

# 3,052 College Students on the Good, the Bad and Learning Post-COVID





More than a year has passed under the shadow of COVID-19. While there are bright spots and important lessons for institutions preparing for a return to campus, students remain deeply ambivalent about learning online. Most concerning, 58 percent do not feel the learning experience has been worth the cost of tuition.



# Table of Contents

## 1. Worth the Investment?

How students view the cost of online learning .....	7
Looking for improvements to remote learning .....	7
Financial and mental health challenges .....	8

## 2. Access

Technology access is still a problem, but flexibility helps .....	10
Students want blended instruction, even post-pandemic .....	11

## 3. Community and Belonging

Community plays a central role in students' perceptions of value .....	13
Building community in the classroom still needs some work .....	13
Belonging fosters engagement .....	14

## 4. Engagement

Active learning isn't consistent in virtual classrooms .....	16
Students want learning to be relevant and transferable .....	16
Instructors should invest in their use of classroom technology .....	17

## 5. Value

Caring instructors make a big difference .....	19
Feedback is a powerful motivator .....	19
Community is everything .....	20
Discussion and interaction cement learning .....	20
Students want to learn by doing .....	21

## 6. Helping More Students Thrive

The seeds of change .....	23
Enabling faculty and students to build connections .....	23
The tools for success .....	24

## Online learning raises concerns about the quality of instruction

The perception that remote learning is less effective than its in person counterpart has held constant since we began tracking student sentiments more than 12 months ago. While some note improvements over the Fall

**In many ways, the pandemic has exposed challenges within higher education to provide accessible, engaging and high-quality learning experiences.**

of 2020, others have seen none. One in four believe the online learning experience has become worse.

For most students, virtual learning hasn't been worth the cost. This discrepancy between investment *in* and value *out* should not be dismissed as the temporary fallout of an extraordinary year. In many ways, the pandemic has exposed challenges within higher education to provide accessible, engaging and high-quality learning experiences. Without a concerted effort to apply the lessons from the past year, these issues won't simply disappear once students return to the classroom.

## A tough year—but there's hope on the horizon

After months of social distancing, the diminishing state of student wellbeing has no doubt added to the disillusionment. A majority of students report grappling with anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation. Half face

financial difficulties and many don't have access to the technology necessary to support their learning. That's left a significant number concerned about their ability to pass their courses.

Despite the difficulties, we're also entering a period of renewed hope. Vaccine distribution is gaining momentum. The past year has also motivated faculty to learn new tools and approaches to engage students. While the physical classroom remains

the preferred option, remote learning offers fresh possibilities and clear benefits for many: almost 50 percent of students want to see aspects of online learning carried forward once campuses reopen.



# Delivering student value in the next normal

Our findings suggest students are placing greater importance on the quality of their learning experience as they evaluate the return on their tuition dollars. While there is work to be done, we also see clear evidence of what *is* making a difference. Students who agree their instructors make learning active, who foster community and who demonstrate caring through timely feedback are far more positive in their assessments of their institutions and the quality of instruction than the average. The challenge now is delivering these high-quality learning experiences consistently for all students.

# A framework for the future

This is one of the reasons we developed a framework to help institutions assess their ability to create the right conditions for more students to *receive* and *perceive* meaningful value from their college investment. This framework underpins how we approached the questions we asked for this survey. To help more students thrive, institutions must focus on meeting a fundamental set of needs.

**1.** This begins with **‘access’** and using technology to reduce the barriers of affordability and provide the flexibility students need to balance work and family responsibilities on top of their education.

**2.** It continues with fostering **‘belonging’** and ensuring students are equipped to find the human connection, support and mentorship that are critical to persisting through the rigors of academic life.

**3.** Finally, it involves **‘engagement’** and motivating students to invest in their success through learning experiences that emphasize collaboration, exploration and the application of knowledge in meaningful contexts.

There are plenty of gaps to address. But as our findings make clear, even small changes can have dramatic effects on the perceptions of value students receive from their courses. We hope that educational leaders use these insights to create learning experiences that are more accessible, engaging and relevant, helping prepare all students for a brighter and more promising future.

## About the Research

# 3,052

survey responses

### COUNTRY

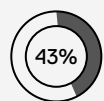


88 percent



12 percent

### BREAKDOWN BY YEAR OF STUDY



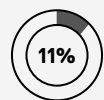
1st year



2nd year



3rd year

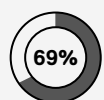


4th year

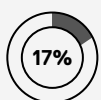


Other

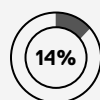
### INSTITUTION TYPE



4-year public

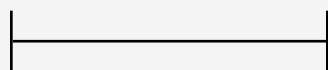


4-year private



2-year public

### TIMELINE



March 1, 2021

March 14, 2021

# Worth the Investment?

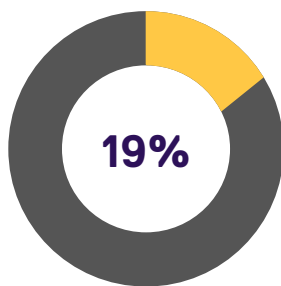


We're now a year into the pandemic and students have been learning remotely for multiple semesters. Though some note improvements as instructors become more versant with remote course delivery, most students simply aren't seeing the value of their higher ed investment. Meanwhile, pandemic life continues to take a heavy toll on student mental health.

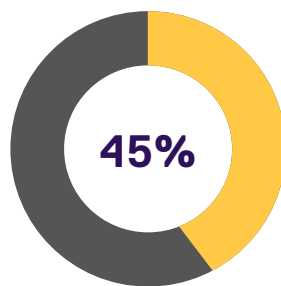
# For most students, online learning just hasn't been worth the cost

Students continue to view online learning as substandard, with less than half rating their experience positively. Absent access to campus amenities, 58 percent say their education hasn't been worth the cost of tuition and fewer than half are engaged in their coursework.

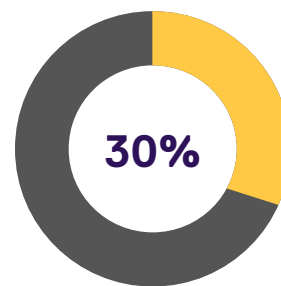
Thinking back to the Fall, how would you rate the current online learning experience this term?



**Less than 1 in 5**  
agree that the learning experience has been worth the cost of tuition



**Less than half**  
feel engaged and motivated in their coursework inside and outside of class



**Only 30%**  
of students feel the online learning experience is engaging inside the classroom

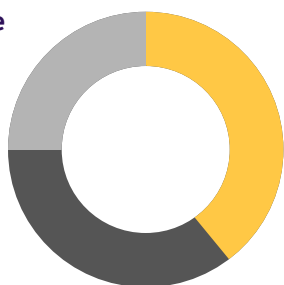
## One year in, most students haven't seen any improvements to remote learning

Faculty and institutions have had a year to make gains after a rocky start, yet only 40 percent of students say the online learning experience has gotten better relative to the fall 2020 term. About one-third haven't noted any change, while most concerning, one-quarter say the learning experience has become slightly or significantly worse.

Thinking back to the Fall, how would you rate the current online learning experience this term?

**Gotten worse**  
**25%**

**No change**  
**30%**

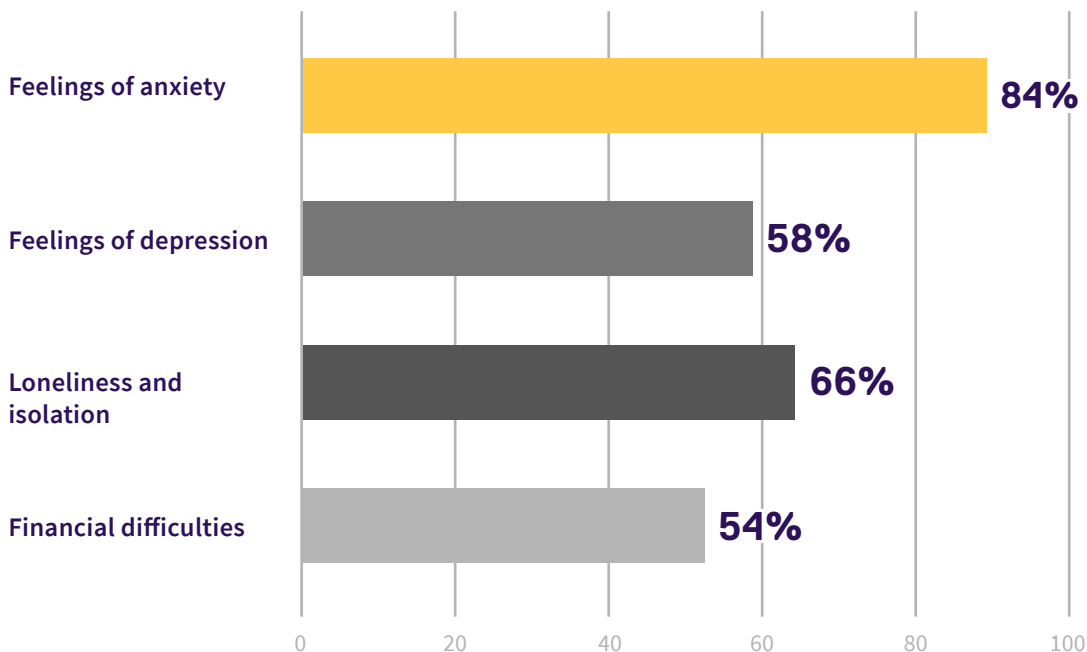


**Has improved**  
**40%**

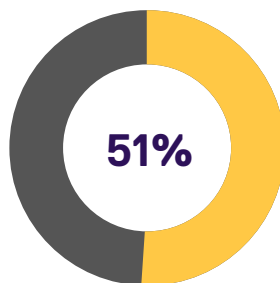
# Financial and mental health challenges add to the student burden

More than half of students are facing financial difficulties as the recession impacts part-time jobs and family finances. Lockdowns and remote learning have no doubt contributed to feelings of loneliness and isolation, and a majority of students are also grappling with anxiety. In this less-than-optimal learning environment, half of students are concerned about their ability to pass the current term.

Thinking about your experience this semester, have you experienced any challenges with the following:



**More than half** of students are somewhat or highly concerned about their ability to pass the current school term.



## SECTION 2

# Access



After 12 months of remote classes, students are still struggling to access resources online. This illustrates the continued challenge many face navigating the patchwork of solutions institutions have cobbled together to support their learning. While most prefer in-person classes, students do see value in the flexibility remote learning has afforded. In fact, almost 50 percent would like to see online tools incorporated into the classroom when campuses reopen.

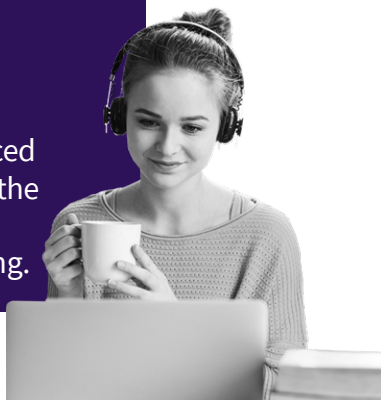


# Technology access is still a problem, but flexibility helps

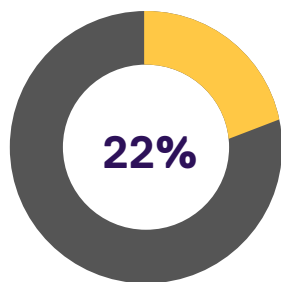
Almost one in three students note that access to technology continues to be a challenge. Yet, more than half agree their instructors are providing the necessary flexibility. Asynchronous options to support self-paced learning have become increasingly important to a generation balancing work and family responsibilities on top of their education.

Almost  
**1/3**

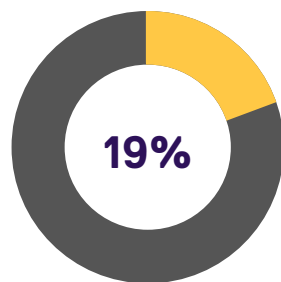
of students have experienced challenges with accessing the technology and resources required to support learning.



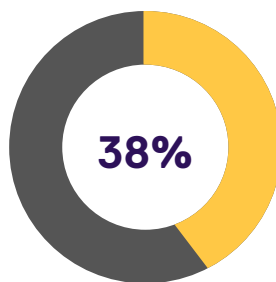
Do you require special support and/or considerations for the following?



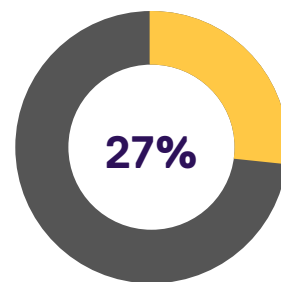
Ability to call in to online synchronous lectures and participate in class via texting



Ability to participate in class anonymously



Access to lecture recordings and transcripts



Access to print version of online assessments

**58%**

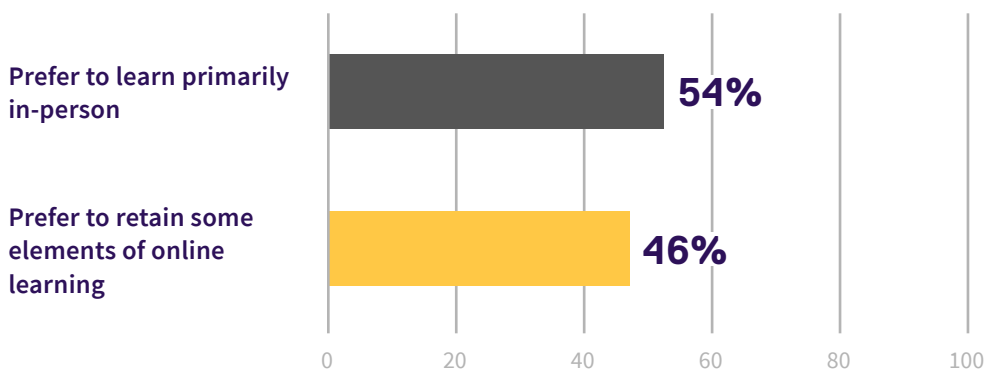
of students reported that their instructors provide the flexibility they need to be successful academically



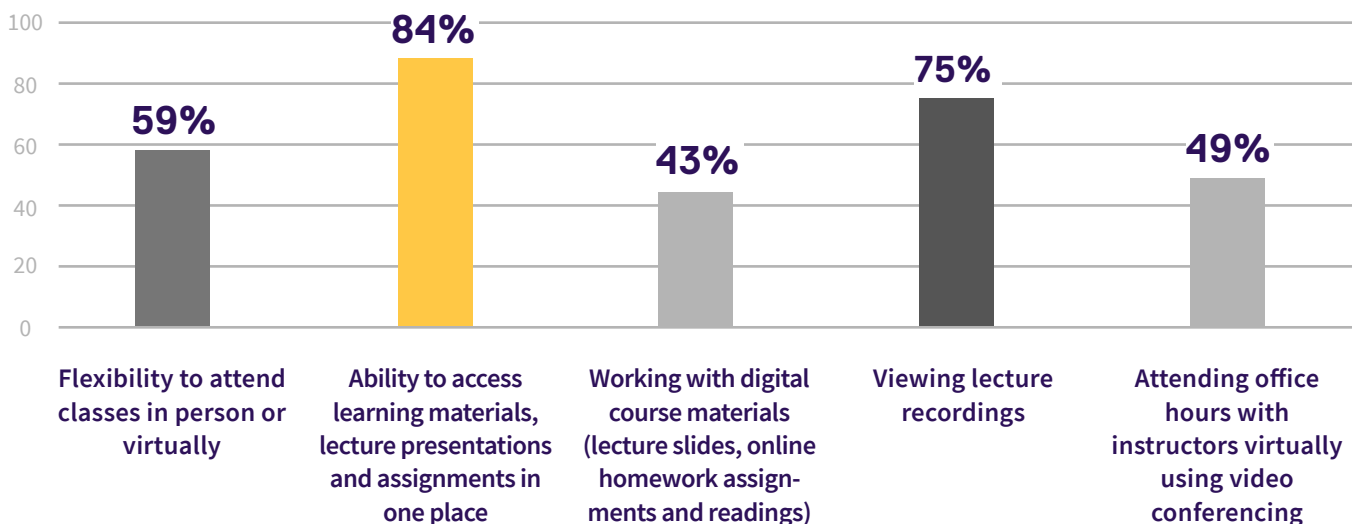
# Students want blended instruction, even post-pandemic

While in-person learning is still the preferred option, once campuses reopen there's a growing appetite for learning that blends online and face-to-face instruction. Many students want to see technology and digital content incorporated in their post-pandemic courses to make learning more flexible and engaging, in and out of the classroom.

When campuses are able to safely reopen, what is the method that best describes how you would prefer to learn?



What elements of online learning would you like to continue incorporating into your education?



# Community and Belonging



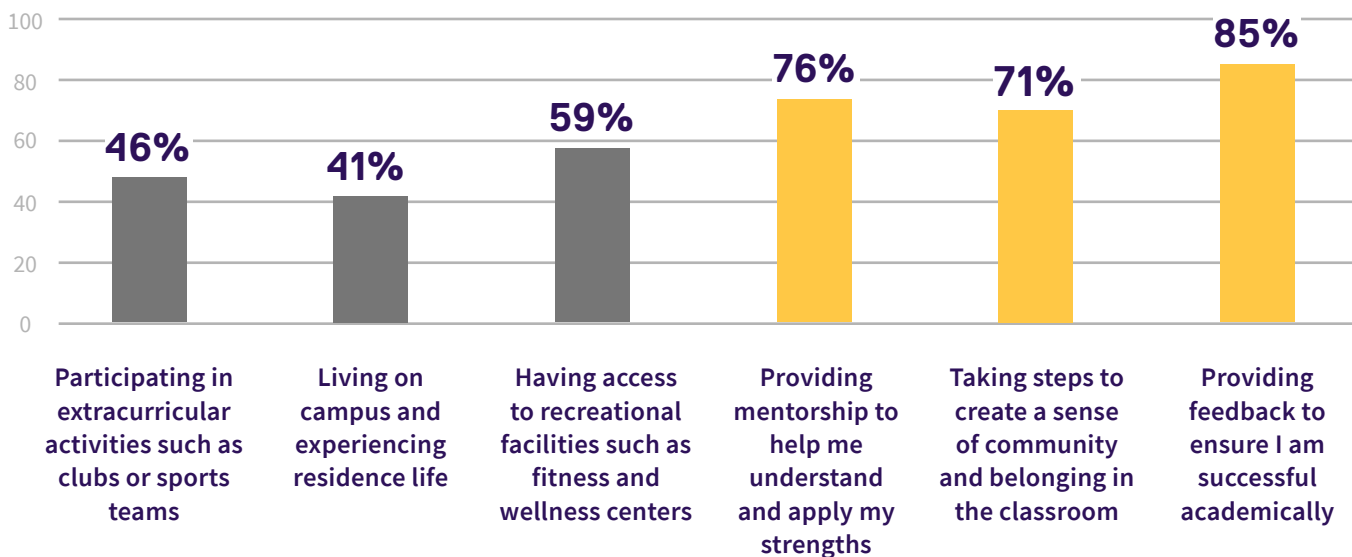
A sense of community and belonging are essential in creating a thriving learning experience—and students who feel their instructors care about them are far more likely to view their educational investment as worthwhile. Even when it's safe to return to in-person learning, a majority want to stay connected to instructors and classmates using collaboration and messaging apps.

## Community plays a central role in students' perceptions of value

The campus experience has long been integral to the higher education value equation. But according to our data, extracurricular activities, recreational facilities and living on campus aren't necessarily helping students realize the value of their tuition—at least not compared to the impact of faculty who foster community and belonging in the classroom.

■ On-campus experience  
■ Role of faculty

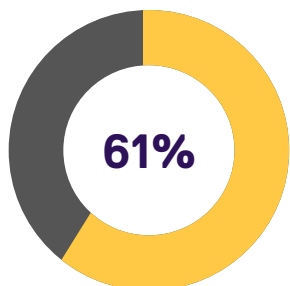
How important are the following in realizing value from your higher ed investment?



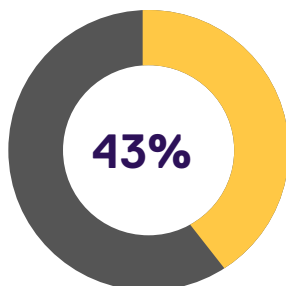
## Building community in the classroom still needs work

In the lead-up to the 2020/2021 academic year, most instructors felt that building community and belonging in the classroom was important. But these efforts are in evidence for only a slight majority of students. While there's work to be done, many students do note the caring demonstrated by instructors and the efforts they take to provide timely, helpful feedback.

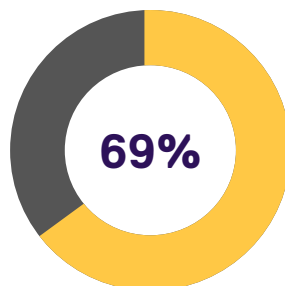
When asked to reflect on the level of support they receive from their instructors, students indicated that:



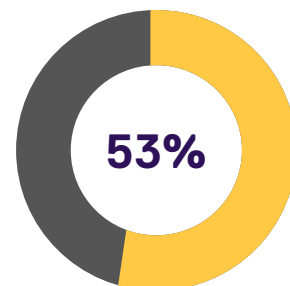
"I have one or more instructors who care about me as a person"



"I have at least one instructor who I view as a mentor"



"My instructors provide me with timely, helpful feedback to ensure I am successful academically"



"My instructors create a sense of community and belonging in the classroom"

## Belonging fosters engagement—and students want tools to help them connect

As noted in our **Fall 2020 Student Survey**, fostering a sense of belonging has a significant impact on overall student engagement and motivation. So it's unsurprising students want tools to stay connected with their peers and instructors in and out of the classroom once it's safe to return to campus.

When it's safe to return to in-person learning

**2/3**

of students say it's important to stay connected with instructors and classmates using messaging and collaboration apps





# Engagement

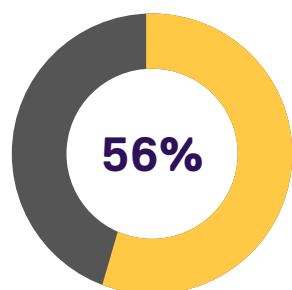


The vast majority of students want instructors to make learning exciting. They're looking for experiences that are active and engaging through discussion, interactive activities and collaboration with peers. But they also want flexibility and feedback from their instructors to keep them on track and ensure their academic success.

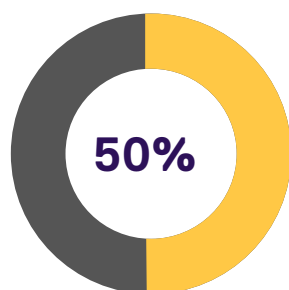
# Active learning isn't consistent in virtual classrooms

Our **Fall 2020 Student Survey** noted the outsized impact of active learning on increasing student engagement. While we see evidence that instructors are making an effort to apply active learning to the virtual classroom, the challenge is one of consistency—given that this approach to learning is not evident for roughly half of respondents.

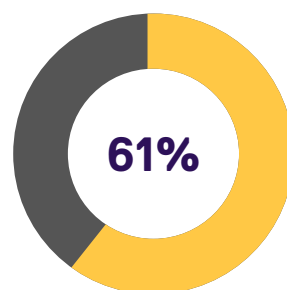
In thinking about the role of your instructors, do you agree with the following?



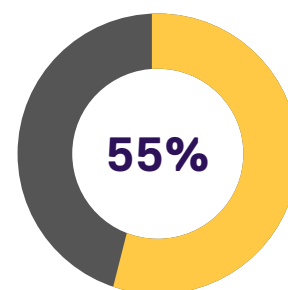
"My instructors make regular use of activities that promote discussion and interaction among students"



"My instructors make regular use of activities that get students working and collaborating together"



"My instructors make regular use of activities during class that get students to apply what they have learned"

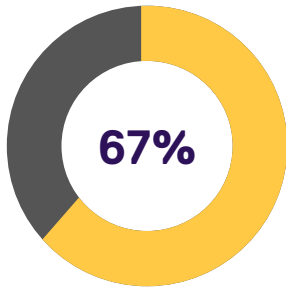


"My instructors make learning relevant by exploring concepts and issues that are important to me"

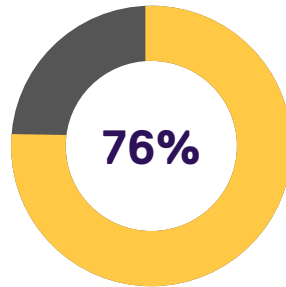
## Students want learning to be relevant and transferable

Most students place great importance on learning experiences that are active and engaging. They want instructors who promote discussion and collaboration—and who make learning relevant by applying learnings to real-world issues. They also want opportunities to develop transferable skills, which is important to a generation that increasingly equates higher education with securing a good job.

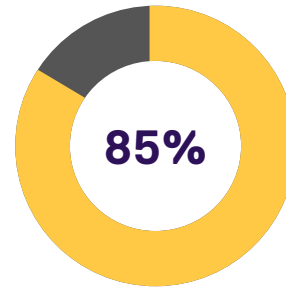
In thinking about the role of faculty in their higher education experience, survey respondents indicated that it was important for their instructors to:



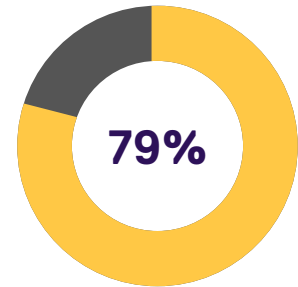
Make learning active through discussion, collaboration with peers, and interactive activities



Make learning relevant by challenging them to apply learning to address real-world issues



Provide feedback to ensure they are successful academically

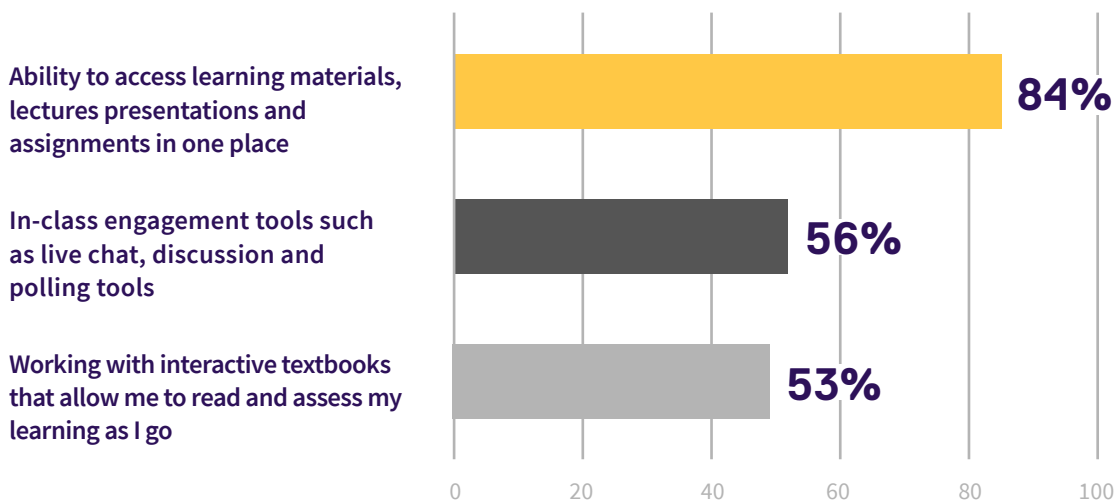


Create opportunities for them to develop transferable skills (such as communication, collaboration, analytical, etc.)

## Instructors should invest in their use of classroom technology

As we plan for a return to campus in the Fall, it's important that faculty and institutions continue to build on the momentum they've created. This includes using technology that makes class time more engaging through polling, live chat and discussions. A majority of students would also like to see engagement extended outside of the classroom through interactive textbooks and digital learning materials.

When it's safe to return to in-person learning, students indicated that it's important to incorporate the following elements into their education:



## SECTION 5

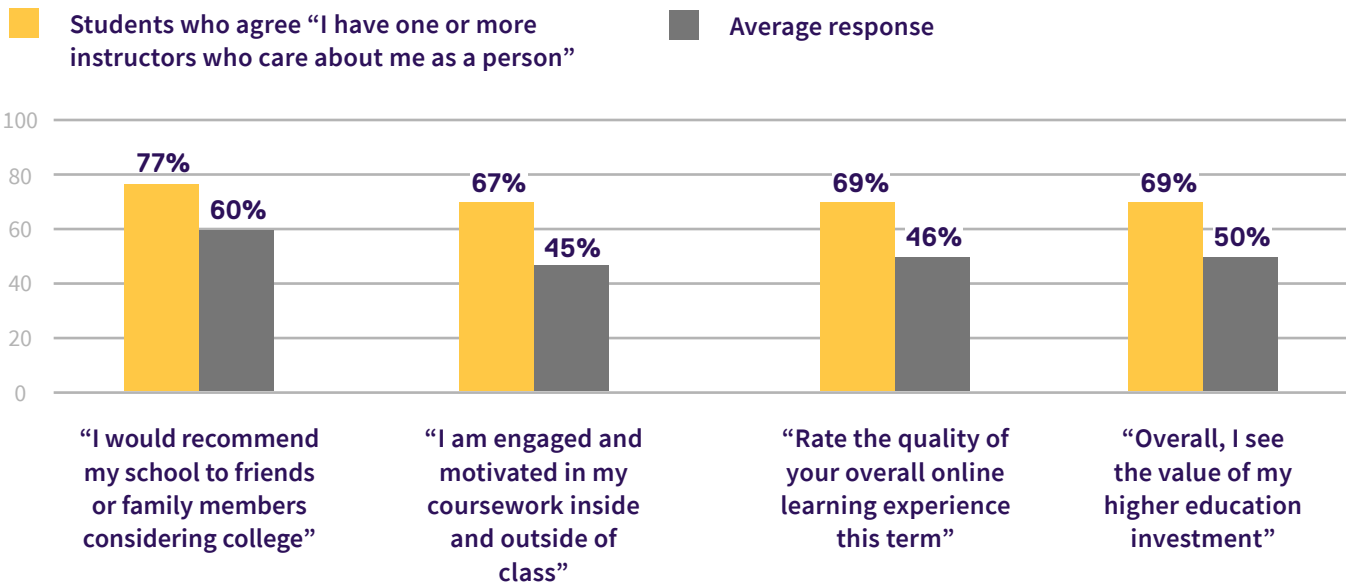
# Value



Building community, demonstrating empathy, providing timely feedback and making learning active have significant impacts on students' perception of the value of higher education. Our findings confirm the critical role of instructors as agents of change to elevate the overall learning experience.

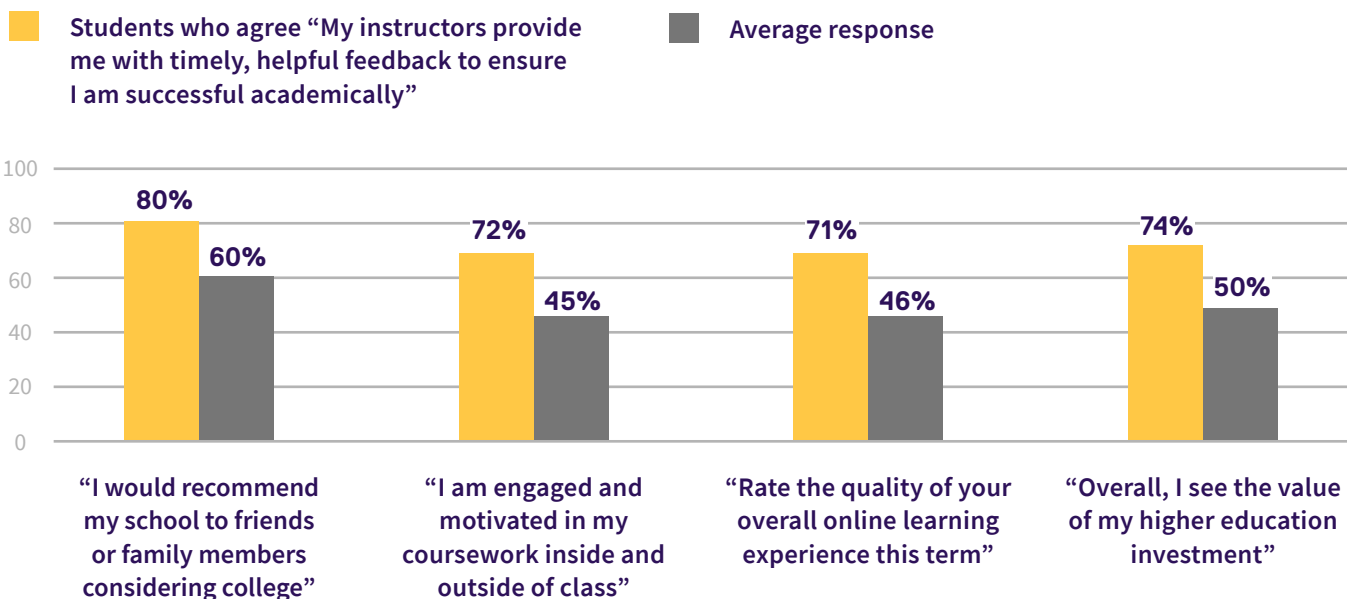
## Caring instructors make a big difference

While it's been a difficult year, caring instructors have had a powerful effect on the overall student experience. Students who agree they have one or more instructors who care about them are much more likely to be engaged and motivated—and to say the learning experience is worth the cost of tuition.



## Feedback is a powerful motivator

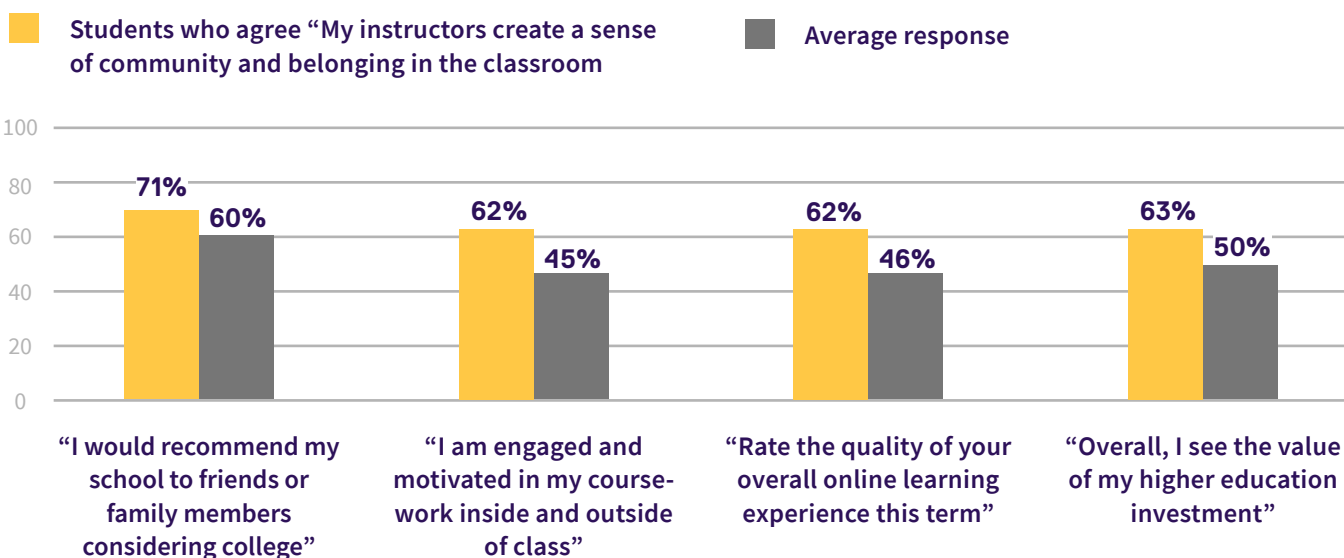
Feedback is especially important for students transitioning to college life. Those who agree their instructors provide them with timely, helpful feedback to ensure they succeed academically are much more likely to be motivated and to say they see value in their higher education investment.





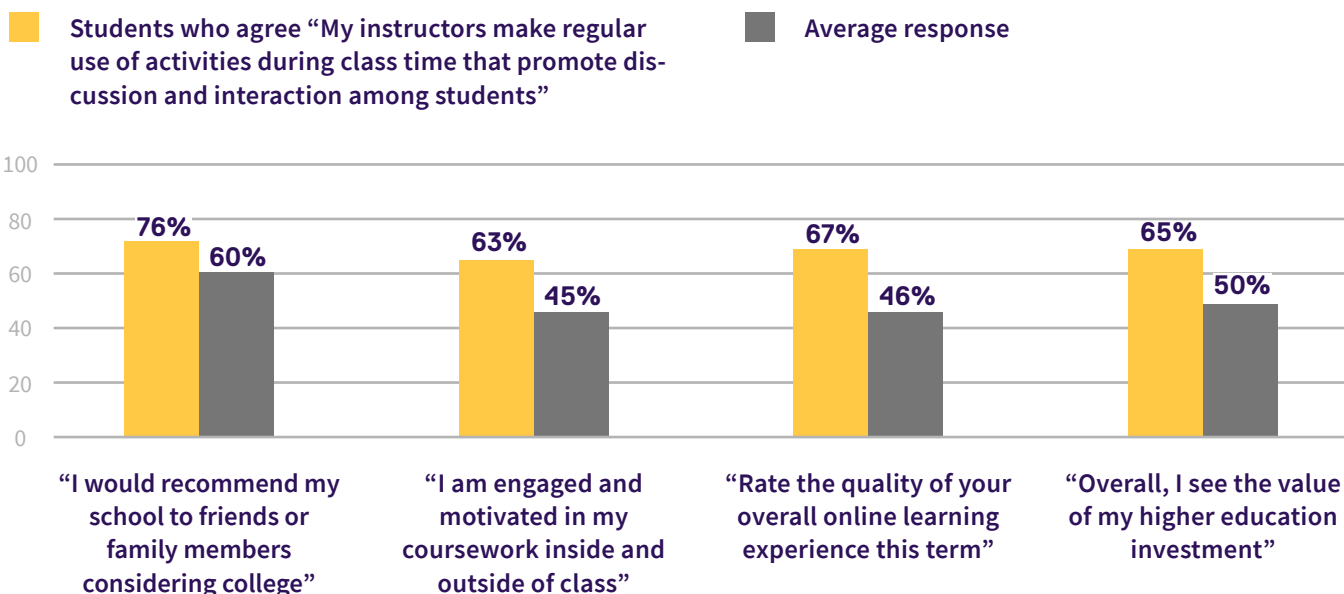
# Community is everything

Just as we saw in our **Fall 2020 Student Survey**, community and belonging are critically important to student engagement and the overall learning experience. And students who agree their instructors create a sense of community and belonging are much more likely to be motivated—both in and out of the classroom—and to recommend their school to friends and family.



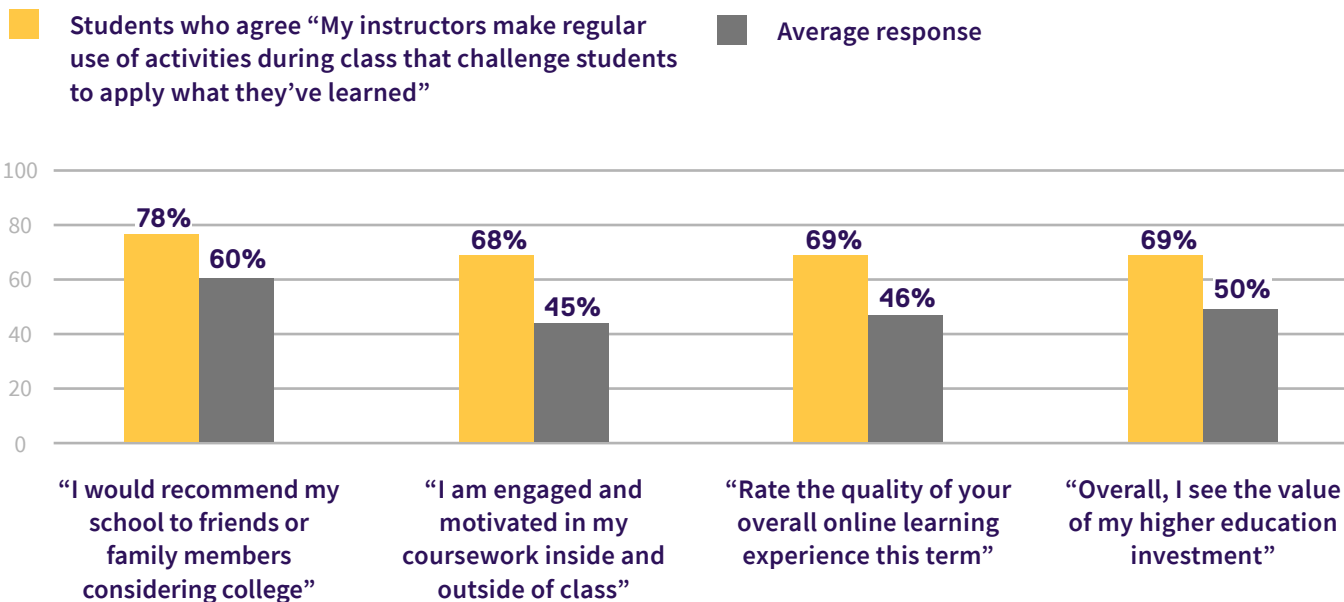
## Discussion and interaction cement learning

Students prefer to be actively engaged in the learning process rather than passive observers. Discussion and interaction among students helps reinforce a sense of being part of a learning community, while promoting the reflection and critical thinking necessary to cement learning. It also helps engender positive feelings across a range of important variables.



# Students want to learn by doing

This is especially important for a generation that wants to understand the connection between theory and practice. Applying learning with the guidance of an instructor—a core tenant of active learning—helps build confidence, while increasing perceptions of the value of learning overall.



# Helping More Students Thrive



Students are placing greater importance on the quality of the learning experience in evaluating the return on their tuition dollars. While there is work to be done, we also see clear evidence of what is making a difference.

# The seeds for change

The ultimate goal of any course or program is to have students come away with a clear sense that they've learned something valuable. But this won't happen if learning remains passive and inflexible. And it is even less likely if students don't feel a sense of community and belonging. The pandemic has brought forward a slew of challenges. But by increasing exposure to digital teaching tools and active learning practices among faculty, it has also offered the seeds for change.

Flexibility has become an increasingly important theme. It's unsurprising many students want to see elements of online learning carried forward post-pandemic. To improve access, providing a wider range of options—including blended, hyflex and online learning—will allow institutions to cater to the evolving needs of today's students. A greater emphasis on asynchronous learning supported by collaboration tools will also help students take control of their education, making it easier for more people to reap the benefits of a college education. This includes investing in high-quality, interactive digital courseware to reduce the costs of materials and make learning as valuable outside the classroom as in.



## Enabling faculty and students to build connections

What has become clear is that institutions cannot rely solely on the campus experience to foster the community and belonging so fundamental to academic success. Our research continues to bear out the significant impact of community building and quality feedback on the overall student experience.

Creating environments where students are comfortable speaking up and showing vulnerability is the backbone of substantive learning. To support this, institutions need to equip students and faculty with the tools to nurture human connections, knowing that learning in the future will happen virtually as often as it does in a physical classroom. And in a world of growing diversity, institutions must also leverage technology to help faculty understand the diverse backgrounds and interests of their students to ensure their lived experience is reflected throughout the curriculum.

Students who say their learning experiences are marked by discussion and interaction—and that challenge them to apply knowledge—are much more likely to be motivated in their studies. They're also more likely to say their education is worth the cost of tuition. Active learning is no longer a 'nice to have.' It's strongly correlated with the perception of student value and should be understood as a fundamental element in fostering the motivation to learn.

# The tools for success

The foundation for improving outcomes is ensuring faculty have access to ‘small data’ that can be served up in real time through ‘always-on assessments’ such as low-stakes quizzes and classroom polls. This helps to gauge student progress early and often while providing the mechanism to deliver the feedback students need. The ability to demonstrate caring and provide support at scale is especially important in large introductory courses where students are at their most vulnerable and their success is least assured.

**“Active learning is no longer a ‘nice to have.’ It’s strongly correlated with the perception of student value and should be understood as a fundamental element in fostering the motivation to learn.”**

By being equipped with real-time insights into student progress, educators can also spot the early signs of struggle, allowing institutions to begin addressing student wellbeing—an area of deep concern—within the classroom. By combining data with mentorship, we can also create environments marked by empathy where students not only feel listened to, but understood and supported.





# About Top Hat

Top Hat is the only all-in-one courseware platform that enables active learning—a proven student-centred teaching pedagogy that promotes deep understanding, critical thinking, and subject mastery—with interactive content, tools, and activities. Millions of students at 750 leading North American colleges and universities use Top Hat to teach and engage with students before, during, and after class, in both in-person and online education.

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