



89% of Online College Students Reported Live, Virtual Class Meetings in 2020

That's a 31 Percentage Point Increase Year-Over-Year According to BestColleges.com's Annual Study

May 25, 2021 (Seattle, WA) - BestColleges.com's 2021 Trends in Online Student Demographics Report, released today, revealed the effects the past year had on the online college experience, including that 89% of students reported a synchronous component such as live, virtual class meetings — a 31 percentage point increase over 2019 (58%). Click below for more information:

<https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/online-student-demographics/>

The second annual Trends in Online Student Demographics Report includes feedback from 1,300 students, including those currently enrolled, prospective online students, and graduates of online programs. Remote learners who experienced virtual learning environments as a result of COVID-19-related campus closures in 2020 were not included in this report.

“Online courses that were predominantly asynchronous before the COVID-19 pandemic may have shifted to use more synchronous communication — matching the type of schedule typically followed by in-person courses — as professors and students managed new life challenges in 2020, including the effects of social isolation,” said Melissa Venable, Ph.D., the report’s author and online education advisor for BestColleges.com. “More synchronous online class meetings may indicate a purposeful decision to increase live interaction and engagement.”

COVID-19 also had an impact on enrollment in online education in 2020, with 15% of students citing pandemic-related circumstances as a reason they pursued a new online program last year. When asked why students chose, or planned to choose, online learning instead of a campus-based program, the impact of the pandemic was the top response, with 28% reporting that it affected their decision.

Currently enrolled students' top concern (24%) related to the online learning experience was balancing education with work, family, and household obligations. However, there were decreased levels of concern compared to the previous year in areas such as the quality of instruction and academic support (16% vs. 30%) and their perception of what prospective employers think of online education (13% vs. 24%).

"Essentially all students experienced some component of online learning last year, leading many to wonder if their experience was just as good if not better than a campus-based one," Venable said. "The COVID-19 pandemic and the shifts it caused in traditional education may have changed perceptions about online education among employers as well."

When choosing to study online, 31% of prospective online students rely on college websites, and 21% look to student reviews most when researching and comparing programs. This is a change from respondents' preferred information source of ranking websites last year, which saw a decrease from 23% in 2019 to 9% in 2020. Finding an online option that meets students' needs and interests was the top challenge (22%) in choosing an online program, according to prospective students.

"For students now considering online education, having an idea of how other students compared and researched the options may help them conduct their own search more effectively," said Venable.

Methodology

Two online surveys were conducted in October and November 2020. All data is self-reported.

For the first survey, we connected with schools offering online courses, as reported by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Representatives from public and private two- and four-year institutions provided feedback via the SurveyMonkey platform from October 19 to November 23, 2020. A total of 366 school administrators responded to questions about online program design and administration, student support needs, and the impact of COVID-19 on their work and higher education in general.

The second survey was conducted from November 10-18, 2020. Student respondents were fielded by Lucid LLC. Survey participants included 1,800 students, representing current remote (500) and online learners (450), prospective online students (350), and online degree program graduates (500). The respondents for the survey were screened by various quality checks, including systems like Relevant ID, and were manually reviewed to ensure consistency and accuracy in the responses.

About BestColleges.com

BestColleges.com empowers students to make smarter educational decisions and find schools that best fit their needs through proprietary research, user-friendly guides, and hundreds of unique college rankings. As a trusted education advisor, they also provide a wide array of college planning, financial aid, and career resources to help students realize life goals and overcome educational challenges as they prepare for careers after college.