Thriving Through Challenge:
Supporting Student Success in Higher Education
Insights and Actions for Today’s Higher Education Institutions

The global pandemic has shifted and shaped priorities for everyone and everything. That’s certainly true in higher education, where protecting the health and safety of students, faculty, university employees, and campus communities will likely mean the continuation of distance and hybrid learning, social distancing, and so forth well into the future. As a result, institutions have to be highly adaptable and efficient—even with budgets straining due to the impact of COVID-19—in order to continue meeting students’ evolving needs.

This e-book draws from our global study, The State of Student Success and Engagement, which surveyed 7,070 current students, administrators, and faculty in 13 countries to gather the latest student success data. It highlights key student success insights drawn from the study that are shaping higher education today. It also explains why each insight matters and what actions higher education leaders should consider to build a technology strategy using the Canvas Learning Management Platform.

Technology is a critical enabler of student engagement and success across all socioeconomic groups.

That’s especially true when you consider students’ current struggles to continue learning and connecting. According to our survey, students around the world are feeling the impact of the pandemic keenly in areas related to their success (85%), academic progress (71%), and work/career readiness (70%). Additionally, more students feel they’re falling behind on their studies than before (70%)—and especially individuals from less privileged backgrounds.

Lack of high-speed internet access is also a significant barrier for some students. The inability to utilize university facilities and learning resources can create insurmountable obstacles to their success.

COVID-19 is impacting...

- Student Success: 85%
- Academic Progress: 71%
- Work/Career Readiness: 70%
- Falling Behind: 70%
A mere 11% of students with a self-identified lower-economic status said it was very easy to stay engaged with remote learning, compared to 48% of students with a self-identified higher-economic status, according to our survey.

A strong technology strategy built around communication and productivity tools can help move the needle in the right direction. Implementing and maximizing the capabilities of a unified learning management platform is increasingly important to supporting diverse learners, reinforcing strategies aligned to student success initiatives, and keeping students from falling behind.

Tools that help institutions bridge these gaps and push initiatives forward can help them better provide equitable access and diverse learning options for students across socioeconomic lines. These tools can also ultimately make a profound difference in student engagement and success, now and in the future.

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Students from self-identified lower economic classes are more than 4x as likely to report difficulty in staying very engaged in online/remote learning.

Lower Socio-Economic Status
Self-Identified

Higher Socio-Economic Status
Self-Identified
KEY INSIGHT: Think more holistically—and go beyond the lecture.

ACTION ITEM: Build teaching habits that support mental well-being and success beyond just grades.

The recent shift toward a more holistic focus on the student includes paying attention to not just student academic success and career readiness, but also mental well-being. And according to Inside Higher Ed's 2020 Survey of Colleges and University Student Affairs Officers, “nearly all student affairs officers say they spent significant time in the past year responding to matters related to student mental health (94%) and student well-being (91%).”

This focus on mental well-being has never been more important in higher education than it is now, as everyone continues to deal with the challenges of COVID-19. Providing this kind of support requires an extra layer of work, as our global survey revealed that students are less likely than administrators to know what resources are even available to help them.

In many cases, institutions provide a range of student services, including academic support, grants for economically disadvantaged students, career development, and educational technology resources, all to ensure students are getting the help they need outside the classroom. But research shows that in many cases, less than 50% of students are aware that these resources are available. Closing that awareness gap is just one more way to help students succeed.

Why this matters

Especially with today’s challenges to face-to-face experiences and interactions, it’s important to think beyond the lecture. Explore alternative ways for students to connect, build relationships, and create meaningful networks of peers, all of which can benefit social interaction and overall well-being.

Some institutions are responding with extra faculty training, student support programs, and external resources intended to help students with their psychological well-being and overall life skills. At the same time, schools and universities can’t forget to support students in building relationships and discovering opportunities as they graduate, and even working with employers to help bridge perceived skill gaps.

We’ve seen varying approaches in the thousands of higher education institutions we’ve worked with across the globe. This has included project-based learning, which enables students to use critical thinking, communication, and creativity to address real-life challenges, find solutions, and prove their knowledge on a project over an extended period of time.

Practicing project-based learning in connection with businesses or community partners gives students the opportunity to work collaboratively and develop life skills needed for today’s workplace. Faculty can leverage online badging, certificates, and portfolios to assess this learning while helping students showcase their skills through completed projects.
How Canvas can help

Faculty have a wealth of creative ways to use Canvas Modules to keep students engaged and show that they care about each one. For example, they can use Canvas Surveys to create a simple weekly essay-style quiz question to check in with students privately. This can be used to see if they’ve completed the week’s assignments and identify any barriers they’ve had to getting work done, whether those are technical or personal in nature. Students may reply in their choice of writing, audio, or video.

Also, designing coursework that allows students to work collaboratively in chat rooms or video conferences can help them stay engaged and connected, which is especially essential in a remote-learning environment.

Canvas Folio Management gives students a digital portfolio and an institution-branded network in which they can showcase their capabilities and connect with peers, faculty, and potential employers. At the same time, it offers institutions data and insights into student growth and success. All of this supports increased peer-to-peer interactions and creates a spirit of “we’re all in this together.” Canvas Folio Management also helps faculty see success in the works. With a dashboard of insights into skills, connections, and other success-related metrics, institutions can stay up to date with students’ growth and achievements.

Canvas Pathways uses badging as a scalable way to engage students by inspiring them to achieve through positive reinforcement. This badging can yield compounding returns: As students accrue badges, they become more invested in both the learning and badge-earning processes. Badges can also help benefit the student as an active learner while providing a tool that supports career readiness and eventual recruitment within the growing standard of competency-based hiring.
KEY INSIGHT:
Keep your faculty engaged.

ACTION ITEM: Support faculty with in-depth training to help them use technology most effectively.

Our survey verifies a well-known and leading contributor to academic success: the quality of faculty. That means not just the experience and skills they bring to their jobs, but also their access to technology and their ability to create engaging content and instruction overall.

As we work with educators around the world, we see technology often used as a facilitator to support connections between teachers and students. But even with the increasing use of technology today, students and administrators alike value hands-on learning and collaboration that technology simply can’t replace.

When asked what factors are considered to be the main drivers of student success, students and administrators named the following, reinforcing that technology is best used when paired with interactive content and opportunities for connection beyond devices:

- Quality of faculty: 88%
- Technology availability: 86%
- Engaging content/instruction: 86%
- Hands-on instruction: 86%

Survey respondents also highlighted the importance of the teacher-student connection, saying faculty are responsible for shaping students’ minds by creating an environment that empowers students to apply themselves and take ownership of their learning.

Why this matters
When students experience direct involvement from their instructors, they feel more successful. Therefore, creating opportunities for in-person interactions in a digital environment is critical for both institutional and student success.

There are numerous ways to support faculty in this mission. For example: investing in professional development that focuses on best practices in adopting learning technology, providing ongoing faculty support through instructional designers and educational technologists, and encouraging faculty collaboration and communities for ongoing inspiration and the sharing of best practices.

When creating a learning environment that facilitates instructor involvement, focus on tools that support interactive collaboration, feedback loops, and both synchronous and asynchronous video communication. The delivery of high-quality, differentiated learning experiences with apps and immersive technologies can help faculty and students alike thrive and connect in a time when connection proves challenging.

Hands-on instruction engages students in multiple modes of learning: kinesthetic, problem solving, and trial and error. While this may be more challenging with online learning, there are numerous ways to build diverse learning modalities into coursework. By combining video, for example, with collaboration tools that provide instant feedback, peer comments and feedback loops, faculty can support opportunities for increased student engagement.

Emerging options like immersive technology and virtual reality are worth considering for their ability to open up new adaptive learning channels over time and as budgets allow for it.

Canvas | Supporting Student Success in Higher Education
How Canvas can help

Canvas Studio engages learners and instructors through video content, allowing them to share, comment, and give feedback, all within the video timeline—and all in real time. In this way, learners can learn from each other’s insights and the instructor’s.

Canvas Studio makes it easy for faculty to create engaging video, and for students to participate in dynamic conversations as they view that video independently. It provides a platform for students who might otherwise be passive and non-participatory in class to interact and participate.

Students can submit videos as part of any project. And like with the rest of Canvas, SpeedGrader functionality makes it easy for teachers to apply rubrics and offer quick, targeted feedback on video submissions in Canvas.

Faculty can easily assess students by choosing from a variety of question types and creating a quiz directly on the video timeline. Students can then watch the video and answer questions as they go—or after the video is over. They get immediate feedback on how well they did and their performance data transfers directly into the Canvas GradeBook.

“Our goal is to lead and transform education. To do that, we need to ensure our institution is using a leading LMS. Canvas has helped us take our teaching and learning to a new level regarding student engagement, flexibility for learning, and data-driven decision making.”

— Kyle Snowdon, Digital Learning Manager, Lethbridge College, Canada
KEY INSIGHT: Design online learning with intention.

ACTION ITEM: Incorporate best practices to create a sustained online learning environment that delivers superior student experiences across devices.

Creating meaningful, interactive experiences between faculty and students—and connecting students with each other—will be critical to sustaining student engagement as the pandemic continues. Moving from temporary, emergency measures to more intentionally designed online learning is key.

Even as educators adapted their pedagogies to the technologies at hand in 2020, students struggled with the more basic need of accessibility as campus computer labs closed and high-speed WiFi became unavailable. Keeping students engaged with their instructors and their peers is difficult under normal circumstances, and has proven even more so in this new reality.

As you might expect, our survey found that COVID-19 is indeed impacting student engagement, career readiness, and academic progress. Unfortunately, many students have fallen behind.

Fortunately, faculty, students, and technology leaders also believe in the potential of digital learning. Faculty says it makes them more effective and makes students more engaged and efficient. Students say it helps them boost their grades, complete their homework, and organize their schedules. Technology leaders agree that learning technology can help improve outcomes and provide a richer and more personalized learning experience across the board.

Our survey found that many respondents have a more positive opinion towards online learning now than they did before COVID-19 emerged in the world, according to 60% of APAC, 47% of EMEA, and 48% of U.S respondents.

We see many educators leveraging technology to create a more immersive experience that allows students to discuss and collaborate virtually, rather than watching one-way video lectures. We’ve also noticed institutions using audio and video tools to offer personalized and targeted feedback to individual students. As they do this, they transform the traditional grading process into an important opportunity for connection.
How Canvas can help

Canvas supports faculty in their efforts to deliver blended and online learning while giving them the freedom to explore and evolve their approach to teaching and learning. Plus, it comes with a wealth of resources to help faculty and students make the most of their learning management platform and tools. Instructors love Canvas because it enables them to easily import, build, and manage courses, and grade and communicate with their students. Students love Canvas because of its highly customizable notification system, its integration with their favorite devices and social platforms, as well as its interactivity, and—yes—ease of use.

Course and group-level announcements and discussions help faculty personalize and deliver highly targeted communication while also helping students easily engage with each other. For groups or individuals in classes big or small, Canvas helps keep those who need to know in the know.

With Canvas course-level analytics, faculty can keep a real-time eye on how their students are doing and contact them immediately via Canvas. A little adjustment at the right time can have a massive impact on a students’ long-term success.

Canvas Community
The Canvas Community has more than a million members and is the most active community in education. It’s where anyone interested in the Canvas learning management platform can go to find resources, share ideas, and connect with other Canvas users.

Canvas Commons
Canvas Commons is a shared learning object repository that enables educators to find and import learning resources, and share them with other users. It’s a digital library full of educational content that can be easily added to Canvas courses.

Why this matters

Consistent, familiar learning environments, both physical and digital, improve learning experiences—while helping faculty elevate learning and simplify their administrative tasks. The seamless integration of tools goes a long way toward reducing obstacles to learning. But achievement can be even greater when those tools leverage the power of native operating systems and apps to create consistent user experiences.

If institutions want to increase student success, they need to emphasize the needs of individual students. This includes providing equitable access to resources, offering flexibility that improves the ability to engage in in-person and online classes, as well as finding ways to help students complete their coursework and navigate their educational journeys to completion. With this in mind, instructional design must be approached with empathy to meet students where they are academically, socially, and emotionally.

Sean Nufer, an educator at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and 2020 Canvas Educator of the Year winner, shared how he prioritizes connecting with students in a recent discussion: “The community that you have in a traditional classroom is not replicated online. We have to be purposeful in building those connections ... and those connections are vital, because without that network, what are we? We’re not just repositories of information. What brings education value are the connections we make that last beyond the three credits or 16 weeks.”
KEY INSIGHT:
Find ways to set students up for career success.

ACTION ITEM: Develop a more holistic focus on the student.

Our research brings to light some key differences in how schools and students define success. While students and administrators agree about work and career readiness being important, they disagree about landing a job as a direct factor of student success. Students and administrators do agree on the top three factors that contribute to student success: work/career readiness, student educational goals, and holistic development (defined as self-discipline, communication, knowledge, and personal reflection). However, of these three factors, students are more likely to consider a job in their field of study (71% vs. 68%) as the top measure.

Administrators are more likely than students to place importance on traditional success measures like student educational attainment (75% vs. 69%), graduation (70% vs. 66%), retention (62% vs. 52%), transfer rates (44% vs. 39%), minority student graduation rate (59% vs. 53%), at-risk student graduation rate (58% vs 51%), time to completion (60% vs. 54%), co-curricular engagement (56% vs. 51%), non-cognitive assessment scores (52% vs. 45%), and alumni giving (41% vs. 35%).

Meanwhile, students rate their advancement (73% vs 72%), satisfaction with the university experience (73% vs 71%), and grade point average (61% to 59%) higher on their lists.

Why this matters
Even just the knowledge that students and educators in higher education define student success differently can be a catalyst for educators to better align themselves with students’ goals and needs. And the right learning management platform can help everyone maintain a united focus on both student engagement and success. This platform can act as a hub of tools and resources that can be used both inside and outside of the classroom, helping to eliminate technology roadblocks for faculty and students.

Even better if this platform is a cloud-native, open-source, software-as-a-service (SaaS) solution that’s easy to customize and integrate with other technologies. This kind of platform not only minimizes the number of digital tools an instructor must access daily, but also gives educators more time to personalize their content and enhance learning.

A unified platform approach can help your organization:
- Prioritize student engagement and success
- Deliver choice and scalability
- Promote openness and access
- Accelerate learning
- Create long-term partnerships
- Support data-driven decision making
- Simplify teaching

Supporting Student Success in Higher Education
Canvas Catalog allows us to offer over 100 modularized, skills-based courses that provide students with the opportunity to upskill and gain access to in-demand industries in our service area.”

— Dr. Josh Duplantis, Dean of Workforce Development, Coastal Alabama Community College

How Canvas can help
Aligning education with job demand will only become more important over the next year as students continue to feel concerned about how their education is preparing them for a post-COVID-19 workforce.

This is just one area where the Canvas Learning Management Platform shines. With Canvas, you can effectively connect teachers to students through ubiquitous communication. Features like Mastery Paths make it simple for institutions to offer personalized learning pathways based on student mastery of concepts and skills throughout their journeys.

Additionally, Canvas Catalog—a modern, institution-branded storefront for your course offerings—can be used to encourage both current and future graduates to return to learning and continually sharpen their skills. Portfolium can help students showcase their experiences in the classroom and achieve their career goals outside of it, giving them space to curate achievements, projects, and competencies in ways that will wow potential employers. And Canvas Studio lets educators create, deliver, and host highly engaging video content and even share feedback and conduct quizzes via video as well.

When combined, these offerings are designed to create a feedback loop for students seeking career readiness and knowledge, while attending to their needs in a holistic way. That's exactly the kind of environment students can thrive in.
Innovative higher-educational institutions choose Canvas.

The Canvas Learning Management Platform delivers an open, extensible learning ecosystem that allows schools to build a digital learning environment that meets the unique challenges of their institutions. Canvas simplifies teaching, elevates learning, and eliminates the headaches of supporting and growing traditional learning technologies.

Canvas is made up of a powerful set of highly integrated learning products that allow institutions to get all of the functionality they need and none that they don’t. By taking a holistic, platform approach to learning management tools, institutions can help faculty elevate learning while simplifying their administrative tasks, using:

- **A simple, intuitive interface.** Students can learn the platform once and carry that knowledge throughout their entire undergraduate (and even graduate) programs.
- **A Single sign-on.** With only one password to remember, faculty and students can seamlessly tap into countless educational resources.
- **Open software.** Institutions can hit the ground running from day one and customize the platform to suit their needs over time.
- **A cloud-based platform.** Enjoy nearly 100% uptime, without the need for onsite tech support or maintenance.
- **Scalability.** Canvas offers the flexibility to pay only for what you need and quickly adapt in an ever-changing landscape.

Canvas itself adapts, scales, and provides seamless integration with open third-party tools to help institutions leverage the same platform as they grow and shift priorities to meet the changing educational environment. Through open APIs and adherence to LTI standards, Canvas provides easy integration with a network of leading education technology partners to support your digital campus today and well into the future.

Learn how Canvas can help your institution build the foundation for an integrated, modern student experience.

See the Canvas difference at institutions across North America.

#1 Top Ten Universities

Top Business Schools

R1 Universities use Canvas