

Key Questions for Online Learning: Where Digital Living and Education Meet

Online learning, or e-learning, is the use of technology to deliver instruction and facilitate and enhance learning. Online learning today includes rich interactive media to promote deeper learning and access to tools that help students reflect on their skills, abilities, and progress as learners. As it has gained in both popularity and promise, online learning has become a priority for institutional leaders to understand and apply to their institution's particular pedagogical culture and strategic priorities. This EDUCAUSE research brief outlines key questions leaders should ask—and relevant data to consider—to help develop or refine a strategic direction for online learning and the digital engagement it enables.

How many online courses do you offer?

Institutions most likely be to offering "a significant number":

- Community colleges (80%)
- Public universities (68%)

Least likely to offer online courses:

- 36% of private bachelor's institutions have never offered online courses

Is online learning a priority for your institution?

Eighty-five percent of institutions view e-learning as a strategic priority, and 81% see it as an investment. Fewer institutions are translating those views into specific actions (figure 1).

In the past year, almost half (47%) of undergraduate students have taken a completely online course, and one in three faculty (35%) have taught an online course. However, students vastly prefer courses with some online components (62% of students) to completely online courses (8%).¹ There is no single model "for determining the proportion of courses that should be taught online, how e-learning services should be managed, or whether MOOCs should be considered. Academic leaders need to consider both their mission and their market...."²

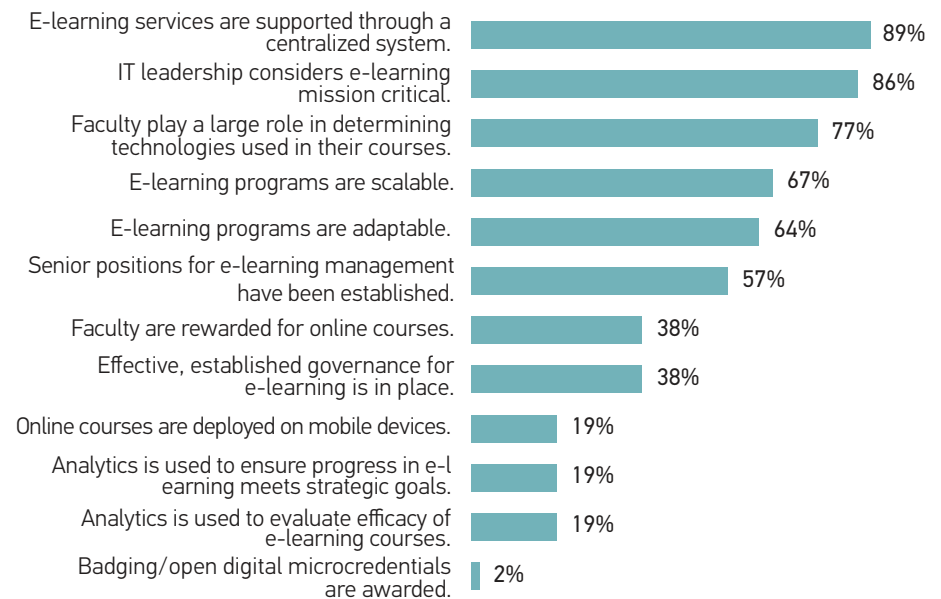


Figure 1. Institutional e-learning practices

¹ Eden Dahlstrom and Jacqueline Bichsel, *ECAR Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2014*, research report (Louisville, CO: ECAR, forthcoming).

² Jacqueline Bichsel, *The State of E-Learning in Higher Education: An Eye toward Growth and Increased Access*, research report (Louisville, CO: ECAR, June 2013), available from the [ECAR E-Learning Research Hub](#).

Will online learning be more (or less) important to your institution in the next three years?

Online learning is viewed as a competitive advantage: 91% of institutions have at least minor concerns about their ability to keep up with other institutions in e-learning (figure 2).

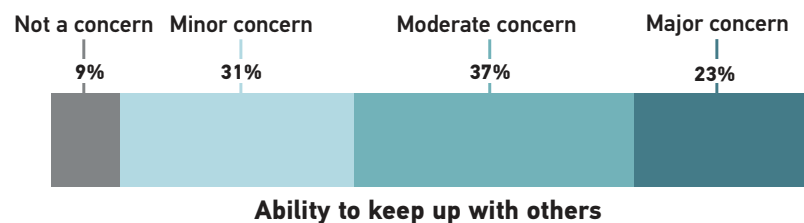


Figure 2. Competition as an e-learning concern

Online learning is unlikely to become less important, at least in the near future. The number of institutions offering online learning is very large and growing (figure 3).



Figure 3. Institutions offering online learning

Which digital technologies are most appropriate for your goals, and what are others doing?

Institutions' initial investments in online learning may support the electronic delivery of information, such as recorded or streamed lectures, faculty PowerPoint slides, or syllabi. Many institutions are further using technology to deepen learning, improve student outcomes, and introduce efficiencies. As shown in table 1, different investments in e-learning will support different strategic priorities.

Table 1. Relationship of priorities to investments

Institutional Priority	E-Learning Investment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting enrollment growth Providing additional revenue streams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online degree programs, telepresence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing institutional reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High-quality online learning experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimizing duplicative offerings, increasing consistency Offering students increased flexibility in course offerings and in access to course resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online courses or course segments Course and curriculum management analytics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving and revitalizing teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional technology centers of excellence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing the learning experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis on adaptive learning environments Games, simulations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerating the time to degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student success analytics Integrated planning and advising services

Which digital technologies are most appropriate for your goals, and what are others doing?

Many established and emergent technologies can support student engagement with individual courses, faculty, and the institution. Consider both your institutional priorities and whether you need to focus on particular groups of students or the entire study body to help determine your choice of technologies and the degree to which you deploy them (figure 4).

Implications

Online learning is here and almost certainly in most institutions' future. New initiatives should begin with the institution's strategic goals and student needs, harmonize with its culture, and only then consider the solutions that best fit. Faculty play a key role: Don't forget to involve them in the solution, support their learning curve, and consider introducing incentives for designing and delivering e-learning.

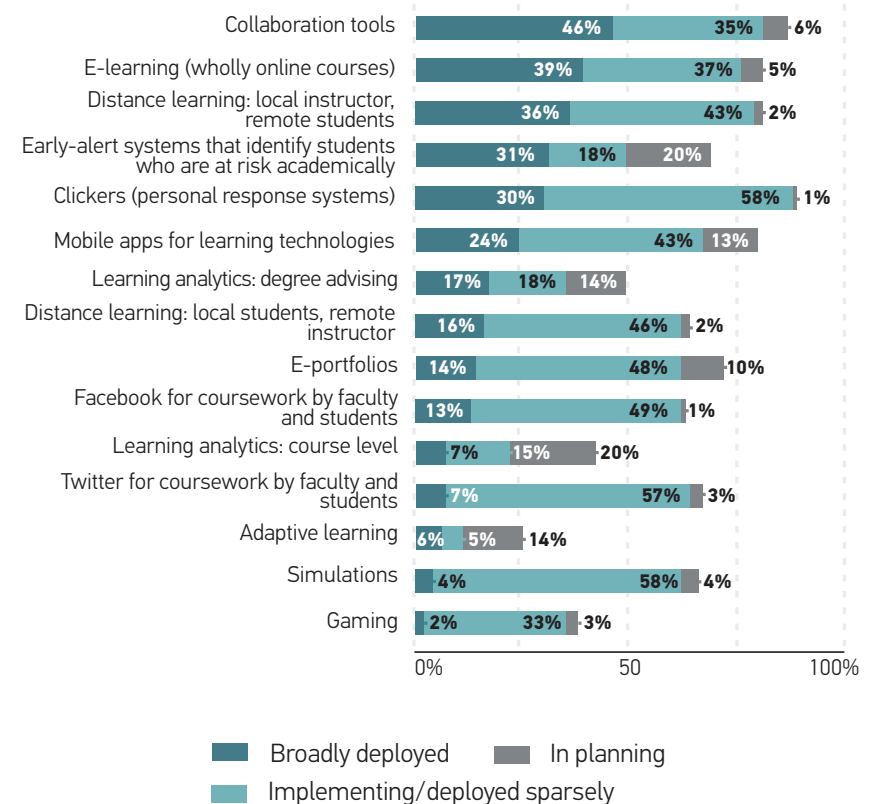


Figure 4. Institutional use of digital engagement technologies

About This Brief

This report is one of a series of executive briefs designed to help institutional leaders optimize the impact of IT in higher education. It was supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation. To read the other briefs and access related resources, go to [Resources for Presidents and Senior Executives](#).



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