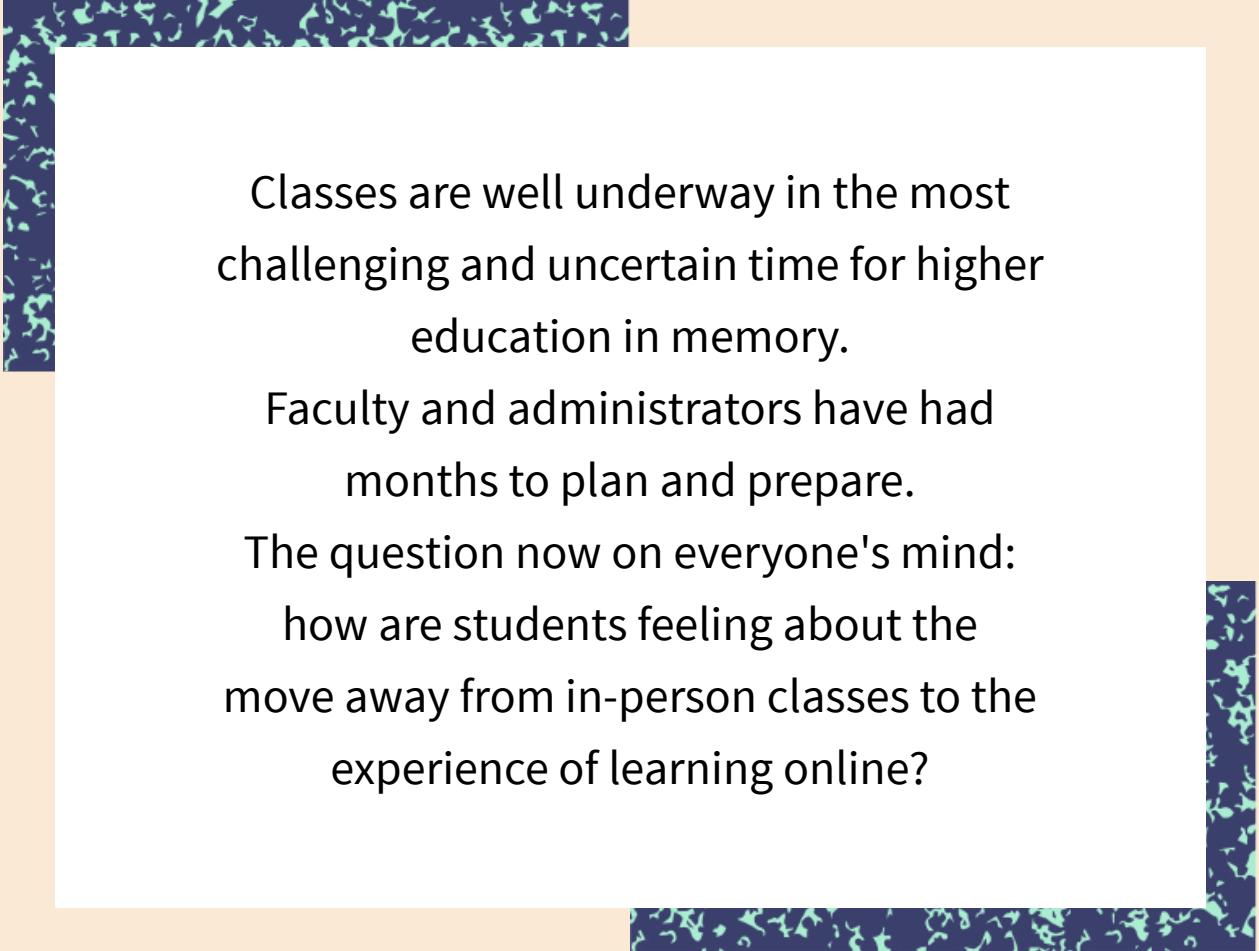# Higher Ed Students Grade the Fall 2020 Semester

TOP HAT

Classes are well underway in the most challenging and uncertain time for higher education in memory.
Faculty and administrators have had months to plan and prepare.
The question now on everyone's mind: how are students feeling about the move away from in-person classes to the experience of learning online?

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Surpassing a Low Bar?
The Fall 2020 Student Experience

When we talked to students amid the shuttering of campuses earlier this spring, colleges and universities faced an over-whelming task. Caught up in an unfolding global pandemic, students expressed understanding and even gratitude toward instructors faced with hastily transitioning their courses online. But they also made it clear the experience left much to be desired.

The spring 2020 term is hardly a fair benchmark in assessing the impact of online learning. But with months to prepare for the fall, has the student perspective changed? Are they finding the sense of community that is so central to academic success? Most important of all, do students believe they are getting value for their higher education investment?

In October 2020, we surveyed more than 3,000 college and university students from across the United States and Canada to find out.

Waiting on a miracle?

Unfortunately for many, the months of preparation for the fall academic term have yet to produce any dramatic improvements. Students continue to view online learning as the poor cousin of the traditional in-class experience. Learning virtually on the whole is seen as less engaging and student motivation outside of class continues to suffer. Many students are also contending with a cumbersome patchwork of technologies to 'attend' lectures, connect with faculty and access readings and other assignments.

The loss of campus resources has only compounded these challenges. The lack of reliable access to computers, the Internet and quiet study spaces are being deeply felt by many students. This is exacer-bating concerns about equity and access, with a majority of respondents expressing at least some worry about their ability to pass the current term.

Sobering findings, indeed. But when we dig a little deeper, we also find reason for optimism.

Hope (and hard work) springs eternal

Ahead of the fall 2020 term, we learned that faculty were making concerted efforts to embrace teaching approaches closely linked with student engagement and success. Judging by the responses to this survey, those efforts are starting to pay off.

While there is certainly room for improve-ment, a slight majority of students agree that their instructors are taking steps to

make learning in the virtual classroom more active. They're promoting discussion and integrating activities that get students working and collaborating together. They're taking time to get to know students, to provide timely feedback and to foster a sense of community and belonging.

Many students also report being equipped with technology beyond email to communicate with peers and instructors outside the 'classroom.' This is helping alleviate the sense of isolation so many felt when campuses closed abruptly in the spring. The right tools are also having a profound effect on how engaged students are in the learning process itself.

The incredible empathy instructors showed toward students has also continued. Only now is this being woven into the day-to-day learning experience. Our report finds that when instructors work to create a sense of community and to make learning more interactive, students are more engaged—and more motivated both in and out of class.

Still, there is work to be done. Based on their experience so far, many students are taking a wait-and-see attitude before committing to another term. What is clear though is that important strides are being made. A growing number of instructors are moving in the right direction—and that's good news for students and institutions alike.

About the Research

3,412

Survey responses were collected by Top Hat from 3,412 undergraduate students in the United States and Canada from October 2–11, 2020. Demographic breakdowns are as follows.

INSTITUTION TYPE

4-year public: 71%
4-year private: 18%
2-year public: 11%

COUNTRY

United States: 82%
Canada: 16%
Other: 2%

BREAKDOWN BY YEAR OF STUDY

First year: 47%
Second year: 26%
Third year: 16%
Fourth year: 11%

Making the (Virtual) Grade?

The fall 2020 academic term began under the shadow of COVID-19. Although faculty and institutions had time to plan over the summer, students are still struggling to adapt to learning online.

Student engagement is suffering, and so is their motivation

When it comes to engaging students online, many learners are reporting that their experience to date leaves room for improvement. But keeping students stimulated in online learning is only part of the issue. Just as we saw in spring 2020, a lack of engaging learning experiences means students are also struggling to stay motivated with their coursework outside of 'class.'

How much do you agree with the following statements?

The online learning experience is engaging inside the classroom.
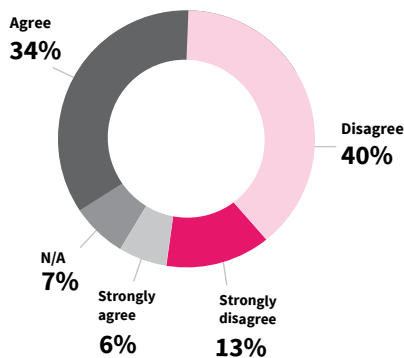
The online learning experience is engaging outside the classroom.
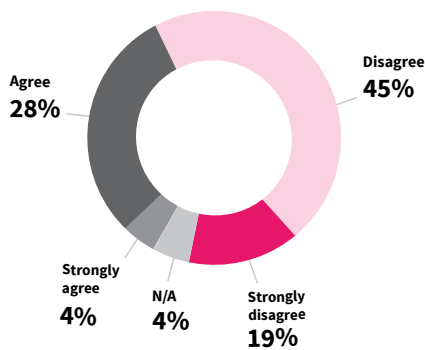
I am able to stay motivated and engaged with my education and coursework outside of class time.

Agree 34%
Disagree 40%
N/A 7%
Strongly agree 6%
Strongly disagree 13%

Agree 28%
Disagree 45%
Strongly agree 4%
N/A 4%
Strongly disagree 19%

Strongly agree 8%
N/A 1%
Strongly disagree 18%
Agree 38%
Disagree 35%
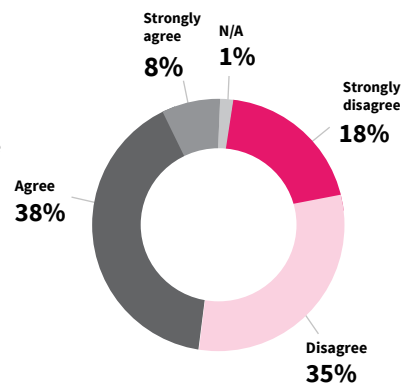
A lack of campus resources raises equity concerns

Disengaged virtually, students are having trouble adapting to learning online. Of course, it doesn't help that the need to balance coursework is compounded with additional caregiving responsibilities and the loss of campus resources many rely on to succeed academically. What are they missing the most? Reliable access to computers, the Internet and quiet study spaces needed to participate in virtual classes and complete assignments.

Have you experienced any difficulties in adjusting to online learning?

77%
Lack of engaging in-class experience

75%
Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class

48%
Lack of regular and reliable access to a quiet study space

39%
I have to balance my time spent on coursework with caregiving duties for family/dependants

24%
Lack of regular and reliable access to Internet

8%
I have not experienced any difficulties adjusting to online learning

5%
Lack of regular and reliable access to a computer

Despite faculty preparation, students still consider online learning less effective than in-person

Ahead of the fall 2020 academic term, institutions proactively invested in tools and training. Even so, many instructors felt ill-equipped to teach effectively online[1]—and many students appear to share their concerns. The online journey so far has been deemed ineffective by most, at least compared to the in-person classes they are used to.

Do you think you're learning as effectively online as you would have in person?

I don't know
8%

Yes
8%

About the same
15%

No
69%
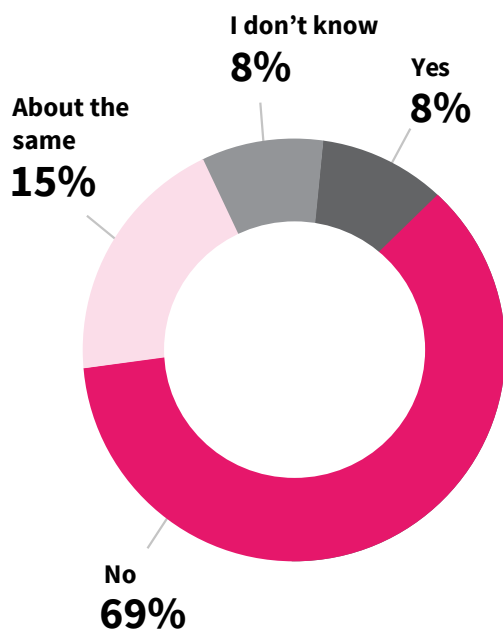
Are students seeing the value of online learning?

The fall academic term so far has hardly been a slam dunk. But there are indications things are moving in the right direction. Most students express at least some confidence they will see value in their higher education investment while only ten percent are not at all confident.

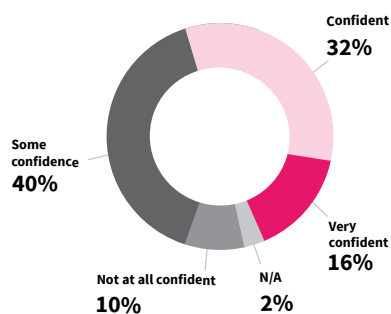Concerns about student retention continue to run deep at an administrative level. On the one hand, 57 percent of students say their opinion of their school has remained the same or actually improved, while 37 percent say it's gotten slightly or significantly worse. The good news is that the majority of students say they are likely or highly likely to continue their studies into the spring 2021 academic term. And only six percent of respondents are highly unlikely to carry on.

Based on your experiences so far this academic term, how confident are you that you will see the value of your higher education investment?

Confident
32%

Very confident
16%

N/A
2%

Not at all confident
10%

Some confidence
40%

How has your opinion of your school changed since you started this academic term?

Slightly better
13%

Significantly better
5%

Significantly worse
8%

N/A
7%

Slightly worse
29%

Same as before
38%
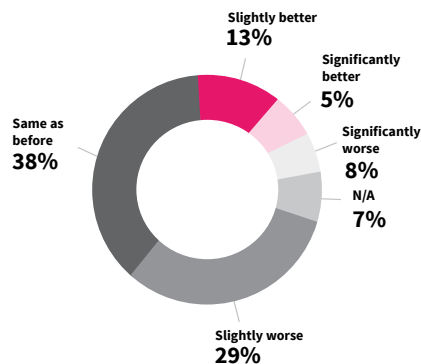
How likely are you to return to your current school for the spring term?

Highly unlikely
6%

Unlikely
4%

Highly likely
44%

Too soon to say
20%

Likely
26%
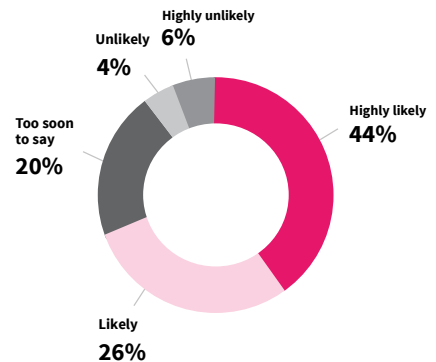
The Right Tools Make All the Difference

Technology adoption is presenting a number of challenges. But there are bright spots as well. Equipping learners to communicate effectively with peers and instructors in and out of class is showing a positive impact on engagement, motivation and student satisfaction with their higher ed investment.

Students are using a variety of tools to support their learning process

Technology is now central to the learning experience. Yet a significant number of instructors continue to rely on a patchwork of different solutions to communicate with students, run class meetings, and manage homework and other assignments.

With more technology in play, many students are struggling to find their virtual bearings. At a time when almost all students are learning online to at least some extent, close to 40 percent report difficulties navigating online learning tools. Almost 30 percent report similar challenges with accessing online learning materials.

What is the average number of technology tools and platforms used in your classes?

Category	Value
4+	50%
3	31%
2	17%
1	2%
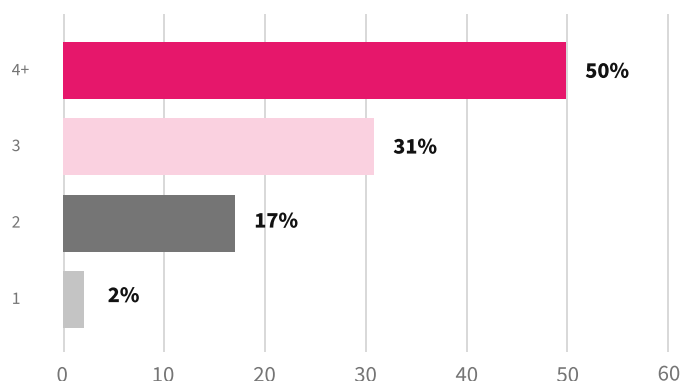
Have you experienced any difficulties in adjusting to online learning?

38%
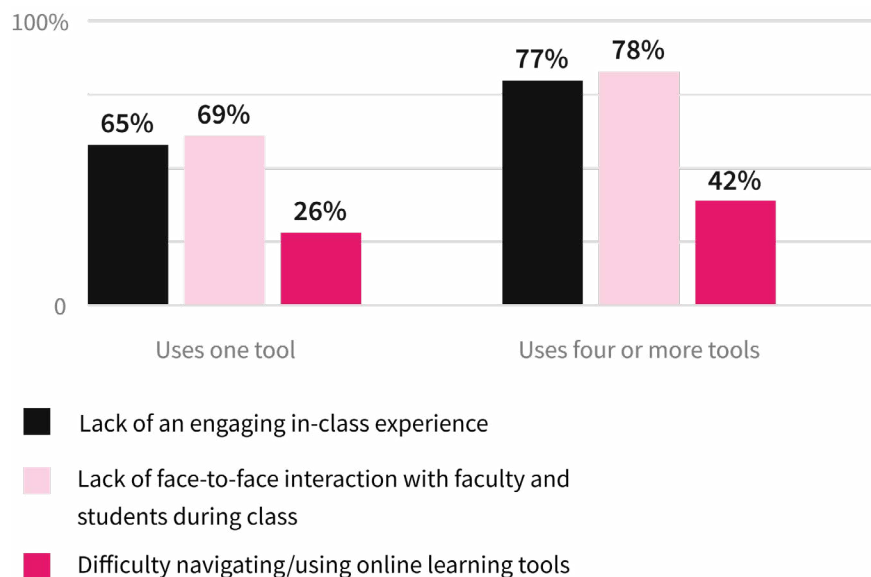Difficulty navigating/ using online learning tools

28%
Difficulty accessing online learning materials

More isn't necessarily better

The bottom line: too many tools isn't helping. Almost half of the students surveyed use four or more technology tools to support the learning process. When we dig a little deeper, we find these same students report having more difficulty navigating resources and are more likely to say the synchronous learning experience is unengaging. Despite more technology, they are also more prone to lamenting the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and faculty than those using fewer tools.

Have you experienced any difficulties in adjusting to online learning?

Chart data:

Uses one tool:
- Lack of an engaging in-class experience: 65%
- Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class: 69%
- Difficulty navigating/using online learning tools: 26%

Uses four or more tools:
- Lack of an engaging in-class experience: 77%
- Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class: 78%
- Difficulty navigating/using online learning tools: 42%

Legend:
- ■ Lack of an engaging in-class experience
- ■ Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class
- ■ Difficulty navigating/using online learning tools
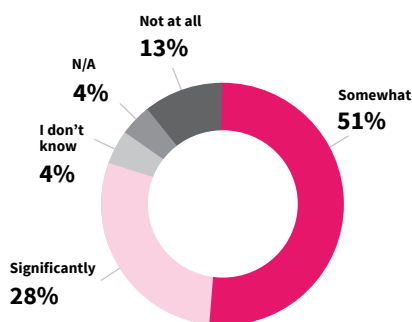
Live video is leading to better learning

Almost 80 percent of students say that video chat and live streaming have made online learning somewhat or significantly better. And the majority confirm they enjoy tuning into real-time lectures and discussions.

Seventy-two (72) percent of students responded positively when asked about the importance of using video to connect with instructors and peers. While most prefer to attend classes in person, 16 percent would continue to use video to engage with instructors and fellow students after the pandemic. And 41 percent are leaving the door open to this possibility.

How important is the ability to connect with teachers and classmates via live video?

- 4 - Very important: 38%
- 3: 34%
- 2: 19%
- 1 - Not important: 9%
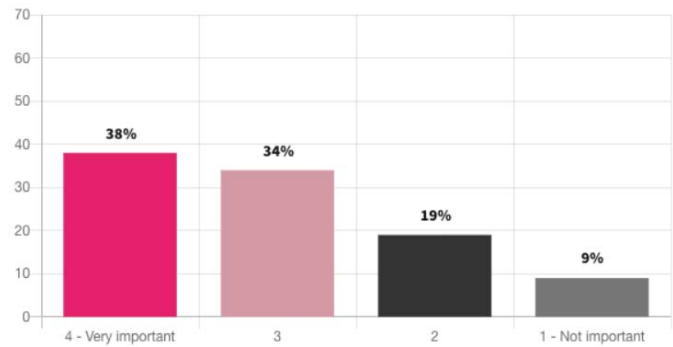
Has the ability to connect via video created a better online learning environment for you?

- Somewhat 51%
- Significantly 28%
- Not at all 13%
- N/A 4%
- I don't know 4%

How much do you like real-time lectures and discussions using video conferencing?

- I like this 41%
- I like this a lot! 25%
- Same as before 20%
- I dislike this 11%
- Unlikely 3%
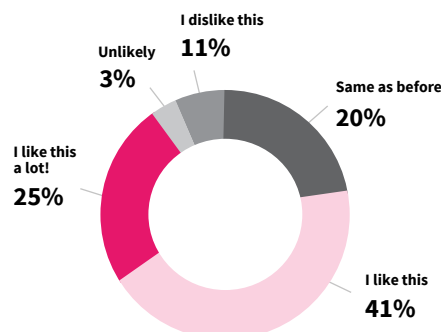
In a post-pandemic world, where online learning is no longer a must, would you continue to use video to engage with instructors and students virtually?

- Maybe 41%
- No 37%
- Yes 16%
- I don't Know 6%
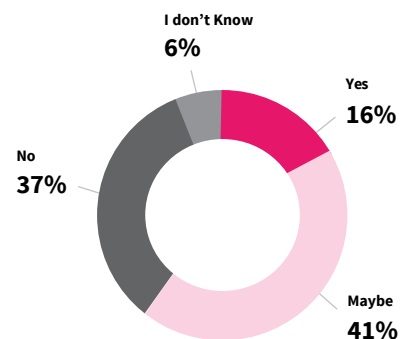
Students are better able to connect with faculty and peers

In the spring 2020 shift to emergency remote teaching, students missed having regular access to friends and professors. Thankfully, the majority of students now say they've been provided with tools beyond email to stay connected outside the 'classroom.' This is an important step as instructors use technology to form a greater sense of community and connection with remote learners.

I have been provided with tools beyond email I need to communicate effectively with **my instructor** in and outside of the 'classroom.'
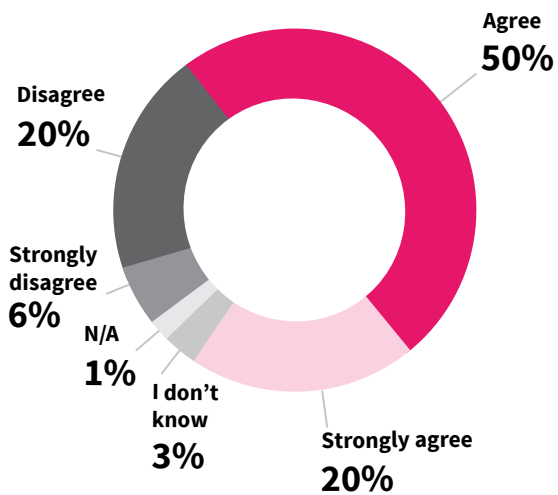
I have been provided with tools beyond email I need to communicate effectively with **my peers** in and outside of the 'classroom.'

Agree
50%

Disagree
20%

Strongly disagree
6%

N/A
1%

I don't know
3%

Strongly agree
20%

Agree
45%

Disagree
25%

Strongly disagree
10%

N/A
2%

I don't know
2%

Strongly agree
16%
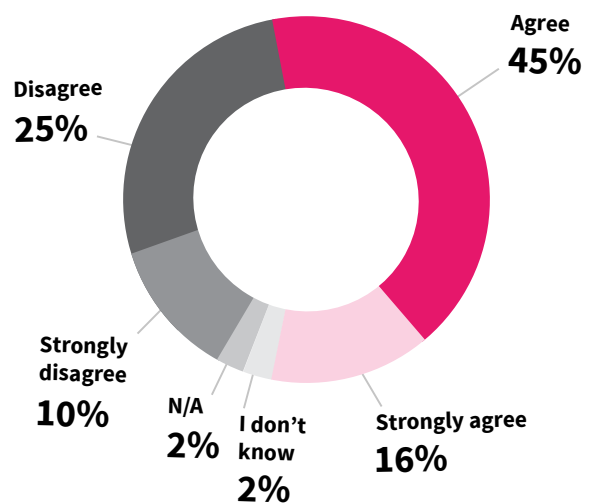
Helping students communicate outside of 'class' significantly impacts engagement and motivation

The right tools make all the difference. Students who agree they have been provided tools beyond email to communicate effectively with instructors and peers say they are significantly more motivated and engaged with learning outside of class than the average.

Providing effective communication tools has a significant impact on keeping students engaged and motivated outside of class.

Legend:
- Average positive responses
- Positive responses: I have tools to communicate with peers outside of class
- Positive responses: I have tools to communicate with instructors outside of class

The online learning experience is engaging outside of class: 33%, 67%, 73%

I am able to stay motivated and engaged outside of class: 47%, 62%, 72%
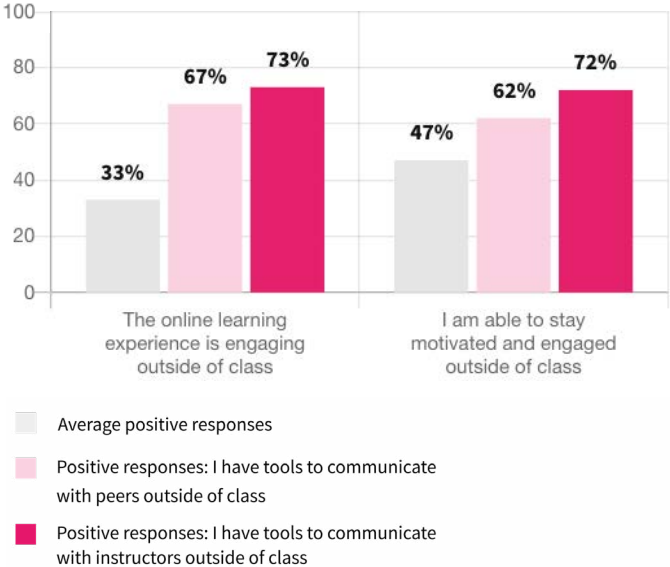
Changes to the Virtual Classroom Show Promising Results

The focus on making learning active and building community in the virtual classroom is paying dividends. Students who agree their instructors are doing well in these areas are more engaged overall and are more likely to see value in their higher education investment.
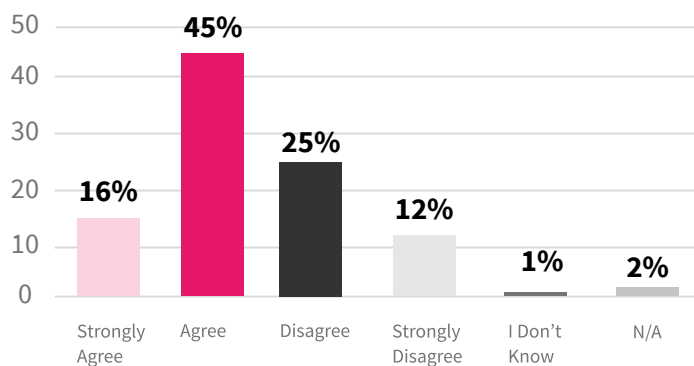
Instructors take steps to make learning active

Much of the training faculty received ahead of the fall academic term had to do with improving student engagement and learning outcomes. So far, it appears educators have taken these lessons to heart.

The majority of students agree their instructors are making regular use of activities that promote discussion and collaboration. What's more, they report being challenged to apply what they're learning in the virtual classroom. While there's still room for improvement, instructors are clearly moving in the right direction.

Do you agree that the training and support you have received aligns to best practices associated with 'active learning' or 'student-centered' learning?[1]
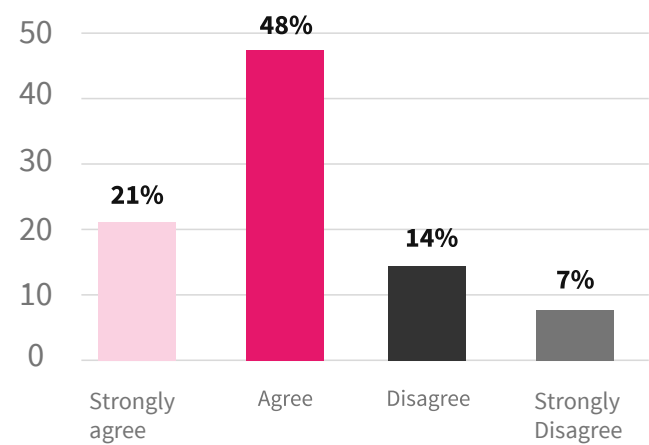
Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	21%
Agree	48%
Disagree	14%
Strongly Disagree	7%

My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that promote discussion and interaction among students.

Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	16%
Agree	45%
Disagree	25%
Strongly Disagree	12%
I Don't Know	1%
N/A	2%

Instructors take steps to make learning active

My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that get students working and collaborating together.

13%	41%	29%	14%	1%	3%
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I Don't Know	N/A

My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that challenge students to apply what they have learned.

18%	49%	21%	9%	1%	2%
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I Don't Know	N/A

Active learning is having an outsized impact on the student experience

Small changes make a big difference. Students who agree their instructors make regular use of activities to promote discussion and get students working and collaborating together find the online learning experience more engaging than the average.

The impact of making learning active doesn't stop here, either. The same respondents are also more likely to see value in their college investment and to have a higher opinion of their school.

Promoting discussion and collaboration in class shows a positive impact on engagement and perceptions of learning value.

Bar chart values:

The online learning experience is engaging inside of class: 43%, 66%, 59%

How confident are you that you will see value in your higher ed investment?: 49%, 61%, 54%

■ Average positive responses

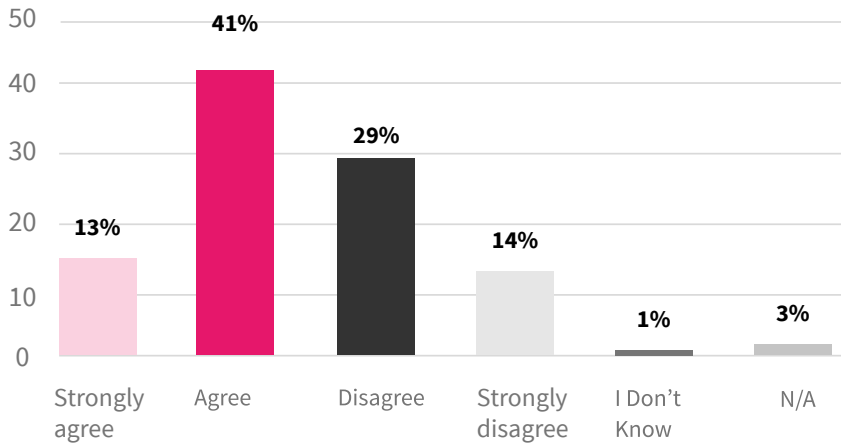■ My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that promote discussion and interaction among students
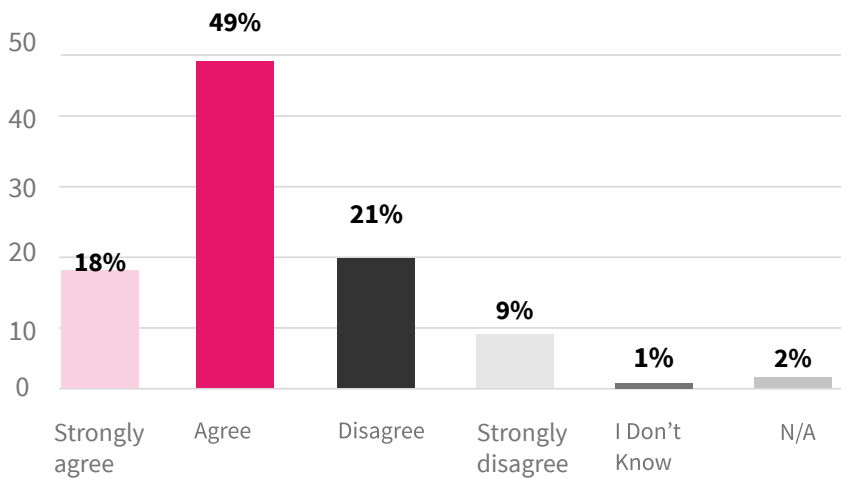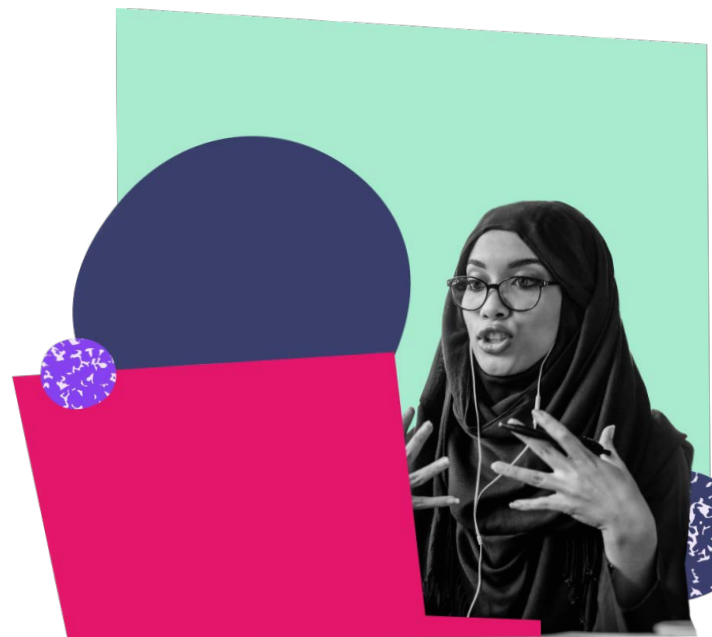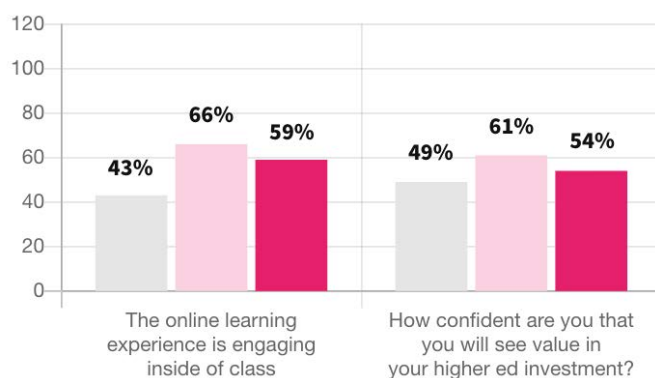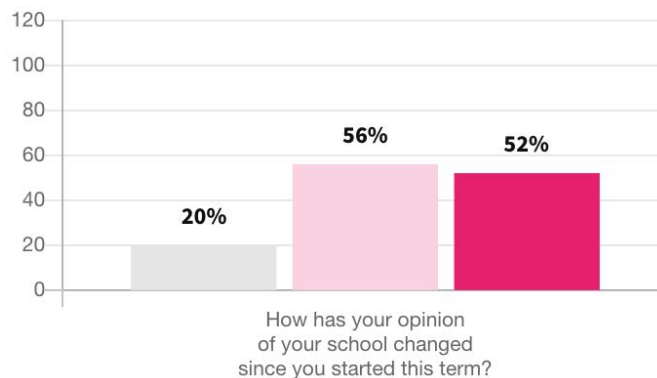
■ My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that get students working and collaborating together

Promoting interaction and collaboration in class also positively affects school opinion.

Bar chart values:

How has your opinion of your school changed since you started this term?: 20%, 56%, 52%

■ Average positive responses

■ My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that promote discussion and interaction among students

■ My instructors make regular use of activities during 'class time' that get students working and collaborating together

Instructors are embracing community building in the virtual classroom

Fostering a greater sense of community was a key concern for faculty in preparing for the fall 2020 academic term. The good news? Many instructors are embracing this mission. Taking time to understand student backgrounds, checking in to see how students are doing, providing timely feedback—it's all helping to connect learners with each other, their instructors and their institutions.

How important is fostering a sense of community amongst students in your classes?[1]

| Category	Percentage
Very important	57%
Important	28%
Somewhat important	9%
Not important	5%
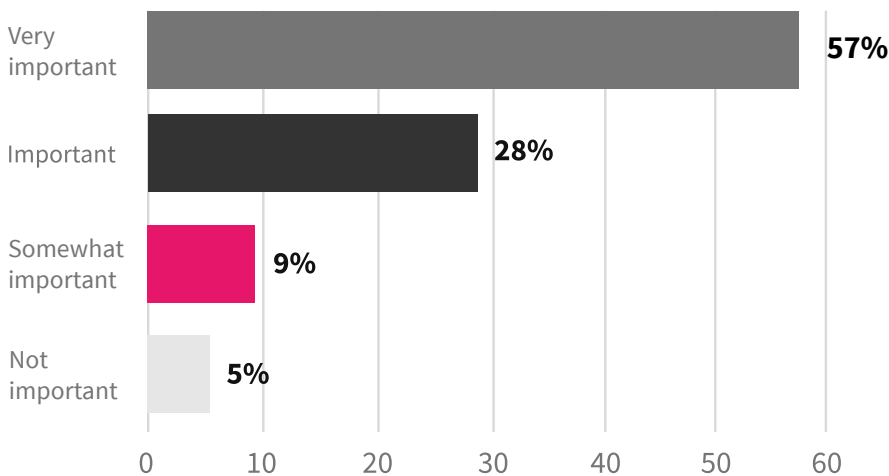
A sense of belonging has the power to improve student engagement

The importance of creating community in the virtual classroom cannot be overstated. Students who agree their instructors have taken steps to foster a sense of belonging are more likely to say the online learning experience is engaging—not just in class, but outside as well.

Belonging is a powerful thing. These same students are also more likely to stay motivated and engaged with coursework and to say that they are learning just as effectively online as they would have in person. Another promising sign: these students are more likely to see value in their education investment and to have a higher opinion of their school.

**Creating a sense of community and belonging has a positive effect on engagement inside and outside the classroom.**

Legend:
- Average positive response
- My instructors create a sense of community and belonging

Categories:
- The online learning experience is engaging inside the classroom: 43%, 66%
- The online learning experience is engaging outside the classroom: 33%, 70%
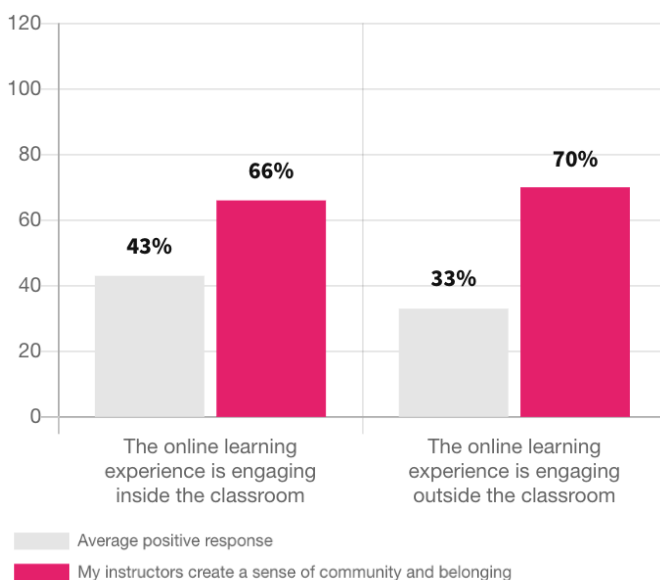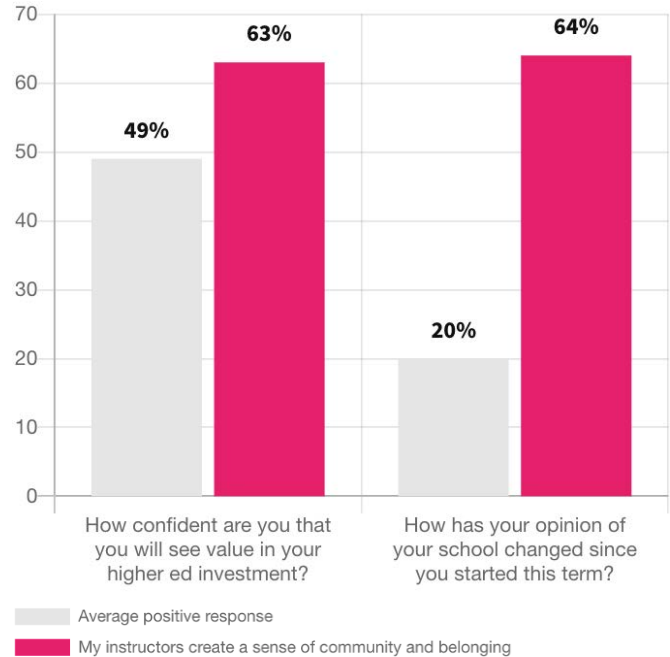
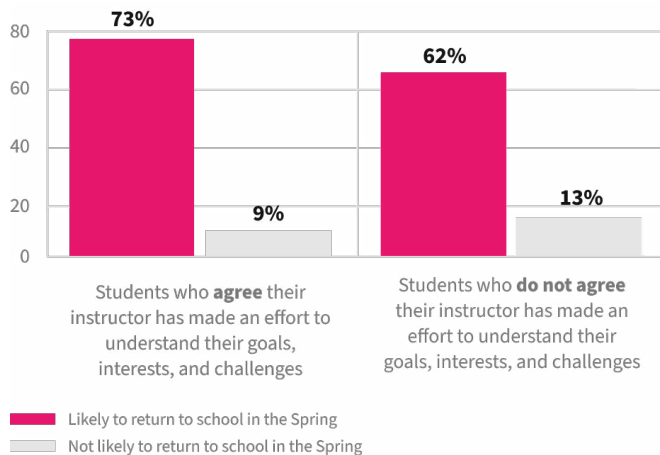# A sense of belonging has the power to improve student engagement

Community and belonging also affect student motivation and how effective online learning is perceived.
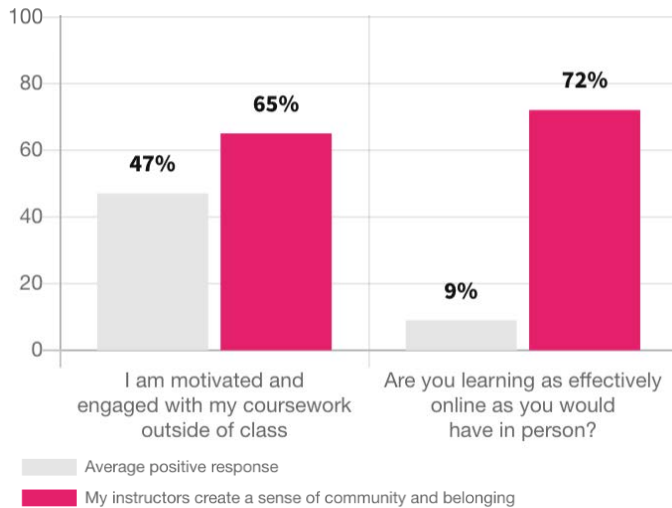
Community and belonging also have a significant impact on other important indicators of student satisfaction.

Legend:
- Average positive response
- My instructors create a sense of community and belonging

Categories: I am motivated and engaged with my coursework outside of class (47%, 65%); Are you learning as effectively online as you would have in person? (9%, 72%)

Legend:
- Average positive response
- My instructors create a sense of community and belonging

Categories: How confident are you that you will see value in your higher ed investment? (49%, 63%); How has your opinion of your school changed since you started this term? (20%, 64%)

Impact of instructors who get to know their students

Legend:
- Likely to return to school in the Spring
- Not likely to return to school in the Spring

Categories: Students who **agree** their instructor has made an effort to understand their goals, interests, and challenges (73%, 9%); Students who **do not agree** their instructor has made an effort to understand their goals, interests, and challenges (62%, 13%)

Transforming the Student Experience

Far from settling into the new normal, students—like the rest of us—remain anxious and uncertain about what the future has in store. The reality is, it's unlikely that spring 2021 will bring a return to the pre-COVID on-campus experience that so many crave. The current perception that learning online is less effective than in person is hardly helping stem concerns about a further drop in student enrollments.

COVID-19 will continue to roil the world of higher education for some time. But progress is being made and that's encouraging. More instructors are embracing proven approaches to elevate the online learning experience. Students are better armed with technology to communicate and collaborate with faculty and peers. And steps are being taken to create a sense of belonging in the virtual classroom. These efforts may suffer from a lack of consistency, but a promising picture is emerging.

Learning is active

The learning environment instructors create hugely impacts how motivated students are in their studies—and how willing they are to continue in their education. When professors promote discussion, when they get students working together and when students are challenged to apply important concepts, learning becomes more engaging and more rewarding. It also colors how students feel about the value they are receiving for their higher education investment. As this report suggests, this is just as true in the virtual classroom as it is in the physical one.

Asynchronous, or 'offline' learning options should be an essential part of any instructor's teaching toolkit, offering much-needed flexibility in these turbulent times. But to build trust and encourage the risk taking and debate that are the hallmarks of higher education, active, real-time participation is also necessary. The most effective courses take the best of both worlds, using class time to apply learning, and asynchronous methods to prepare students to engage with the material, their instructors and each other.

One more thing to manage

Many instructors understand what's needed to ensure their students succeed. But the challenge is that the technology being used isn't always up to the task. Roughly half of the students we surveyed use multiple tools to support the learning process, suggesting the Frankenstein approach employed in the spring remains an ongoing concern. Although

more instructors are taking time to help students get up to speed on the tools they will be using, almost 40 percent still report difficulties navigating these systems.

The lack of reliable access to the Internet and computers play their part. As do the difficult home environments many students learn in. But the larger issue lies in the lack of standardization on tools purpose-built for the virtual classroom. For the most part, decisions around class-room technology continue to rest with the instructor. How long this will continue remains to be seen. But the results of this patchwork approach so far suggest more of the same—a cumbersome and unnec-essarily disjointed learning experience for too many of today's students.

Strengthening student connections

Perhaps the most important takeaway in all of this is the remarkable power of community. Laura Freberg, a professor of psychology at California Polytechnic State University, recently echoed the widely understood belief that the pandemic has changed the way instructors teach. More concerningly for administrators, she noted it also "threatens the bonds that connect students to each other and their campuses."

As our analysis suggests, creating a sense of belonging in the virtual classroom has far reaching effects: Students are more engaged and have a higher opinion of their school. Creating community in the virtual classroom may be one of the best means available, not only to keep students engaged but enrolled as well.

Instructors may not be able to replicate the bonding that happens during sporting events or late night study sessions. But small changes do indeed make a big difference. Showing an interest in students personally. Understanding their backgrounds and passions and connecting this to course content. Providing timely, helpful feedback. And, as the author and learning sciences expert Michelle Miller champions, prac-ticing 'radical availability' in responding to student requests. In the same way that many drops fill a bucket, actions like these can have a profoundly posi-tive impact. By making community and connection an intentional goal, instruc-tors will get more students invested in each other, their courses and, ultimately, their chosen place of higher learning.

References:
1. Top Hat Field Report: COVID-19 Faculty Preparedness. Fall 2020 Edition.
https://tophat.com/teaching-resources/interactive/faculty-preparedness-survey/

tophat.com