REPORT

EMPOWERING CHANGE TOGETHER

Student Perspectives on Quality Online, Digital, and Blended Learning

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The Online Learning Consortium (OLC) is a collaborative community of education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching and learning experiences designed to reach and engage the modern learner — anyone, anywhere, anytime. OLC inspires innovation and quality through an extensive set of resources, including best-practice publications, quality benchmarking, leading-edge instruction, community-driven conferences, practitioner-based and empirical research, and expert guidance. The growing OLC community includes faculty members, administrators, trainers, instructional designers, and other learning professionals, as well as educational institutions, associations, and industry partners. Learn more at onlinelearningconsortium.org.

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The OLC's Research Center is a go-to source for original, evidence-based research on digital learning trends, innovations, and effective practices. We create community and knowledge around quality online, blended, and digital learning, and we position the dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a touchstone for all of the work that we do in service to our community and the field. Our research is driven by community priorities and field-wide trends and seeks to provide cutting-edge, actionable information for educators and practitioners. Our publications cover a range of genres, from peer-reviewed journal articles to edited collections, to reports and playbooks. Our premier journal, *Online Learning*, is ranked among the top 3% of all open-access journals in the field of education. The OLC Press, the official publishing imprint of the Online Learning Consortium, offers titles on leading-edge topics in online, blended, and digital learning, with works available in printed and digital formats. To learn more and read our newest publications, visit the Research Center website.

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Executive Summary

> *What does quality digital learning look like from a student perspective? How do students think quality digital learning can best center DEI principles?*

With these driving questions at the center of our work, we surfaced seven elements of quality digital learning from recent OLC conference panels that centered student voices. During these panels, students called for digital learning educators, practitioners, and leaders to 1) get beyond face-to-face replication; 2) take collaborative action on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); 3) keep humans and connection at the center of learning; 4) incorporate intentional and deep design; 5) structure learning experiences for success; 6) support professional development opportunities for their instructors; and 7) nurture a culture of belonging.

Elements of Quality Digital Learning	
Getting Beyond Face-to-Face Replication	• Students want more than face-to-face replication • Students want to engage in an online community • Students want to actively contribute to course design
Taking Collaborative Action on DEI	• Students want to move beyond buzzwords • Students want to be active contributors to DEI work • Students want an adaptable framework for DEI policy
Keeping Humans and Connection at the Center of Learning	• Students want an experience that has a human feel • Students want their instructor to be present and engaged • Students want instructors to facilitate meaningful connections with their peers

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This report explores these findings through deep engagement with student voices, culminating in [recommendations](#) for digital learning leaders, instructors, and support staff.

Introduction

As colleges and universities adapt to an ever-changing landscape, many educators are seeking best practices for developing learning experiences that meet student and organizational needs. However, disparate definitions of quality and differing instructor and student preferences complicate this work. A recent report from [Tyton Partners (2023)](#), for instance, reveals a misalignment of course modality preferences between students and faculty, with students preferring hybrid (blended) and digital options and instructors preferring face-to-face instruction. This misalignment actually runs much deeper, since students and faculty may not even define quality learning in the same way. Schindler et al. (2015) found that there are four major groups of stakeholders that must be considered when defining quality: providers (i.e. taxpayers), product users (students), employers (i.e. institutions), and employees (i.e. faculty and staff). Although they acknowledged that "in order to define quality and attempt to establish a culture of quality in higher education, all stakeholders should be involved in the discussion," they admitted that "each group has a different perspective on quality" (2015, p. 4). While Schindler et al. identified major categories for defining quality, their literature review confirmed that "there is still no consensus on a definition" (2015, p. 8).

This lack of consensus on what quality education entails raises significant concerns, especially as students are increasingly seeking flexible pathways to complete their degrees and meaningful engagement opportunities, which has created demand for more digital, blended, and online learning options. While students value flexibility, they also desire quality learning experiences that prepare them for their future careers. [Capranos, et al. (2023)](#) noted that many students "consistently expressed concerns about expectations, lack of instructor interactions, and instruction quality" (p. 12). Communication is also a challenge as the [CHLOE 8](#) report indicates that Chief Online Learning Officers (COLOs) are not sharing quality online offerings and support measures with currently enrolled or prospective students. In the report, Garrett et al. (2023) explained: "Even with the current enrollment challenges and increased demand by students for quality online offerings, only 18% communicate online academic support quality to prospective students, 17% communicate technical support quality, and even less discuss their online learning quality" (p. 43). Such findings exacerbate the challenge of reconciling faculty and student definitions of quality, since it highlights a trend of institutions not including students in quality conversations.

The lack of student perspective extends beyond institutions to the field more broadly. Online quality education indicators have been determined through scorecards and rubrics (see, for instance, the OLC's [Quality Scorecard Suite](#)), and these benchmarking tools have instantiated online learning excellence at institutions across the globe. While these resources are invaluable for institutions, they are most often designed by faculty, instructional designers, and academic leaders without much input from students. This highlights the field-wide need to further a shared understanding of what constitutes quality

in online education and ensure that educators, leaders, practitioners, and students are aligned.

This report aims to begin this work by highlighting student perspectives about quality online, blended, and digital learning. In undertaking this research, we were mindful of two challenges. First, while the phrases "putting students at the center" and "student-centered learning" are commonly invoked, we often lack research-driven strategies for translating these ideals into practice. In analyzing student voices, then, we also provide actionable strategies for multiple stakeholders (leaders, instructors, and support staff) to consider when implementing the student feedback. Our second concern was that, all too often, we may speak about what students want without listening to them speak in a sustained way about their needs, goals, and concerns. We want to challenge ourselves and the field to consider what students themselves have to say in this centered role. Inspired by the work of [Tyton Partners](#) (2023), Capranos et al. (2023), and prior collaborative efforts with Achieving the Dream (ATD) and Every Learner Everywhere ELE) that focused on [caring for students](#), we respond to this challenge by highlighting student voices to answer two key questions:

> ***What does quality digital learning look like from a student perspective? How do students think quality digital learning can best center DEI principles?***

As we considered these questions, we realized we had a highly informative dataset at our fingertips that could provide some answers. In the last few years, the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) featured four student panels at four separate conferences. We partnered with ELE and GlobalMindEd, both of whom have student fellows and ambassadors, respectively. To welcome student voices into our conferences, we sought the help of these two organizations in spotlighting their students as a way to surface the real needs and wants of the students we serve. The panels focused on building quality digital, blended, and online learning experiences that are centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles:

- Student Perspectives on Evidence-Based Teaching Practices ([OLC Innovate, 2022](#))

- Charting a Learner-Driven Future for Online Learning: A Student Panel on Centering Humanization and Care ([OLC Accelerate, 2022](#))

- If They Build It, They Will Come: Co-Constructing Diverse Pathways to Digital Learning With Our Students ([OLC Innovate, 2023](#))

- Empowerment Online: Students Share Their Digital Learning Journeys (Accelerate 2023 Panel ([OLC Accelerate, 2023](#))

During these sessions, 12 students from varying universities, backgrounds, and experiences were asked a number of questions about the impact of COVID on their educational experiences, what elements they value in a learning experience, their biggest digital learning challenges, and the support they need to succeed. Panelists included 1 Ph.D. student, 1 M.A. student, 2 alumni of undergraduate programs, and 8 undergraduate students. Our team downloaded the transcripts from these sessions and coded them to reveal seven major themes related to what students want from their learning experiences.
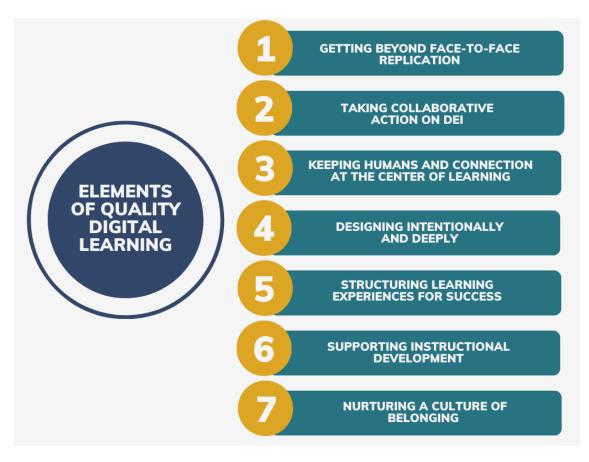
Overview: Elements of Quality Learning

Student panelists were very clear regarding their hopes for quality digital, blended, and online learning experiences. Seven essential elements of quality learning driven by DEI principles emerged from the perspectives students shared, including:

1. Getting beyond face-to-face replication and leveraging the strengths of digital teaching and learning;

2. Taking collaborative action on DEI;

3. Keeping humans and connection at the center;

4. Maintaining intentionality and depth in their design;

5. Structuring learning experiences for success;

6. Supporting instructional development; and

7. Nurturing a culture of belonging.

In the following sections of this report, we share key insights from the student panelists before offering recommendations based on these valuable student perspectives. These can be used to guide instructors, support staff, and leaders as they leverage digital, blended, and online learning as a part of their institution's strategy.

Figure 1

Seven Elements of Quality Digital Learning

Elements of Quality Learning

Getting Beyond Face-to-Face Replication

> *" I wish digital learning looked completely different."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022*

Students Want More than Face-to-Face Replication

As students reflected on positive and negative experiences in online courses, a common thread emerged: faculty were most effective when they stopped trying to replicate face-to-face instruction online and leaned into digital learning affordances. As a student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 explained, "I think a lot of what happened in the pandemic is we said, 'Oh no, we can't be in our classroom, so let's replicate the classroom – but online.' [...] But I think when you have a digital space online, you need to maximize it to its fullest potential and also recognize where it may not [be] the same as in-person learning." Examples students shared of failing to maximize online course potential included treating such courses as an extension of face-to-face courses, failing to provide informal engagement opportunities, relying on recorded lectures, and providing too much of what students perceived to be busy work. When asked if faculty have gotten better at this online course customization in the years that followed the original COVID-19 outbreak, one OLC Innovate 2022 student panelist simply stated that it's a "continuing problem," highlighting the ongoing need to maximize the unique affordances of online instruction.

Students Want to Engage in an Online Community

While students wanted to see creative strategies adopted for online courses, there was a critical component of face-to-face learning that they wanted to see maintained: engagement with instructors and classmates. Several students highlighted the importance of connection with their instructors, especially during the emergency remote shift that occurred in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. A panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 explained, "When COVID happened, we realized, as you said, people need people." They further indicated that they would like to see that sense of connection that faculty cultivated with students online during the pandemic continue. A panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 challenged educators to "spend those minutes with those students, get in there and spend the time in the rooms and talk, answer questions. Because for me discussion is one of the largest things that helps me the most. I can listen to a lecture, but it helps so much more if we can engage afterwards." Another element students wanted to maintain from face-to-face instruction was the intimacy of a small, shared community. As a panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 clarified, "In the online courses that were most beneficial to me, a lot of the same elements exist in a normal classroom. It's much more intimate and

there's a smaller amount of people in the class." A final student from OLC Innovate 2022 stressed that faculty should be "intentional in fostering class participation and recognizing that things are a little bit more difficult, too, for students socially when things are online and we're physically isolated from other students."

Students Want to Actively Contribute to Course Design

In addition to contributing to an active and engaged online learning community, students expressed interest in being consulted on course design. In particular, they were excited about opportunities to weigh in on major topics and syllabus policies. In speaking about strategies for engaging students, a panelist from OLC Innovate 2023 clarified, "One way that would be really interesting would be when it comes to syllabus design and curriculum design. I think having some student input on certain types of topics that could be covered [...] or more engaging ways to teach students would be really interesting." As this student noted, students often have insights into what does and does not work well for classroom policies, and they may have suggestions for course content based on their own goals or experience. Including students as collaborators in all aspects of a course creates a shared sense of investment in a course. Another panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 had previously shared a similar sentiment about tailoring course content to individual students: "Ask your students what they prefer. It's good to gauge that interest to see who you know what they prefer. Do they want these videos posted? Do they want to be together and have that human interaction? Because every student is different. So the best thing: talk to your students. Get to know them, get to know how they learn, because everyone learns differently." While this personalization can be challenging for faculty who are teaching a wide range of courses and students each semester and have limited time for on the fly course customization, students nonetheless felt strongly that they wanted to have a say in how courses were taught and evaluated. It's interesting to note that this personal ownership of their education might be an unintended side effect of the emergency shift to remote instruction. At the time, we trusted students to drive their own educational experiences, and they now want to continue to draw upon their expertise about how they learn best to shape their educational experiences.

Taking Collaborative Action on DEI

> *"So I think when it comes to diversity and inclusion and kind of embedding that more with[in] the college environment, I think it should not be superficial or very surface level."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Innovate 2023*

Students Want to Move Beyond DEI Buzzwords

While students recognize the value of DEI conversations happening at their institutions, they are skeptical about the impact such conversations have on practice. In particular, they expressed concerns that institutions might try to enforce DEI principles through rules rather than fostering inclusive environments. As one panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 explained, "Diversity, equity, inclusion, are only words until we start acting upon them. And acting upon them with rules or regulations, or trying to put things in place through a third party, does not help either." The student instead suggested a hands-on approach to mentorship and fostering student success: "That's why I feel like mentorship within the universities and community colleges is the most powerful thing you can do […] so [students] understand they have what they need and that they are supported." Students voiced clear concerns that DEI work would get relegated to policy, which they tended to view overall as impersonal and regulatory rather than generative of relationships and community. During the OLC Innovate 2023 panel, moderator Angela Gunder underscored the students' focus on DEI as a generator of student belonging and added: "We tal[k] a lot about equity gloss, where we just use the word, but we're not actually aligning actions to that, and […] we have to go a lot deeper in order to support diversity, equity, and inclusion and belongingness for our students." Indeed, student panelists indicated a deep investment in DEI work and a hope for a diverse faculty and staff that wants to, as one student from OLC Accelerate 2022 put it, "truly get involved in the lives of students" to put DEI principles into practice.

Students Want to Be Active Contributors to DEI Work

As students reflected on the importance of shifting beyond DEI buzzwords and toward inclusive practice, they also noted that they want to play an active role in this work. As one student argued during their OLC Accelerate 2022 panel, "Students should not be infantilized when it comes to the level of advice or support that they can provide. I think making sure all of the stakeholders within the college environment are taken seriously […] that's very important." Interestingly, students noted that they wanted to be consulted as co-creators of community and DEI strategy. While they want to be valued for the expertise they can provide, a student panelist at OLC Innovate 2023 also thinks that institutions should be "keeping our students at the forefront of what we do" in order to "provide strong, culturally responsive learning and teaching both for students and professors."

Students seem distrustful of DEI practice and policy that takes a top-down approach and excludes student perspectives.

Students Want an Adaptable Framework for DEI Policy

Finally, students recognized the complexity of DEI work and hoped to see policies and practices that can be responsive to shifting needs. One student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 noted:

> I don't think there's any one policy that could be like a silver bullet that could be totally inclusive and cover everybody. That's why I think it goes back to the humanity aspect of it. It's gonna take people with that emotional intelligence, that sensitivity to people's needs and wants, and just understanding that [...] we all literally come from different walks of life, so there are [going to be] situations and people that you just couldn't have foreseen or accounted for, no matter what policies [are in place].

This student highlighted a key tension within educational policy: the challenge of developing policies that are useful and fair for students while remaining flexible enough to adapt depending on students' unique circumstances. Another student echoed this concern at OLC Innovate 2023 by explaining, "I think that when it comes to diversity and inclusion, things constantly change, our communities constantly change. [...] [W]e need to [...] understand that having one specific program is not an end-all-be-all answer to something." Overall, students seemed more interested in robust and campus-wide DEI initiatives than in policy language, which they overall viewed as limited and potentially exclusionary.

Keeping Humans and Connection at the Center of Learning

> *"I will say it was, it felt, almost just super impersonal. There was no human aspect to it. It was just like – here it is: it's online. I didn't even have instructor interaction."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022*

Students Want an Experience That Has a Human Feel
Students were clear that it was important to them to make what they described as an impersonal environment more personal and humanized. One student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 further described this as a form of connection through presence and engagement:

> When I first started college online, learning was impossible for me because I needed that presence. I needed that personal engagement. At first, lectures were solely pre-recorded; all discussions were done via forum, and that was really, really hard for me, and I just personally couldn't do it, and it was really hard for me.

Students shared that the lack of personal engagement can feel very different from what they experienced in their K12 educations, where their teachers were easy to contact, collaborative learning supported their learning, and outside activities made them feel part of a larger community.

Students Want Their Instructors to be Present and Engaged
Many of the student panelists focused on the importance of various asynchronous and synchronous interactions that make things more personal and humanized, but one particular type of connection stood out—the desire to connect with their instructor. As a student panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 mentioned, "the most important thing is just the communication between the professor and the student." Students across the panels shared important stories about how they saw their instructors as mentors and topical experts with a wealth of knowledge to share. They also indicated wanting a much deeper interaction than just watching recorded lectures and taking exams without any feedback. A student panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 expanded on this a bit, sharing the importance of voice and feeling connected, which can impact a student's confidence in reaching out if they need help:

> So if you're constantly this faceless person that's assigning work, it's really hard to connect with the instructor. I struggle with that in one of my classes – that she never really posts her own voice in the class. It's like there's a lot of readings, and there's assignments, but I never get to hear from her, and it makes me feel very disconnected… [which] makes me not necessarily want to interact with her. It's like, really, we don't know who she is or feel that connected to her.

Students shared that they wanted to see their instructor present through announcements and reminders to show they were engaged and that they were a human who is passionate about the topics. They also wanted to connect to their instructors through engaging discussions, feedback on real-world assignments, and reconceptualizing office hours to not feel like they were just for lack of understanding or that they would be a burden on their instructor if they attended.

Students Want Instructors to Facilitate Meaningful Connections to Their Peers
Connection for the student panelists did not stop with the instructor, they also wanted to have connections with their peers – both academically and socially. A student panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 shared that they felt like there can be a lack of collaborative learning and a feeling of community when learning online, which can be challenging for learners. However, as another student panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 noted, good collaborative experiences don't just happen; they need to be intentionally planned:

> It's really important that the professor was intentional in fostering class participation and recognizing that things are a little bit more difficult for students socially when things are online when we're physically isolated from other students because it's not always super encouraging as an environment to be online to mingle with other students. I've had classes where professors would be really intentional about setting class time aside to set up breakout rooms or have message boards where students could just join those for the purpose of socializing.

Students across the panels were clear that the instructor plays a huge role in successful, engaging digital, blended, and online learning experiences. Not only does their presence make or break the experience, but the way they intentionally design their courses to build and maintain those deep connections matters just as much.

Designing Intentionally and Deeply

> *"I think the other thing about staying on track with your assignments from the instructor's side is being really intentional about the assignments that you are assigning and the value that they're producing. I think that some instructors might try overcompensating from the gate."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Innovate 2022*

Students Want Meaningful Learning Experiences
Besides wanting a connected and humanized learning experience, students were clear about their disdain for what they perceived to be busy work or assignments where they were not able to understand the value.

Across the panels, students asked educators to focus on intentionality when incorporating assignments into their digital, blended, and online courses. Students shared that they are often juggling different classes, work, and other responsibilities. Related to this juggle, a student panelist from OLC Innovate 2023 shared how they appreciated when instructors made things easy to digest, sharing connections and purpose between content, activities, and assessments. However, this didn't necessarily mean that students wanted their learning experiences to be easy. It was clear that they yearned for deeper learning experiences with feedback from their instructors. For example, a student panelist from OLC Innovate 2022 shared that:

> [During COVID] I was able to get all my school work done on time, but I didn't feel like I was actually learning anything. I was just sort of just taking it all in and then regurgitating it onto my homework assignments.

Student panelists very much wanted to complete work for their courses that was meaningful for their futures in flexible ways that had opportunities for personalization.

Students Want Flexibility and Personalization
Students also asked instructors to design their courses with flexibility and opportunities for personalization. A student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 shared the importance of digital, blended, and online learning as opening access to higher education and fulfilling careers:

> I feel like education should always be accessible anywhere to anyone. No matter what your schedule is. If you want to go for education and change and get a career that you can love, and that passion, you should be able to do that.

Beyond designing courses with flexibility embedded into them to increase access, a student panelist from OLC Innovate 2023 expanded on this to include being able to personalize the course experience itself:

> I think that having more agency and choice when it comes to the kind of things that I would like to learn digitally has also been helpful ... I've been able to personalize my learning a bit more, and that's something I wasn't able to do as much when I first started.

Giving students different options for picking content topics, types of content (e.g., audio, video, text), and assignments can give them the ability to personalize their experience with agency and choice, helping to grow their motivation and interest in the topic and field.

Students Want Instructors to Leverage New Methods for Engagement and Feedback
Students were excited when their instructors leveraged new methods and used new technologies to increase engagement in their courses. As a student panelist from OLC Innovate 2023 shared:

> Education is constantly changing, and we have to adapt with it, and just knowing that we have different supports and people in our corner, and continuing to learn even as educators is just so beneficial to us and future students.

Students see that our world is changing, and when instructors model behaviors, like using new technologies and pedagogies in their teaching, students see change as a positive opportunity that can support learning. Across student panels, students mentioned innovative uses of social media (e.g., TikTok), AR/VR, simulations, and the metaverse as helping them get deeper into topics they might not have otherwise explored at length. Students also mentioned how important feedback on their activities – whether by courseware where they could practice concepts or directly by the instructor in the learning management system or through office hours – was for them and their learning.

Structuring Learning Experiences for Success

> *"I didn't really come from a school that had a lot of technology embedded in their courseware or anything like that. I had my first laptop given to me by my university. When I started, I had never had my own piece of personal technology."*
>
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Innovate 2023*

Students Want Instructors to Know What They are Facing
During the panel sessions, students wanted instructors to know that they all had different experiences in regards to technology and that it should not be assumed that they knew how to use computers or different programs. Some students had very little technology use in their K-12 experiences, while others used technology robustly, making it important for instructors to spend time at the beginning of class getting students acclimated to both the topic and the tools they would be using that semester.

Students shared that they were also figuring out how to juggle school, work, and other responsibilities. One student from the OLC Accelerate 2022 panel mentioned that they wanted "to have a schedule that I could cope with for school and have a good work-life balance." Students also noted that learning to manage their time wasn't necessarily easy for them, and resources, as well as tips from instructors, routine structure, and clear expectations, were useful to support their learning.

Students Want an Easy-to-Understand Structure and Routine
Student panelists remarked on the variety between themselves and their classmates in regards to whether students should have access to the whole semester's content and activities at once versus getting pieces (e.g., modules) at a time. They acknowledged that some students find this important for planning their time, while it left others overwhelmed. No matter the release strategy, students did recommend trying to create a routine that they can follow and learn what to expect from: "If we always have that clear and concise routine, I find that it's very beneficial for me and for some of my classmates, too."

Besides having an established structure and routine, students also recommended having clear due dates on assignments in the learning management system. These suggestions are consistent with the benchmarks and quality standards in the OLC Quality Scorecard Suite's [Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice](#) and [OSCQR Course Design Review](#) scorecards.

Students Want Clear Expectations
Student panelists were clear that expectation setting and relationship-building start the very first week of class and continue throughout the semester. As a student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 shared, instructors engaging early with students is crucial:

> Get engaged early with your students so they can get a thorough understanding of the course … get that syllabus up as soon as possible, so that they know what they are responsible for and what type of time that they need to dedicate to the course. It's been helpful for me to have an email from my professor weeks before we start so that I have an understanding of what I'm responsible for.

When possible, instructors can set the stage for success by taking the time that first week (and before) to help students connect to the course topic(s) and expectations, their peers, and themselves. The early weeks of the semester are also ideal for experimenting with the tools they will be using that semester in a low-stakes manner. Students commented that they like to understand the expectations of the course and the instructor early but that clear expectations are important throughout the course. In the words of one student from OLC Accelerate 2022, "transparency is key."

Students on the panels also wanted instructors to know that it was okay to try new things (e.g., technologies, assignments, teaching strategies) and that it does not have to go perfectly. As an OLC Accelerate 2022 panelist reiterated, the key is to be open with the students and to let them know that they are supported: "It's giving grace to yourself, giving grace to your students and making sure that they feel supported and not lost."

As this student mentioned, it is important for instructors to know that students realize things will not be perfect. However, the relationship and the connection between instructors and students helps both parties extend and receive grace when things do not go as expected.

Supporting Instructional Development

> *"I wish faculty had more training and understanding on how to [...] mimic or replicate or even exceed classroom learning."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Innovate 2023*

Students Want Faculty to Undergo Training in Online Instruction
Students across presentations noted their hope that faculty would engage in ongoing professional development to improve their online course design. One student noted at OLC Innovate 2023 that while professors have "such a wealth of knowledge to share," "moving forward in the aftermath of the pandemic, and also just the tech-centered world we live in, [will involve instructors discovering] how they can deliver that content in different interactive digital activities." The student further noted that they wanted faculty to learn how to "ensur[e] that humanity and human interaction is at the core of digital learning" and clarified: "I wish faculty had more training and understanding on how to [...] mimic or replicate or even exceed classroom learning" by cultivating human interactions rather than relying on pre-recorded lectures. It's interesting that students highlight a lack of training and the sudden switch to remote teaching during the pandemic as the primary causes of less effective and engaging online courses. Another student shared that they wish there were opportunities for students to share feedback on course design to guide this professional development. Specific suggestions students made for instructor growth included creating multiple engagement opportunities, shifting away from pre-recorded lectures, building assignments that are accessible to students with limited technology, and creating meaningful assignments and assessments online.

This approach for ongoing faculty development aligns with a 2022 report by Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and Tyton Partners in partnership with Every Learner Everywhere, [Strategies for Implementing DIgital Learning Infrastructure to Support Equitable Outcomes](). One of their recommendations for academic administrators is to "Create a learning culture and equip faculty for success through effective professional learning, incentives, and technologies" (2022, p.11). This reiterates the need for instructor development to be an institutional priority and investment.

Students Want Faculty to Share Available Technology Support Resources
An emergent theme from the student panelists was that faculty should connect students to existing resources like IT help desks and how-to guides, establish regular check-ins with students about technology support needs, and introduce students to course technology in low-stakes ways early on in the course. As an OLC Accelerate 2022 panelist clarified: "I am in an architectural course right now, and we use a lot of software [...] I feel like I'm learning a new language sometimes." The student also suggested that faculty could provide assistance in a low-stakes way: "I appreciate when [the instructor] puts videos online that

walk it through." By asking about their comfort with the platform and offering support, the instructor demonstrates a commitment to addressing individual needs and creating an inclusive digital learning experience. This approach works best when faculty allow students to engage with technology early in the course, so there are many opportunities to seek assistance. Another student at OLC Accelerate 2022 reinforced this perspective, underscoring the risk of instructors assuming universal tech-savviness: "You can't assume that everyone is a technology pro. You can't assume that everyone knows how to work these digital learning platforms."

Students Want Faculty to Embrace the Messiness of the Learning Process

Students also recognized the ongoing need for experimentation and the pressure this places on instructors to meet new student needs as they emerge. Students noticed that there was an adjustment period for instructors during the shift to remote instruction in early 2020, and they did not expect that faculty would have everything figured out right away. An OLC Innovate 2023 panelist explained, "Once the pandemic hit, and we had to go into virtual classes, I will say that you know a lot of it was an adjustment period, especially for a lot of my instructors. So I think that's kind of when we had to think outside of the box [...] about different ways to teach students." Interestingly, they viewed themselves as partners in this work of creatively redesigning learning environments and pedagogical strategies to meet the altered circumstances. Another student panelist from OLC Accelerate 2022 identified a productive metaphor for this focus on constant change in online learning – gamification:

> If you think of a video game, for instance, any good video game, you're supposed to fail inherently. If you beat everything [at] first, probably you're like, Wow, I'm either that good or this game kind of stinks. So the whole point of that is, you keep failing but you learn from those mistakes. Eventually you get better. You know, you level up. And so in that way, I would have appreciated it if digital learning looked like that, where you're creating a space where it's okay to fail again, and again, and again. Maybe you learn better through repetition.

This student highlights the need for faculty to embrace the gamified elements of online learning by modeling a growth mindset when navigating new tools or teaching modalities. As the panelist indicates, this creates space for the instructor *and* students to normalize experimentation and the messiness surrounding the learning process.

Nurturing a Culture of Belonging

> *"So online learning made it a lot easier to not only be a person – I also had rent to pay, a dog I had to take care of, family members that I was worried about and I had to take care of back home. So all of these different things where it would have been a lot harder without online learning."*
> *--Student Panelist from OLC Accelerate 2024*

Students Want Inclusion to be Intersectional

Just as students called out DEI initiatives that failed to move beyond what they saw as "lip service," they also expressed concerns that campus inclusion policies often failed to encompass their complex, intersectional identities. An Accelerate 2024 panelist expounded on this point: "As far as spotlighting diversity, equity and inclusion, it's first understanding what that means. It's first understanding [...] who we're targeting when we say that, and the truth is we're not targeting anyone." The student further explained that inclusion language can sometimes send the message that student identities aren't complex: "And I think sometimes a lot of that feeling and sense of belonging is intersectional. So when it comes to listening [seeking feedback from students], I believe that it's kind of the same way. It's an intersectional thing. I never speak from one part of my identity." The students were skeptical of attempts to compartmentalize parts of their identities through inclusion initiatives and instead were interested in a more complex and comprehensive way to foster belonging. They suggested a metaphor of soup rather than lasagna for such a model of intersectional identity, with one panelist from OLC Accelerate 2024 noting, "it's not layered for me [...] everything is existing at one time." An OLC Accelerate 2024 panelist also wanted educators to demonstrate interest in their lives beyond their academic success: "Creating these safe spaces [spaces for students to belong through active participation] really lets students know that you don't just view them from an academic perspective. You're not just your major or the career that you're pursuing, but ensuring that they're able to have a great holistic experience and that they're able to pursue their dreams and their career goals." These nuanced perspectives highlight the significance of creating educational environments that prioritize students' multifaceted experiences, identities, and aspirations.

Students Want Inclusion that Fosters Belonging

While students were generally critical of inclusion's limitations, they were very supportive of initiatives designed to foster belonging. Student panelists noted that their sense of belonging was cultivated in several ways. First, as a panelist from OLC Accelerate 2023 shared, "I felt this sense of belonging not only because I was at an HBCU, but because I had faculty that genuinely wanted to see me succeed; they saw themselves in me." This point echoes previous students' comments about the importance of authentic relationships with faculty who value their perspectives and support their goals, but it raises the stakes by connecting these relationships to their sense of belonging. The student added that their sense of belonging was heightened when they were invited to suggest additions to their

Master's program course offerings: "It made me feel like I was contributing to my school which ultimately made me feel a sense of belonging. […] it kind of gave me this feeling of 'I'm actually making a change here,' and that's the best way to make someone feel a sense of belonging." This student's experience implies that incorporating opportunities for students to actively contribute and shape their academic environment can be a powerful strategy for enhancing their sense of belonging.

Students Want Belonging to Cultivate Community

While students highlighted different ways in which belonging had been cultivated on their campus, they saw beyond the significance of this for individual students and its generative potential to foster community more broadly. An OLC Accelerate 2023 panelist provided an extended metaphor to illustrate how they distinguish between inclusivity and belonging: "Inclusivity was just allowing someone in the party, asking them what their favorite song is, and the DJ plays it. A sense of belonging is not only allowing that person into the party, inviting some of their friends, having the DJ play their music, everyone's dancing to the music that they enjoy too." This approach to belonging facilitates community-building because, according to the student, "Everyone feels that sense of connectedness from that person's experience." The distinction between inclusivity and belonging underscores the importance of not merely inviting individuals into the metaphorical party but actively involving them, celebrating their unique contributions, and creating a collective experience that resonates with everyone.

Conclusion

> ***What does quality digital learning look like from a student perspective? How do students think quality digital learning can best center DEI principles?***

As we explored these driving questions, the student perspectives prompted us to imagine a better future for digital learning, one that centers intersectional identities, complex human interactions, and flexibility. A key takeaway from this research is that students see quality digital learning starting with the desire to partner with educators and leaders to create this future and drive needed change, especially surrounding DEI initiatives. The student panelists see higher education as a complex web of connections and challenges, and, post-COVID, increasingly prefer immersive learning experiences that provide a range of ways to engage with course content and instructors/peers. They would like to see this same collaborative spirit applied to campus improvement initiatives.

Students also want us to be honest about the complexity of the issues we are facing together. OLC recognizes that meaningful change happens through partnership and engagement with students, which means that we must foster collaborative environments where students can be a part of the solution. As we consider the next steps in advancing online, blended, and digital learning, our commitment to amplifying student perspectives remains central as we advance online learning policy and pedagogy that aligns with the needs and experiences of those we serve.

We are particularly attentive to the calls from student panelists for personalized educational experiences that are adapted to their evolving needs. These calls manifested in four major ways with students are seeking:

1. increased time with instructors, who should ideally tailor feedback and assignments to individual students;

2. more flexibility in how students choose to engage with their courses;

3. meaningful engagement opportunities with peers across modalities, and

4. better implementation of institutional goals and policies that might sound good on paper but do not translate to better learning environments in practice.

While these are excellent suggestions, we wonder whether higher education is currently suited to handle these needs given the current climate of decreasing budgets and business model adjustments. The challenge is especially prescient for instructors, especially graduate student instructors and adjunct faculty (for more information on supporting adjunct faculty, please see the collaborative effort between OLC, WCET, and ELE to support adjuncts across institutional roles). In many cases, instructors are being asked to teach in

new modalities or with new technologies even though they are already overwhelmed with the demands of juggling multiple courses, among other responsibilities and shifting student expectations. As a field, we need additional resources and advancements in technology for customizing course content and enhancing engagement opportunities while mitigating the risk of instructor burnout.

While these insights offer us many strategies for improving our communication with students and prompt us to engage with their feedback regularly, this report is admittedly limited in scope. Future studies should expand the sample size and seek to be more inclusive of varying student perspectives to better understand the needs of learners at all levels of study. We would also recommend that future studies seek perspectives from students at a range of institutional types to better understand student needs across contexts. Given the many demands on instructor time and limited resources, we would also like to see studies that extend this work and consider how best to prioritize engagement opportunities that are most impactful to students.

Perhaps the most encouraging takeaway from this work is that students are eager to play an active role in shaping a brighter future for both themselves and the institutions they belong to. As educators and leaders, we must consider ways to leverage their insights, welcome their constructive feedback, and recognize their roles as change agents. In doing so, we foster a sense of ownership and engagement that extends beyond the classroom, creating a community where both students and institutions actively contribute to a shared vision for student success and institutional excellence.

Recommendations for Digital Learning Leaders, Instructors, & Support Staff

Based on the data analyzed from student panelists, we recommend that digital learning leaders (e.g., Center for Teaching & Learning Directors, Provosts, etc.), instructors, and support staff consider implementing the following actionable takeaways.

Leaders

- ☑ Integrate digital, blended, and online learning outcomes into strategic planning efforts and university goals. As you engage in strategic planning efforts and initiatives, remember to include digital, blended, and online learning leaders from your campus and students from different levels (e.g., undergraduate, graduate) and experiences (e.g., modalities, disciplines).

- ☑ Align university goals with needed resources, investing in instructional and support staff's professional development. This is especially important in the areas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), as well as in adopting effective practices for developing and facilitating digital, blended, and online programs and courses.

- ☑ Empower students to move beyond buzzwords by actively involving them in DEI and course quality initiatives. Make them essential contributors to project teams, participating in the development, implementation, and evaluation of DEI, student success, and learning practices and policies.

- ☑ Ensure that DEI initiatives move beyond the policy level, when appropriate, to include opportunities to build community. At the policy level, strive to generate adaptable DEI frameworks that recognize intersectional identities and individual student needs.

- ☑ Allow more flexibility to instructors and instructional support staff to implement creative learning environments that adapt to the 'messiness' of an ever-changing educational landscape

Instructors

- ☑ Design and facilitate courses that center humanized connections by:

    - ☑ Making an engagement plan that outlines how often you will post announcements and how you will use different mediums (e.g., video, audio, and text) across communication venues (e.g., announcements, content, feedback) to let students know you are there and supporting their learning.

At the beginning of the semester, share with students how they can expect you to interact with them.

- ☑ Using [humanizing strategies](#) to enhance your courses and [get to know students](#). Think about reconceptualizing office hours, renaming them (e.g., drop-in hours, student hours) to feel more welcoming, and explaining to students at the beginning of the course that they are there for more than just if they have questions but also to connect.

- ☑ Setting a [supportive tone in the syllabus](#) and bringing students into the design of the course, asking them to provide comments, questions, and feedback on the syllabus, course topics, and activities.

- ☑ Framing your course as an online learning community, with multiple opportunities for students to engage with you and each other.

- ☑ Develop impactful, in-depth activities by:

    - ☑ Designing courses with the end in mind, [Backward Designing](#) or [mapping](#) your course, making the connection between what students are doing and course/career goals [transparent](#).

    - ☑ Creating simulated and/or real-world assignment application options for students to engage in relevant challenges related to their future careers.

    - ☑ Providing opportunities for students to contribute to course design, engagement plans, and assignment/assessment criteria, when appropriate.

    - ☑ Visiting your center for teaching and learning to learn about existing technologies, as well as new technologies (e.g., social media, courseware, adaptive learning, AR/VR) that provide flexible engagement opportunities for course content and feedback on assignments in support of student learning.

    - ☑ Connecting students to technology support and other campus resources to provide multiple opportunities for help-seeking.

- ☑ Structure your course for success by:

    - ☑ Determining a routine that will work for the course experience that helps students learn early what to expect, empowering them to manage their time and resources effectively.

☑ Establishing clear expectations for students in the syllabus and assignment rubrics.

☑ Taking time during the first week (or before) to give students time to acclimate to the course and the technology they will be using while getting to know the course topics, their peers, and you in a low-stakes way. Using a technology that might not be familiar to students? Before creating your own technology tutorials, check with your center for teaching and learning for existing how-tos to share with your students.

Instructional Support Staff

☑ Offer professional development opportunities around the essentiality and complexity of DEI, as well as effective practices in digital, blended, and online program and course development. Need additional support? Think about partnering with a professional organization, like the OLC.

☑ Help instructors, program coordinators, and department chairs get beyond the basics and maximize efforts to leverage the strengths of digital, blended, and online learning. Having trouble getting their time? Think about quick stop-ins to department or leadership meetings with key effective practices or bite-sized videos, how-tos, and examples from instructors across disciplines.

☑ To boost attendance at professional development workshops, work with your campus' digital leadership team to create (and fund) a [community of practice](#) where instructors work on an enhancement project and share it with peers, as well as the larger campus.

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