

101: DISTANCE EDUCATION



INTRODUCTION

Today's students are more diverse—in age, race, and income—than any previous generation. They are more likely to be older, working, parenting, and may learn part-time or online.

Distance education enrollment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

in Fall 2018

nearly **7 million**

were enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions¹



approximately

1/2

of those students took all of their courses online²



68%

of online students were at public institutions³



Of online students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

84%

of online bachelor's students were employed⁴



65%

of students pursuing online bachelor's degrees were female⁵



32

was the students' average age⁷



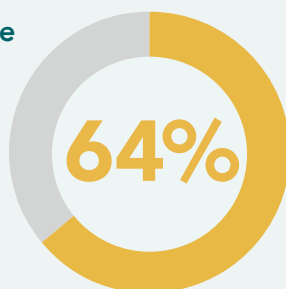
41%

of online students were parents⁸



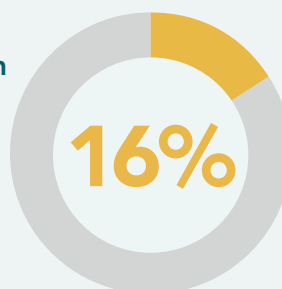
Of students taking classes online

white



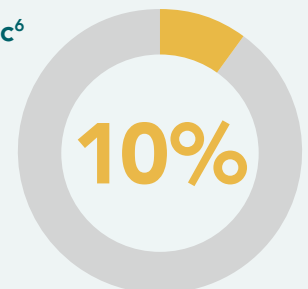
64%

African-American



16%

Hispanic⁶



10%

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION?

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted many postsecondary courses online due to public health concerns. For some students, this may be their first time participating in distance learning.

Distance learning in 2020

29% of students have reported that they will be receiving their instruction fully online in Fall 2020



10% of colleges have planned to be fully online



57% a majority of students stated that they will receive instruction through a "hybrid model" partially online, partially offline.⁹



55% have had a primarily online or hybrid model this fall with less than a quarter of colleges with instruction primarily in-person.¹⁰



Looking ahead to spring, colleges are generally planning for more of the same, with most schools indicating they will have online or hybrid instruction.

What are the opportunities and challenges for today's students in distance education?

36% of distance ed students are pursuing education to transition to a new career field¹²



30% of students report that they have difficulty accessing course content even if they have internet at home.^{13,14} Among the biggest barriers to completion for online students are the cost of more classes and internet connectivity problems.



50% of students in online education report that existing commitments, including work and family obligations, prevent them from attending on-campus education¹⁵



3 in 10 Americans say that even if COVID-19 was not a threat, they'd prefer an online-only learning option.¹⁶



As more students shift to distance education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, policy and practice should anticipate the needs of students who continue to learn online at greater numbers. Broadband access and affordability remains paramount to online learners, and off-campus or local child care can be a reliable option instead of campus-based. As our postsecondary learning system continues to evolve, we must continue to support student success, no matter where it occurs.



broadband access



affordability



**off-campus or
local child care**

ENDNOTES

¹ *Fast Facts: Distance learning (80)*. National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80>.

² Ibid.

³ Online Learning Consortium. "New Study: Over Six Million Students Now Enrolled in Distance." 17 May 2017. https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/news_item/new-study-six-million-students-now-enrolled-distance-education.

⁴ Friedman, Jordan, U.S. News & World Report, "U.S. News Data: The Average Online Bachelor's Student," April 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2017-04-04/us-news-data-the-average-online-bachelors-student>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Aslanian, Carol B., et. al. "Online College Students 2019 Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences." Wiley edu, LLC and EducationDynamics. June 2019. <https://49hk843qjpwu3gfmw73ngy1k-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/OCS-2019-FINAL-WEB-Report.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fishman, Rachel, and Hiler, Tamara. Third Way. "New Polling from New America & Third Way on COVID-19's Impact on Current and Future College Students." 22 September, 2020. <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/new-polling-from-new-america-third-way-on-covid-19s-impact-on-current-and-future-college-students>.

¹⁰ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "Here's Our List of Colleges' Reopening Models." <https://www.chronicle.com/article/heres-a-list-of-colleges-plans-for-reopening-in-the-fall/>.

¹¹ Kelderman, Eric. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. "Spring Planning Has Begun. Here's What Colleges are Thinking so Far." September 2020. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/spring-planning-has-begun-heres-what-colleges-are-thinking-so-far>.

¹² Best Colleges. "2017 Online Education Trends Report." <https://res.cloudinary.com/highereducation/image/upload/v1/BestColleges.com/2017-Online-Education-Trends-Report.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Clark, Ashley. Higher Learning Advocates. "Survey Reveals Higher Ed Students Have Inequitable Access to Reliable Broadband." May 2020. <https://medium.com/higher-learning-advocates/survey-reveals-higher-ed-students-have-inequitable-access-to-reliable-broadband-ab3cc152d663>.

¹⁵ Best Colleges. "2017 Online Education Trends Report." <https://res.cloudinary.com/highereducation/image/upload/v1/BestColleges.com/2017-Online-Education-Trends-Report.pdf>.

¹⁶ Strada Center for Consumer Insights. "Public Viewpoint: COVID-19 Work and Education Survey." July 2020. <https://www.stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Report-July-29-2020.pdf>.

For more information about **Higher Learning Advocates**, please contact **Emily Bouck West**, Deputy Executive Director, at ebouckwest@higherlearningadvocates.org