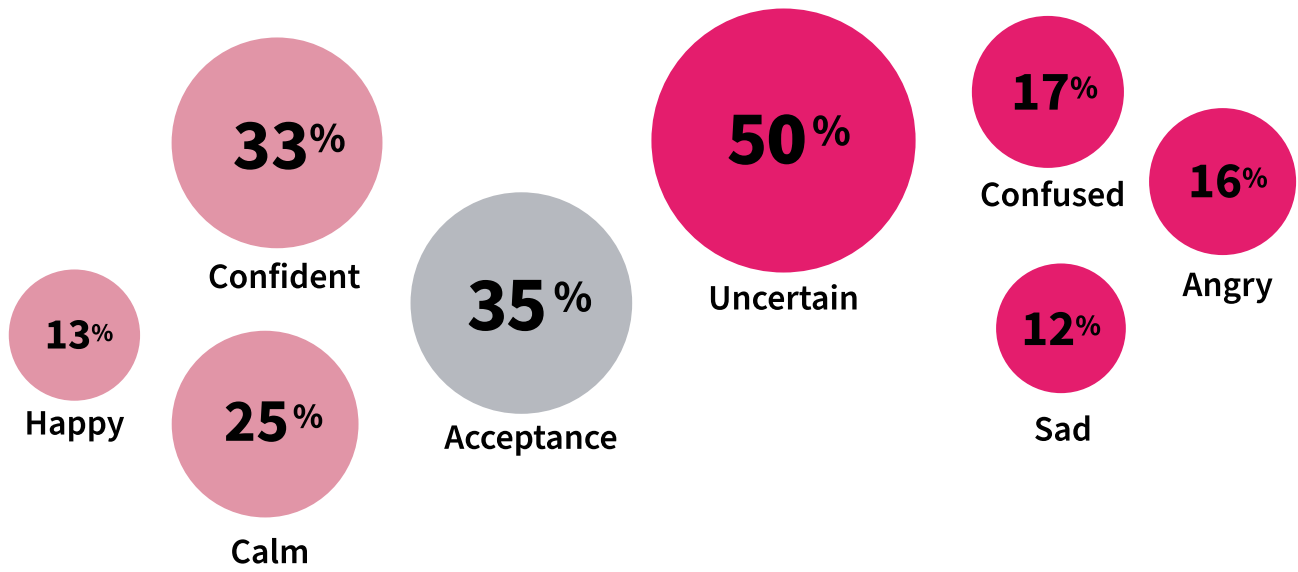
It wasn't long ago that many institutions were cautiously optimistic about a return to the campus classroom. But with COVID-19 cases spiking, plans for the fall have continued to evolve. Adopting a 'wait-and-see' approach, a small number of institutions have held off from announcing plans altogether. This, along with the very real possibility of schools closing shortly after reopening has left many faculty members in a state of flux, preparing as best they can for new teaching modalities amid ongoing uncertainty.

Confused, angry, confident—the emotional rollercoaster continues

Most faculty have spent the past few months preparing for the fall against a backdrop of institutional belt tightening, including layoffs, pay cuts and benefit reductions at many schools. Under the shadow of COVID-19, health and safety are top of mind, with one respondent noting, "it would be foolish and dangerous" to return to the classroom as the pandemic continues.

While these issues have left many respondents feeling uncertain, confused, angry and sad, those who feel their institutions have been more decisive and took steps to prepare early tell a different story. For these individuals, there is the sense of calm acceptance and even confidence as faculty and institutions make a monumental effort to gear up to teach online.

As you look toward the fall academic term, which of these words best characterize how you feel right now? Select all that apply.



What teaching will look like in fall 2020

Despite earlier hopes for a return to the classroom, only a small percentage (11 percent) of respondents plan to teach in person. Twenty-seven (27) percent plan to teach entirely online, with 37 percent planning to use hybrid approaches, combining in-person and online teaching to engage students. Hyflex, which has spurred much debate in academic circles, is one of the least likely approaches (7 percent) to be used this fall. With the start of the academic year just around the corner, 4 percent of respondents indicated their school had still not announced how they would be accommodating students.

Which of the following best describes your school's planned approach to teaching students for the fall academic term?

3%

primarily in person

8%

primarily in person, using a modified calendar (e.g. shifted dates, shorter length)

27%

primarily online

30%

hybrid (some combination of in-person and online, determined by the campus)

7%

hybrid (some combination of in-person and online, determined by the instructor)

7%

HyFlex (students choose to attend in person, remotely or asynchronously)

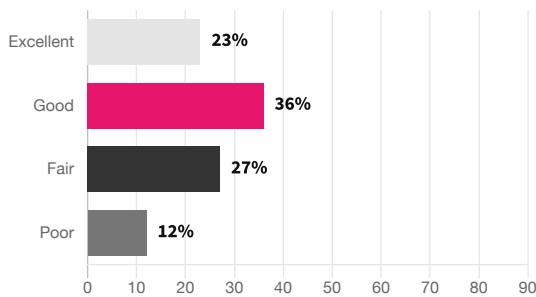
4%

school has not announced plans yet

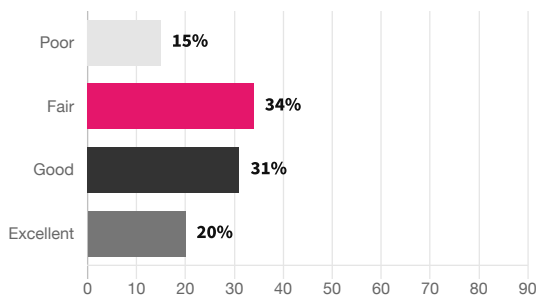
Institutions scrape by with a passing grade on fall 2020 planning

Overall, the majority respondents have reacted favorably to the clarity provided with respect to their school's plans for the coming semester (59 percent). Many have applauded a 'we're in this together' attitude, commenting that faculty and staff have worked together to make the fall transition easier for students. Yet, when it comes to providing clear direction about how to prepare for the coming term, 49 percent of respondents are not quite so charitable. A lack of clear direction has weighed on many while others remain deeply concerned about the risk to students and staff posed by teaching during a pandemic.

How would you rate the level of clarity your school has provided regarding its plans for teaching students in the fall academic term?



How would you rate the clarity of direction the school has provided to faculty about how to prepare for the fall academic term?

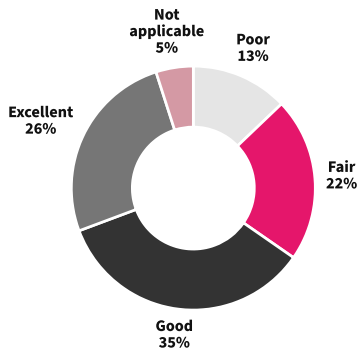


The COVID-19 risk factor looms

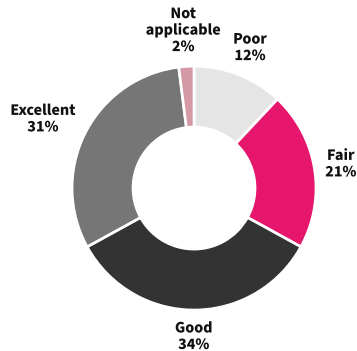
Regarding the risks of COVID-19, the majority of respondents feel well supported—65 percent said their institutions were taking health and safety seriously, while 61 percent admitted their schools were accommodating their personal needs. Listening to employees and partnering with local health authorities to develop policies and procedures has helped assuage concerns for many. Yet roughly one third feel their schools have done a fair or poor job in these areas. Adding to this, juggling caregiving (20 percent) and maintaining a good state of mental (45 percent) and physical health (40 percent) are top concerns.

How would you rate your school with regards to planning for the following?

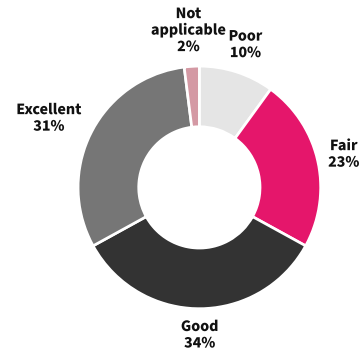
Working to accommodate your personal needs for the fall academic term



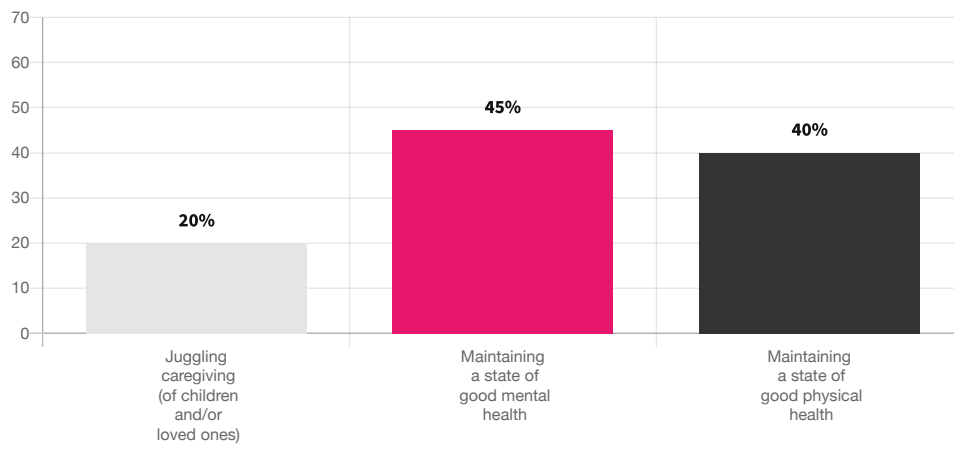
Ensuring the physical health and safety of faculty for the fall academic term



Ensuring the physical health and safety of students for the fall academic term



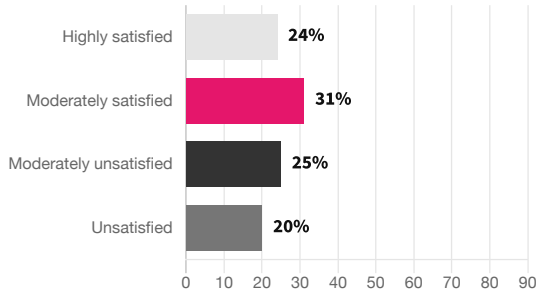
What are your biggest concerns about the expected modality in the fall (in person, online, hybrid, HyFlex) as it relates to your ability to teach effectively?



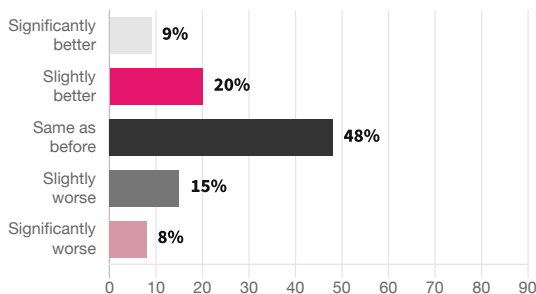
Not all institutions rising to the challenge

A slight majority of respondents are moderately or highly satisfied with their school's plans for the coming semester (55 percent). For these individuals, staff training and support, clear, decisive action and embracing approaches that demonstrate care for students and faculty have played a role in winning hearts and minds. However, for almost one quarter of respondents (23 percent), the perception of their school has become worse as the crisis has unfolded. Concern for at-risk students, and, as several respondents noted, basing decisions on financial considerations as opposed to human needs have contributed to the negative view.

How satisfied are you with your school's stated plans for the fall?



Has your opinion of your school changed during this crisis?





Section 2

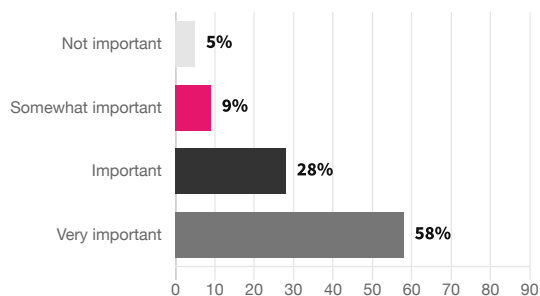
The importance and challenge of creating community

The success of every student is closely tied to the sense of connection they feel with their peers and professors. But with so much uncertainty surrounding the fall semester, and institutions shifting to online and blended learning formats, having the tools to create meaningful connections, humanize the learning experience and build community inside and outside the virtual or physical classroom is more important than ever.

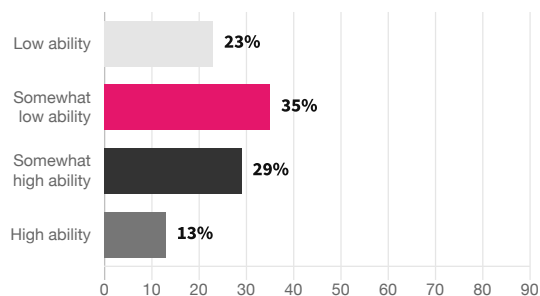
Humanizing the learning experience

Generally speaking, respondents have a favorable view of their ability to stay connected with their students, a sentiment echoed by students in our spring 2020 student survey. However, faculty are much less confident in the ability of their students to stay connected with one another. Absent tools designed to support collaboration and interaction between students, this may jeopardize efforts to create a sense of community inside and outside the 'classroom.'

How important is fostering a sense of community amongst students in your classes?



How would you rate your students' ability to stay connected with fellow classmates?



When it comes to building community, there's work to be done

During the rush to emergency remote teaching in the spring, instructors employed a number of strategies to support—and stay connected with—students. These efforts emphasized increasing the frequency and depth of academic interactions (49 and 31 percent, respectively), and using video messages to humanize the learning experience (46 percent).

Yet students also want to connect with peers and this looks to have been a much smaller area of focus for faculty, with only 17 percent of respondents putting energy into creating a non-academic social community, encouraging students to exchange video messages (10 percent) or creating optional social media groups for their classes (7 percent).

If you taught in the last academic term, what strategies did you use to stay connected with students online? Select all that apply.

49%

increased frequency of academic interactions

31%

increased the depth of academic interactions

46%

created video messages to humanize their online/remote course environment

10%

encouraged students to exchange video messages (eg FlipGrid)

17%

created a non-academic/social community in each course environment

10%

created an opt-in text message group for each class

7%

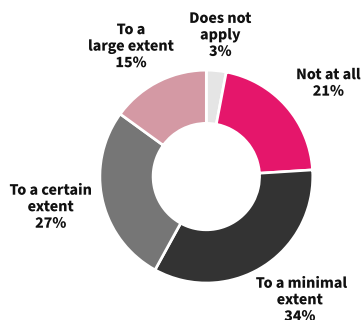
created an optional social media group for each class

The ‘talk’ on student connection and community doesn’t match the walk’

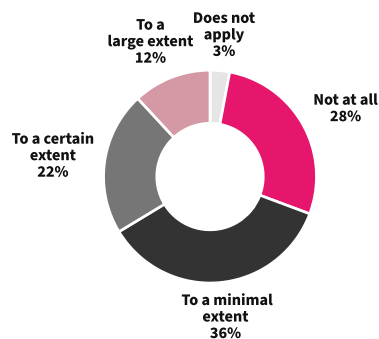
Given the importance of building community in the classroom, it is noteworthy that the majority of faculty said they have received little-to-no institutional support on how to do this well. Only 42 percent of respondents said the support they have received focused on building connections between themselves and their students while roughly one third (34 percent) indicated that learning how to build connections among students was a significant focus. With the dropout rate for students enrolled in online courses is anywhere from 10 to 20 percent higher than traditional courses ¹, this area may not be receiving the attention it deserves.

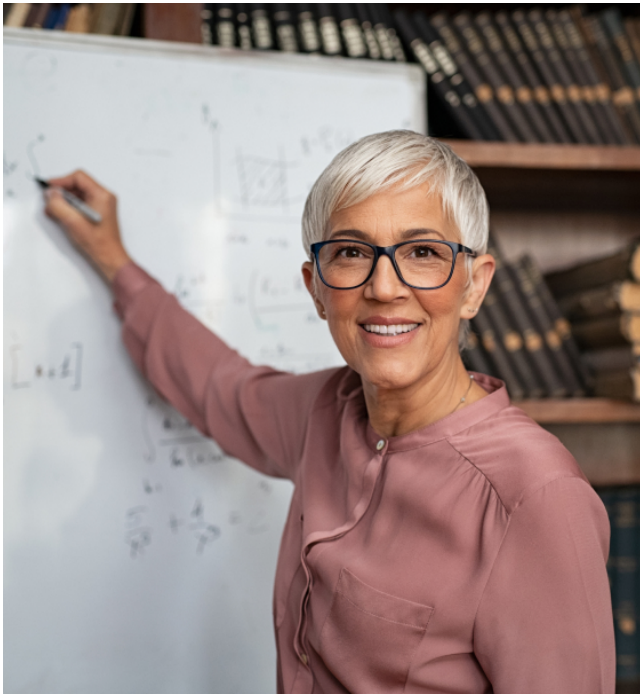
To what extent have the following comprised support you’ve been provided to teach effectively?

Learning how to build connections between you and your students



Learning how to build connections among students





Section 3

Forced online, faculty rethink the way they teach

Perhaps the largest challenge confronting instructors in the spring scramble to online teaching was keeping students engaged in the learning process. A return to the 'sage-on-the-stage' model of lecturing, this time through a video stream, left many students feeling disconnected and less motivated to complete their coursework². These concerns have not gone away. But there are encouraging signs as instructors embrace pedagogies like active learning that put engagement and learning outcomes at the heart of the student experience.

Student engagement is a common concern

The vast majority of respondents (81 percent) express concerns about ensuring students stay motivated and engaged before, during and after class. Fifty-eight (58) percent are worried about creating an engaging in-class experience while 49 percent are concerned about providing students with opportunities for experiential or hands-on learning. A slight majority (54 percent) are worried that the chosen teaching modality may not meet the needs of at-risk students, who may fail or drop out altogether.

What are your biggest concerns about the expected modality in the fall (in person, online, hybrid, HyFlex) as it relates to your ability to teach effectively? Select all that apply.

81%

Ensuring students stay motivated and engaged before, during and after class

49%

Providing opportunities for experiential or hands-on learning

58%

Providing an engaging in-class experience

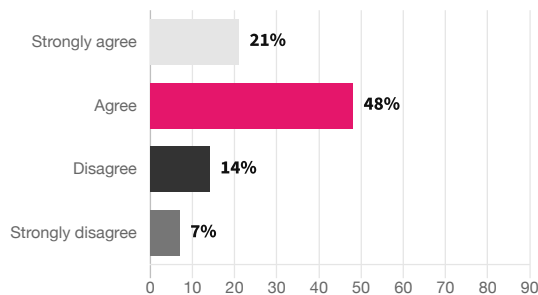
54%

Meeting the needs of students who are at risk of dropping or failing courses based on course-delivery format

Active learning moves to the fore

A majority (68 percent) of faculty agree that the training they have received aligns to pedagogies strongly associated with improved student engagement and learning outcomes. This bodes well for delivering on the increased expectations students have relative to the emergency shift to remote teaching that took place in the spring. Active learning in particular promotes deep understanding, critical thinking and subject mastery through collaboration and by challenging individuals to apply what they are learning.

Do you agree that the training and support you have received aligns to best practices associated with ‘active learning’ or ‘student-centered’ learning?

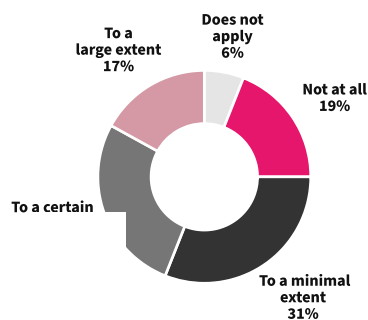


Faculty lack the tools to keep students engaged

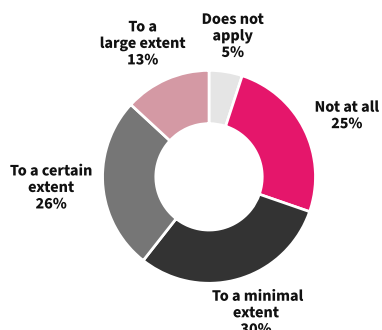
Given the importance of teaching online, faculty support has emphasized learning how to use tools to teach synchronously and asynchronously. But when it comes to learning how to use digital learning tools to engage students, a gap emerges. Only about a third of respondents said that learning how to use tools to engage students in real time (44 percent) and outside of class environments (39 percent) comprised the training they received to a significant extent. This is hardly encouraging given the lacklustre experience of many students in the spring. In the midst of campus closures, students said the lack of an engaging in-class experience had made it difficult to adjust to online learning³.

To what extent have the following comprised the support you’ve been provided to teach effectively in the fall academic term?

Learning how to use tools to engage students in real time in remote environments



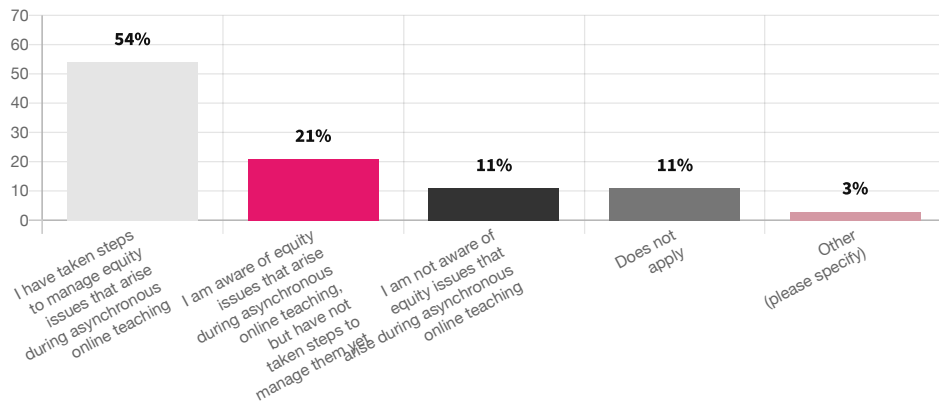
Learning how to use tools to engage students outside of class environments



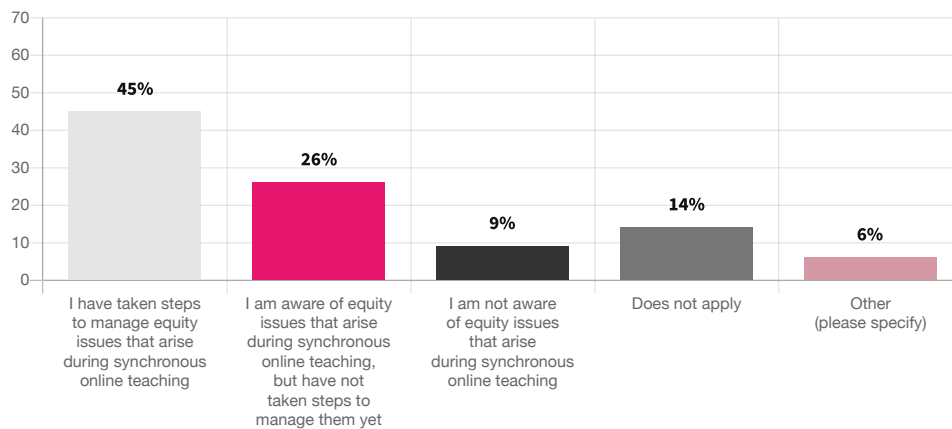
Can instructors create a level playing field for students?

For many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, learning remotely presents a number of challenges: Internet connectivity, regular access to computers and spaces conducive to quiet study, among others. Fifty-four (54) percent of respondents indicated that they have taken steps to manage equity issues that arise during asynchronous online teaching, while 46 percent said they had done the same for synchronous online teaching. Of some concern are the 21 percent who said they are aware of the issues asynchronous learning creates for students but have not taken meaningful action and the 26 percent who said the same for synchronous teaching.

To what extent are you able to manage student’s learning equity issues that can emerge during asynchronous online activities?



To what extent are you able to manage student learning equity issues that can emerge during **synchronous** online activities?





Section 4

Uneven technology adoption raises concerns for student success

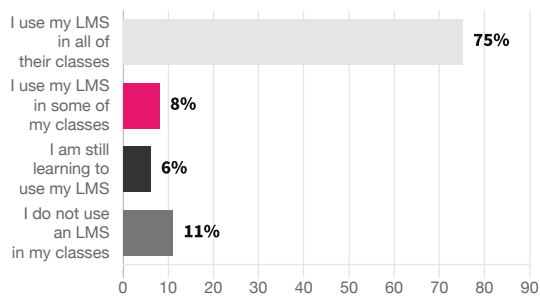
In these changing times, technology has become essential to deliver an engaging and effective educational experience. Relying on patchwork solutions may have sufficed in the shift to emergency remote teaching, but students this fall will be far less tolerant of the poor, disjointed remote learning they received in the spring. Raising the bar will require a heavy reliance on tools purpose-built to humanize the learning experience and support approaches to teaching that involve students as active participants.

An LMS alone is not sufficient for effective online teaching

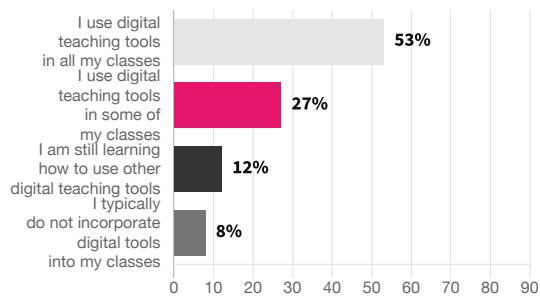
While 75 percent of respondents make use of an LMS in all of their classes, 8 percent are inconsistent in their usage while 11 percent do not use an LMS at all and 6 percent are learning to use an LMS. The lack of an LMS or inconsistent usage may present challenges by denying students a homebase to access learning materials and other academic resources.

In addition to an LMS, roughly 80 percent of instructors use other digital teaching tools in at least some or all of their classes, suggesting an LMS by itself is not sufficient for most instructors. A combined 14 percent of respondents do not use an LMS or other digital teaching tools while 18 percent are still learning to use an LMS and other digital teaching tools. This is some cause for concern given the expectation that most courses will be taught online in the fall in at least some capacity.

How often do you use a Learning Management System (LMS) like Canvas to teach?



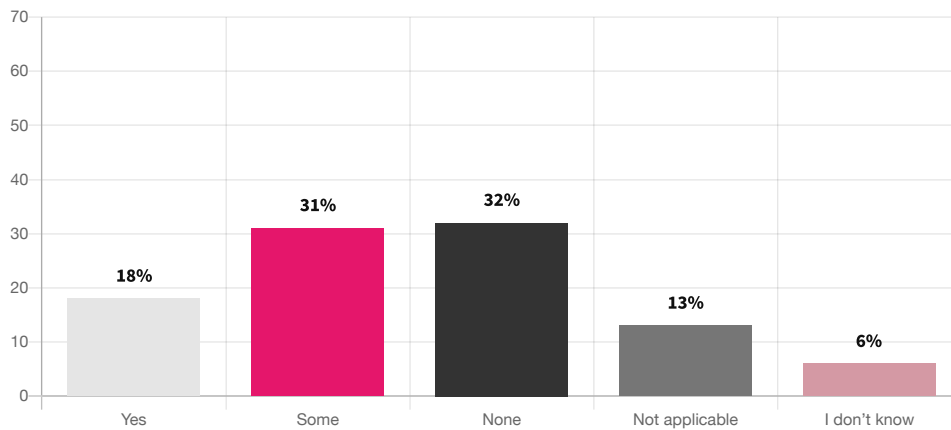
How often do you use teaching tools other than your LMS?



Inconsistency reigns in choosing the right tools for the job

When it comes to adopting tools for teaching, academic freedom still reigns supreme for 32 percent of respondents. Only 18 percent indicated that their institution had mandated the teaching tools and technologies they will be using in the fall, while for 31 percent, some direction has been provided. A lack of mandated technology presents a number of challenges, including an inconsistent learning experience for students across different courses. For faculty, the lack of standardization creates inefficiencies in terms of the work involved in choosing, adopting, navigating and, ultimately, supporting a number of different tools.

Has your school mandated the teaching tools and technologies you will use in the fall academic term?



Technology concerns for students

Given the heavy reliance on digital tools to teach this fall, the mixed picture on technology adoption has raised concerns among faculty when it comes to the student experience. More than half worry about students being able to navigate and use online teaching tools while 41 percent list students' ability to access online teaching materials as one of their biggest concerns. Student equity issues are also top of mind with 61 percent expressing concerns about students having reliable computer access and 64 percent citing reliable Internet access as another potential stumbling block.

What are your biggest concerns about teaching the expected modality in the fall (in person, online, hybrid, Hyflex) as it relates to your students ability to learn effectively? Select all that apply.

51%

The ability for students to navigate / use online teaching tools

41%

The ability for students to access online teaching materials

61%

Reliable student access to technology / computers

64%

Reliable student access to the Internet



Section 5

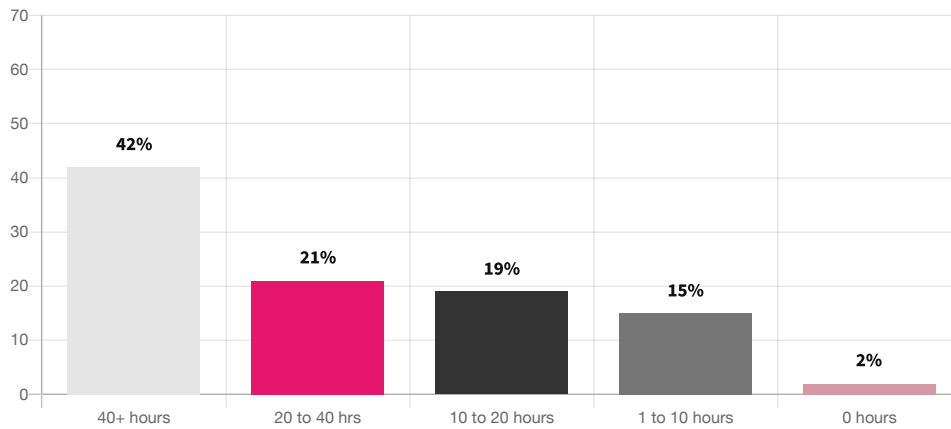
Gearing up for an unprecedented semester

Faculty and administrators have had little time to catch their breath as they pivot to online and blended learning formats for the fall semester. According to our respondents, the effort has been met with mixed results. This includes developing the necessary proficiencies as well as accommodating the health and safety of students and faculty in the face of the ongoing pandemic. Just as concerning is the lack of confidence that students will be successful or see value in their higher education investment.

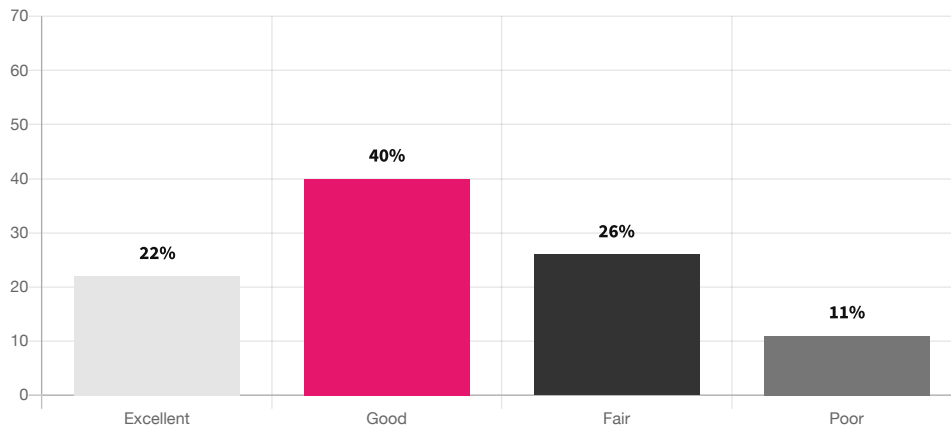
Institutional support gets mixed results

Institutions and faculty have made significant investments to prepare for new approaches to teaching this fall. Forty-two (42) percent have spent more than 40 hours on formal or self-paced training, while 40 percent have invested a minimum of 10 to 20 hours. Although 62 percent were generally positive about the quality of the support they received, 37 percent of respondents provided a less than favorable view. This may suggest that having survived the spring shift to emergency remote teaching, instructors are now more exacting in their expectations.

Thinking only of the formal and self-directed training you've undertaken, how many hours has the change in circumstances required you to prepare to teach for the fall academic term?



How would you rate the overall quality of support provided by your school to help you teach effectively and help students succeed in the fall academic term?

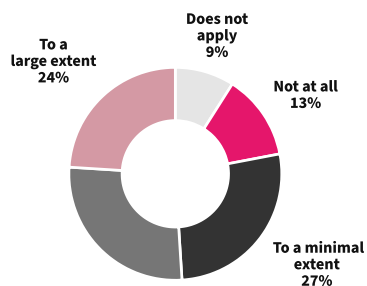


Learning the tools of the trade

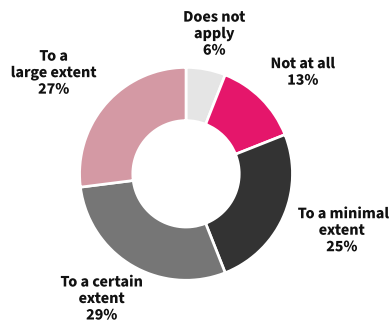
For more than 50 percent of respondents, learning to use tools to teach synchronously has been a significant component of the training they have received. Similarly, learning to use tools to teach asynchronously online has been an important area of focus. Of some concern are the 40 percent and 38 percent of respondents who indicated that learning to use tools to teach synchronously and asynchronously, respectively, has either been a small or non-existent part of the training they've received.

To what extent have the following comprised support you've been provided to teach effectively?

Learning how to use tools to teach synchronously online



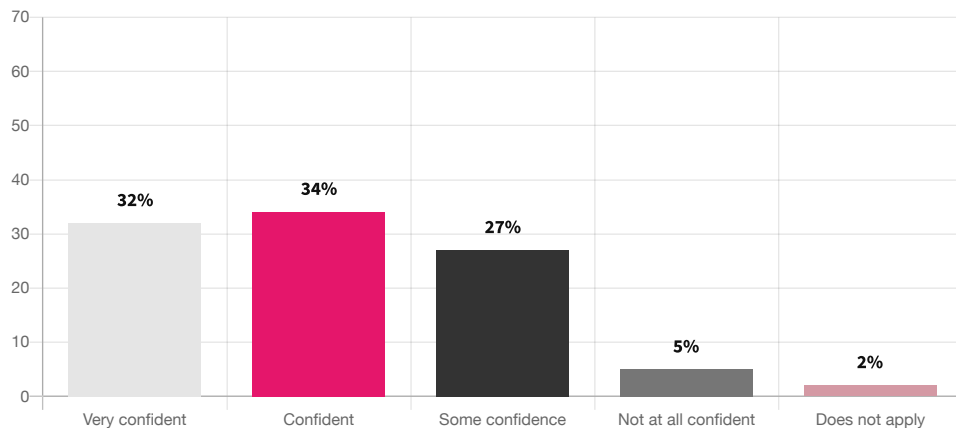
Learning how to use tools to teach asynchronously online



Faculty are confident...to an extent

The good news is that the majority of faculty express confidence in their ability to support the approach to teaching being embraced for the coming academic term. That said, roughly one third (32 percent) are not so self-assured. Due to gaps in training coupled with the lack of direction with respect to the tools needed to teach online, many faculty members may not be well prepared to support new teaching modalities for the semester ahead.

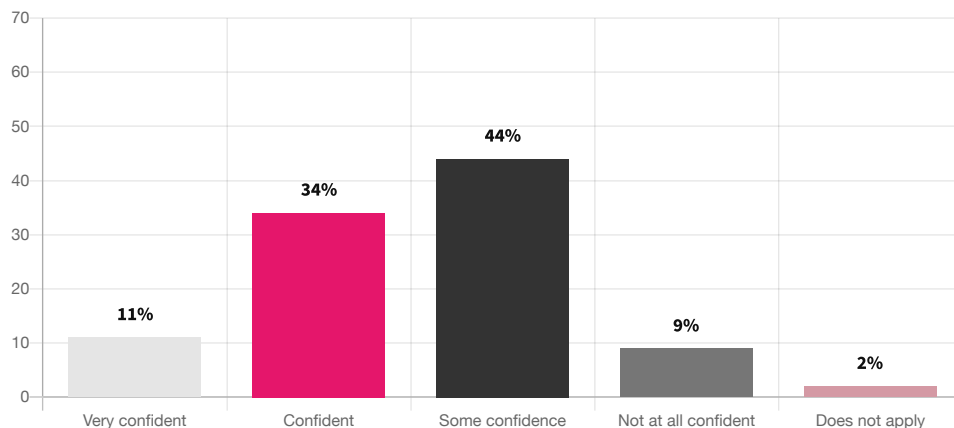
How confident are you in your ability to support the approach to teaching described in the previous question?



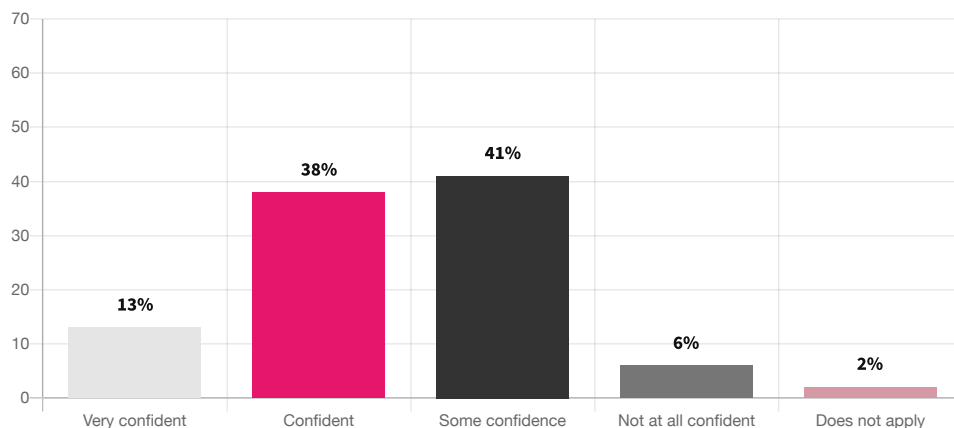
Will students see value? Will they be successful?

While many faculty and administrators are confident in their ability to support their school's approach to teaching, only a small percentage of respondents are very confident (13 percent) that students will see the value in their higher education investment. Equally concerning are the 46 percent of respondents who express at least some level of doubt that students will be successful as learners based on the formats announced for the fall semester.

Based on your school's plan for the fall academic term, how confident are you that your students will see the value of their higher education investment?



Based on your school's plan for the fall academic term, how confident are you that your students will be successful learners in the announced course format(s)?



Responding to the challenges ahead

Adversity is a powerful teacher—and there was more than enough adversity in spring 2020 to offer many important lessons: Addressing the sense of loneliness and isolation so many experienced by creating a greater sense of connection and community for students learning remotely. Providing additional support to the most vulnerable whose lives have been made even more precarious by the pandemic. Just as important, making better use of technology to enhance instruction and bring much needed vitality to the online classroom. Successfully applying these lessons this fall will mean the difference between students (and parents) seeing value in their higher education investment, or not.

Higher education has often been slow to change. Beyond systems largely used to post grades and assignments, investments in digital infrastructure and instructor training to create meaningful online learning experiences have been lacking. Although our survey respondents indicate that this picture is changing, there are still critical gaps to be addressed. How well institutions and faculty respond will have profound implications for students this fall and for semesters to come.

Building vibrant and inclusive online learning communities

With so much learning happening remotely, we cannot take for granted the sense of community that happens as a natural part of the traditional campus experience—both inside and outside the physical classroom. Faculty recognize the importance of this, but not nearly enough in the way of training and support has been provided. Absent the tools and practices that encourage connection and collaboration, this will arguably be one of the biggest challenges this fall.

Virtual office hours and making an effort to reach out to students are only part of the solution. Creating connection and community is an intentional exercise that starts with embedding practices and activities that promote discussion, collaboration and teamwork inside and outside the classroom. Instructors must also lead by example, first by espousing community as a core value and, second, by actively engaging in activities that promote interaction with and among students.

Of course, all of this will mean little if equity and access issues prevent students from becoming active members of a learning community in the first place. The pandemic has made life difficult for everyone—more so for students who were already facing basic needs insecurity. For this reason, community must also be embraced at an institutional level. This includes ensuring every student has the computer and Internet access now crucial to their academic success. Connecting students to mental health and other resources is equally vital. Here too faculty can play an important role by ensuring they have a command of the resources available and are equipped to direct students accordingly.

Moving beyond patchwork solutions

Relying on cobbled together technology to teach remotely may have sufficed in the spring but it will not be enough to deliver the engaging learning experiences students deserve. While most respondents report having a free hand in adopting technology to enhance their teaching (or not), the lack of standardization risks creating an uneven and disjointed learning experience for students.

Standardizing tools designed for online instruction is essential for creating rewarding learning experiences, as well as increasing the scale and efficiency of the virtual classroom. For instructors, familiarity with properly integrated tools allows them to focus on the student experience by using technology as a complement to their teaching rather than ‘one more thing to manage.’ Students, on the other hand, can move much more seamlessly between courses and avoid the headaches many experienced in the spring navigating between different systems in order to attend ‘class’ or access learning materials. Whatever technology has been decided upon, efforts should now turn to orientation and ensuring students are comfortable with the tools they will be using to power their learning.

Creating online learning experiences that truly engage students

For far too many students this spring, remote learning meant watching lectures that had simply been recorded and moved online. For learning to be effective, students must be active participants, rather than passive observers. Technology can enable all of this, but only if it is used in concert with pedagogies like active learning that fully engage students in discussion and problem solving exercises designed to help them apply what they have learned. These activities—along with adequate time—must be embedded within the classroom

to help them apply what they have learned. These activities—along with adequate time—must be embedded within the classroom experience, virtual or otherwise.

Respondents to our survey suggest that institutions are paying more attention to the importance of training instructors on pedagogy. This is very encouraging. Understanding how students learn and the best practices for creating engaging class experiences will make it much easier for faculty to adapt their methods as technology and teaching modalities evolve. More importantly, it will allow them to better apply the power of their own experience to make learning more rewarding by helping students develop the problem solving and critical thinking skills essential to succeed in the modern age.

There is little doubt that the ongoing pandemic will be transformative to higher education. The work is far from over. What's most promising is that more and more faculty are rethinking their teaching to focus on how students learn. They are slowly becoming more confident in using technology to create community and elevate the learning experience. The fall will be far from perfect. Nevertheless, these efforts will no doubt pay dividends, making teaching more effective over the long term, and setting more students up for success in an uncertain world.

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