

INSIGHTS
REPORT

Expanding Online Programs

Costs and Opportunities

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Verizon on expanding online programs — and opening access to higher education.

Higher education institutions are experiencing a period of remarkable change — reimagining the classroom, expanding and strengthening online offerings, and providing more equitable access to learning. In short, there are more opportunities to learn than ever before.

This transformation began as a response to the pandemic, when colleges and universities launched or expanded remote education programs during an unprecedented emergency. Now that the Covid-19 disruptions are fading, online learning continues to grow, and visionary higher education institutions are leading the way. Why expand online programs? The reasons are compelling:

- **Attract new students.**

Potential student populations go far beyond the traditional student — including adult learners juggling working and learning, who need the flexibility of online learning.

- **Leverage new technology.**

Augmented reality (AR) and other new technologies are enabling exceptional educational experiences, increasing the appeal of online learning.

- **Ensure equal access to education.**

By reaching new or underserved student populations, online programs can help make education for all a reality.

With more than two decades of experience supporting our higher education customers with advanced technology and deep partnership, Verizon understands the challenges and opportunities. We're committed to digital inclusion. And we see access to online learning as a critical element of creating a digitally equitable and inclusive society.

We hear many leaders at colleges and universities asking the similar questions. What's the best way to expand our online programs? How can we expand access to education while controlling costs? What are the risks? The opportunities?

To help answer these questions, Verizon is pleased to support this special Insights Report from The Chronicle of Higher Education, "Expanding Online Programs: Costs and Opportunity." Highlighting colleges that are re-envisioning their online programs, this report focuses on the financial impact, as well as the educational potential.

For more information about Verizon solutions for higher education, [visit our website.](#)



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patty Roze".

Patty Roze
Vice President, Public Sector Sales, Verizon

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Cover photo courtesy of Fairfield U. Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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INTRODUCTION



Photo courtesy of Morgan State U.

A student participates in virtual instruction at Morgan State U. in 2022.

When the pandemic struck, colleges scrambled to migrate their classes online. Today, they're scrambling to understand what "online" actually means.

"It's a really chaotic space right now," says Kathe Pelletier, director of the Teaching and Learning Program at Educause, a nonprofit association that focuses on technology in higher education. "Institutions are turning to online-learning modalities in many different ways. Hybrid can mean 17 different things even on the same campus."

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It’s no secret that academic leaders are under tremendous pressure to figure out their online strategy. The “demographic cliff,” when the number of incoming traditional-age students in the United States is expected to fall significantly, is only one factor behind this urgency to evolve. Colleges face ever-increasing competition from other institutions — some located hundreds of miles away — each touting a robust catalog of online programs. Amid this uncertainty, educators are coping with ripple effects from the pandemic. Students enrolling today are more likely to be less prepared academically and more socially disengaged than pre-pandemic first-year students, according [to a report](#) by education consultancy EAB. Making headlines in October was a report that ACT standardized-test scores for the high-school class of 2022 [declined to the lowest level](#) in more than 30 years.

As has always been the case, economics will be driving some of the decision-making in higher ed. On the revenue side, online classes offer a way to increase enrollment numbers among nontraditional students. They include adult learners who have never been to college or who have some college credit but lack a degree, midcareer professionals, low-income students, and those who, because of scheduling and other reasons, are unable to take classes on campus. Some colleges are earning nominal revenue through course sharing — the ability to sell “empty seats” in existing online classes — to students at other institutions.

Partnerships with state agencies and local school districts are also boosting enrollment numbers, creating a pipeline of both new students and future employees. At the federal level, the CARES Act in 2020 provided more than \$14 billion in emergency funding to higher-ed institutions. But “the gold rush of online is over,” says Rob Schnieders, vice president of online strategy and innovation at Connecticut’s Fairfield University. “There are efficiencies, but not as many as you would think. And not necessarily in our model because we want to have a high degree of engagement.”

Federal funding is still available, although money allocated to higher education under December’s [\\$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill](#) fell short of expectations. Areas identified for financial support include financial aid, research,

student support, such as access to child care, and investments in minority-serving institutions. The bill doesn't earmark funds specifically for online education, but it does increase financial aid for low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities. If this effort boosts overall enrollment numbers, colleges could potentially apply some of the new tuition revenue to expanding their online degree programs.

In the short term, most colleges face significant expenditures in bolstering their technology infrastructure, hiring and training staff, and reinventing traditional learning spaces.

Relationships with the private sector have potential for payout. Retail behemoth Amazon, for instance, pays the tuition and other expenses for employees who take courses at one of the hundreds of colleges in its Career Choice network. In a few cases, the tech industry has

funded millions of dollars in capital improvements. Oregon State University, for example, recently approved a project to build a \$200-million technology-innovation complex on campus, funded in part by a company that makes microchips and other advanced components.

In the short term, however, most colleges face significant expenditures in bolstering their technology infrastructure, hiring and training staff, and reinventing traditional learning spaces. In a recent [Educause poll](#), 52 percent of the respondents said their institution was transforming learning spaces to support remote classes, and 47 percent reported that spaces were being modified to support institutional goals related to remote or hybrid learning.

Classroom modifications involve far more than putting a camera into a classroom and pointing it at the professor, says Jay Rozgonyi, associate vice provost for innovation and effectiveness and the director of learning technologies at Fairfield. The learning spaces are “very different environments. I wouldn't buy clothes for vacation to Miami Beach and then take them to Canada in January.”

Issues of equity also come into play. At the very least, students need the proper hardware and reliable broadband connectivity to access hybrid components of classes or when they are fully remote. To that end, [California State University](#), for example, invested over \$18 million to deploy roughly 29,000 personal-computing devices and mobile-broadband hotspots

across 14 campuses in the 2021-22 academic year.

Also key to a successful online strategy is a willingness to invest in instructional designers and educational technologists who are trained to develop effective online coursework, says Bethany Simunich, vice president of innovation and research at Quality Matters, a nonprofit that focuses on quality assurance in online learning. Its latest Changing Landscape of Online Education (CHLOE 7) survey found that [many institutions still employ very few of these specialists](#), potentially limiting how much colleges are able to grow hybrid programs.

Demand — and expenditures — for technical expertise will only grow over time as institutions add things like virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and gamification components to their curriculum. “Newer, more exciting technologies will require even more technology investment” and expenditures on training, Simunich says. “It could be a positive addition to course programming, but most institutions right now are focusing on good-old pedagogy to ensure that the quality is online.”

When choosing a college, students — and their parents — are becoming more discerning as consumers, Simunich adds. “If you’re trying to accommodate more online students and demand by opening up enrollment in online classes, the question is how you’re looking at quality. You can’t ignore things like student engagement, the

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teaching experience, and interaction with the instructor.”

Ultimately, the success of any online program will be measured by student outcomes. That metric is the focus of considerable research right now. A *New York Times* article in October 2022 noted that many [pre-pandemic studies of online higher education](#) found that students in online programs had lower grades, higher dropout rates, and poorer performance than students taking in-person courses. Outcomes were especially bad for men, Black students, and students who had fared poorly in their earlier educations.

“One of the big concerns around online courses is that they may not lend to feelings of engagement or connectedness,” says Cassandra Hart, an associate professor in the School of Education at the University

of California at Davis. “That’s one of the theories around poor outcomes — students feel less engaged.”

Hart, whose [research examines online modalities](#) in distance learning, says it’s still too early to isolate “best practices” in online synchronous classes, given that they were less common before the pandemic. She and other academics agree, however, that putting support services online is crucial to students attending college both virtually and in person.

“Make counseling, tutoring, and financial aid [resources] available online so students don’t have to make their way onto campus to get help,” Hart says.

Already, many institutions are deploying technology like chatbots to remind students about assignments, tests, and registration deadlines. Some use [predictive analytics](#) to determine whether a student is at risk of failing a class or dropping out of school. Supporting students’ mental health is a major area where technology can play a role. For example, a Georgia State University chatbot can recognize when students use “trigger words” that demand in-person intervention in crisis management.

With more online experience under their belts, colleges are likely to see improvement in terms of student outcomes. A [study published in 2021](#) found that online instruction was particularly effective in large introductory classes with 100 or more students, since those students could use chat and discussion boards to

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raise questions they weren’t able to ask in giant, impersonal lecture halls.

Eventually, academic leaders will stop distinguishing between in-person and online learning, experts say, since a single class may include components that are synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (self paced), classroom-based and virtual.

“We’re at a point now where instead of saying it’s about online or face-to-face classes, we’re saying it’s really about good teaching,” says Rachel Holloway, vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs at Virginia Tech. “When we say face to face, you can be outside the classroom, too. All of the lines are blurred. Don’t let a classroom wall be a barrier.”

To understand how colleges are evolving beyond the pandemic, we asked academic leaders at four institutions to share their insights and successes in reshaping the online space and overall student experience. Their stories are featured in the following pages.



Photo courtesy of Morgan State U.

Students from the School of Global Journalism and Communication at Morgan State U. participate in a virtual discussion in October 2022.

Expanding Access

Administrators at Morgan State University, in Baltimore, are targeting everyone from teens still in high school to seasoned professionals with curriculum and support services specifically designed for them. Online education is a big part of these efforts.

“We are thinking about online holistically, looking at the needs of the nontraditional student population and how they may differ from younger learners,” says Nicole Westrick, assistant vice president and dean of the College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies at Morgan State. For example, “someone in a master’s or Ph.D. program may be advanced in their career, so we make sure our career and counseling services meet their needs.”

Morgan State, one of the largest historically Black colleges and universities in the country, created the College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies in 2021 and structured degree programs in a flexible format that suits returning students, working adults, and students who need or prefer distance education. By developing online degrees in areas like cloud computing, public health, and advanced computing, MSU also aims to align its educational offerings with the needs of employers.

Many of the latest efforts lend themselves to partnerships that can increase enrollment and economically benefit the university and students alike. Here are some of the initiatives Morgan State offers that are designed to meet needs at specific stages in students’ lives and careers.

Fast Start Program: In a partnership with the education nonprofit Modern

States, high-school students in Maryland can earn college credit by taking one or more of 30 online freshman-level courses. Courses, textbooks, and materials are all free, meaning students can save as much as \$16,000 in college costs.

Morgan Completes You: Two years ago, Morgan State received approval to launch 18 interdisciplinary degree programs aimed at students who have earned some college credit but have not completed their degrees. The classes are fully online, and degree programs are offered at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. The program also allows students to customize their coursework based on their schedules, interests, and career needs. And affordable tuition puts a degree within reach for adult learners — both in-state and out-of-state undergrads pay \$270 per credit hour (including fees). Advanced degrees typically have a set fee, such as \$30,000 for a master’s in social work or \$40,000 for a master’s in business administration, Westrick says. Morgan Completes You launched in 2022 and had 110 students enrolled for the spring of 2023, according to Westrick.

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Amazon Career Choice: In 2022, the university announced a partnership with Amazon, aimed at advancing the education of employees in Maryland and neighboring states. The company covers the cost of tuition, books, and fees for its hourly employees who want to earn their high-school equivalency diploma, gain proficiency in English as a second language, and/or earn a bachelor's degree at Morgan State. The university is the first four-year HBCU in the Amazon Career Choice network, which includes hundreds of schools across 14 countries.

Ed2Go: The university's Center for Continuing and Professional Studies offers more than 400 noncredit and career-training courses that can be taken entirely online. A wide array of certificate programs on topics like public speaking, starting a business, or becoming a mobile-app developer helps nontraditional students burnish their resumes and advance their careers.

Separately, some specialized partnerships aim to fill positions that are in demand locally. Maryland's Department of Environmental Health has about 250 jobs that go unfilled each year, Westrick says. So the state approached Morgan State to develop a fully online program and apprenticeship so students can prepare to pass required national exams while earning an income and gaining work experience. Similarly,

a teacher shortage prompted Baltimore City Public Schools to partner with Morgan State, giving paraprofessionals a pathway to earn teaching certifications.

Morgan-Flex: These courses are taught by an instructor in a classroom, and students may attend either in person on campus or virtually via a video-conferencing platform. To be clear, these classes are not asynchronous — both online and in-person students attend classes on the scheduled days at the scheduled times. (Students living on campus or in university-managed housing are required to select the in-person option.)

Regardless of whether a class is for traditional or nontraditional students, in person or virtual, Morgan State gives its faculty and students a wide array of tools to make online learning more engaging and interactive. For example, students can access an online and mobile design app to create social-media graphics, short videos, and web pages. A video-editing app enables users to shoot, edit, and share high-quality videos. An audio-video lab on campus offers both content-creation tools and tech support.

In addition, Morgan State educators recognize that adult learners have real-world work experience that can add a richness to the college experience for younger students who may be in the same course, Westrick adds.

Getting Faculty on Board

What makes Fairfield University stand out from many other colleges, administrators there say, is the latitude and independence given to its instructors.

“Our faculty [members] are scholars as well as teachers. There are no standardized syllabi — we encourage them to bring their own expertise to their work,” says Jay Rozgonyi, Fairfield’s director of learning technologies. That approach applies to both online and in-person learning, he adds.

“We really want students to *do* something. Research shows that less than 10 percent of what you hear in a lecture is retained. Yes, it’s fine to show a 10-minute video, but it’s important to give students a prompt so they can process that information — ideally in a group.”



Photo courtesy of Fairfield U.

Mousumi Bose Godbole, an associate professor of strategic brand marketing at Fairfield U.'s Charles F. Dolan School of Business, leads a virtual discussion in November 2021.

Fairfield University already had a well-established online program when Covid struck. So faculty members trained in online tools and pedagogy were able to pivot quickly when learning went fully remote. Today, with pandemic restrictions largely lifted, the focus is on training teachers to use technology in ways that enhance their subject matter. To that end, the university encourages faculty members to visit the Center for Academic Excellence, where they can schedule individual consultations to learn how tech tools can make lessons more immersive.

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shows that less than 10 percent of what you hear in a lecture is retained. Yes, it's fine to show a 10-minute video, but it's important to give students a prompt so they can process that information — ideally in a group."

As an education instructor himself, Rozgonyi has seen the power of online learning in helping students participate. "I have better engagement online," he says. "People who won't raise their hands in class or not raise them fast enough can do that in an asynchronous chat environment."

Ensuring that most or all of the students are engaging in the classwork is possible

because Fairfield has relatively small class sizes — not lecture halls with 200 to 300 students, Rob Schnieders, vice president of online strategy and innovation, notes.

Letting teachers focus on teaching means giving them technology tools that are easy to adapt, Rozgonyi says. “We want the faculty to create the learning experience themselves and not have to depend on a technical person.”

Fairfield hasn’t encountered stiff resistance to online teaching from its faculty members, Rozgonyi says. One reason, he surmises, is that they have a lot of encouragement and support from the administration as well as their peers.

The Center for Academic Excellence offers workshops, fellowships, and teaching resources, such as sample syllabi and reference materials on course design. The workshops are conducted fully online, lasting four to five weeks.

“It helps them develop an online course and to model what an effective, asynchronous course looks like,” Rozgonyi says. Instructors are encouraged to develop courses on a “backward model,” he explains. “What is the endpoint — what do we want students to know and do? Then we figure out how you’re going to use online tools to deliver that.”

Cultivating tech solutions for a wide range of academic programs isn’t necessarily easy. “We have a culture of highly autonomous faculty members —

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which is great but also frustrating. We don’t require anybody to take a workshop,” Rozgonyi says.

To help instructors witness real-world applications in their field of study, the center hires three faculty liaisons every semester. In that way, peers are working together to develop effective curriculum, Rozgonyi says. A School of Business person might not relate to a School of Education person — but they might be more aligned with a colleague in the School of Business, such as someone who teaches accounting.

For now, Fairfield isn’t pushing instructors to use next-generation technology, such as gamification, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. “We won’t do something just because it’s slick and cool,” Rozgonyi says.

Keeping Students on Track

Colleges have long dreaded enrollment declines predicted by the demographic cliff. And Covid pushed many of them even closer to the precipice.

But some are looking past doomsday scenarios by focusing long term on the students they already have — and ensuring that they earn a degree. “We are interested in the persistence in our students,” says Mary Ann Coughlin, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Springfield College, in Massachusetts.

One strategy is course sharing, in which a Springfield student can take online classes offered at other higher-ed institutions during the summer and winter breaks. Through course sharing, students can earn missing credits required for a degree, broaden their field of interdisciplinary study, avoid waiting lists, and retake classes they may have failed. At the same time, students enjoy the college experience on campus and maintain their personal connection to Springfield.

In 2019, Springfield joined a course-sharing consortium created by the Council



Photo by Christopher Evans/Springfield College.

By joining a course-sharing consortium, Springfield College allows its students to take advantage of other colleges' offerings while remaining on the Massachusetts campus.

of Independent Colleges (CIC) that now includes over 300 higher-ed institutions. Before launching the effort, Springfield identified like-minded institutions to partner with, as well as which courses would be available to students.

Consortium members license a software platform called Acadeum, which allows students to request, obtain approval for, be billed for, and be cross-enrolled in courses taken at other institutions. Colleges buy licenses to use Acadeum, and pricing varies based on the enrollment numbers and classes taken.

There are often more than 10,000 courses actively available for registration, says Matt Trainum, CIC's vice president for networks and strategic partnerships

"It's a complete no-brainer for institutions," he says.

In 2022, there were roughly 2,650 course enrollments among CIC consortium institutions. "It's another tool in the toolkit in getting students to graduation," Trainum notes. Since participating colleges are offering otherwise empty seats in existing classes, large investments in technology aren't necessary to expand.

In terms of the institutions, the economic benefits are twofold, according to Acadeum. Participating institutions can generate new revenue from the courses they offer while holding on to the tuition dollars from students who might otherwise go elsewhere. Still, finances aren't driving Springfield's course-sharing initiative,

“We are interested in the persistence in our students.”

Coughlin says. The small amount of revenue earned by filling empty seats virtually has been put toward upgrading things like furniture and technology.

In 2022, the nonprofit Southern Regional Education Board created an online course-sharing consortium that includes historically Black colleges and other minority-serving institutions in five states. Inspiration for the initiative came from a pilot project in the winter of 2021 involving two HBCUs: [Benedict College](#), in Columbia, S.C., and Dillard University, in New Orleans. Through that trial program, Benedict and Dillard seniors who needed up to six credit hours to graduate in the spring of 2022 could take an accelerated

online course. More than 90 percent of students who took part in the Dillard-Benedict partnership ended up on track to graduate that spring.

The key to successful course-sharing partnerships is academic support for individual students, which includes things like monitoring attendance and tracking course credits.

Overall, Black students in higher education face added stresses that can get in the way of graduation, [according to survey results](#) released in February 2023 by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation. An analysis of the responses of roughly 6,000 students identified two major barriers: racial discrimination and competing responsibilities like work and caregiving. In drilling down on specific needs, 59 percent of Black bachelor’s students rated “greater flexibility in work or personal schedule” as very important to their remaining enrolled. Offering online asynchronous classes is one way colleges can provide that flexibility.

Accommodating Students

Educators at Virginia Tech believe that online options give students the flexibility to choose how and when they learn, which is key to keeping them motivated. “They’re more likely to be engaged,” says Rachel Holloway, the university’s vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs.

When the university puts out its course schedule, classes are given modality designations: in person, hybrid (online and in person), online synchronous and online asynchronous. Some courses are offered in multiple modalities, Holloway adds.

Indeed, one enduring lesson from the pandemic is that students want a range of online options, according to [survey results](#) released in October 2022 by Educause. Even respondents who said they preferred fully face-to-face courses want access to a variety of online resources and activities.

Virginia Tech administrators see opportunities to serve students who for

various reasons can’t be on its Blacksburg campus. In 2021, the university partnered with Northern Virginia Community College to offer its first online bachelor’s degree program for students outside Blacksburg. The Business Information Technology’s Cybersecurity Management and Analytics degree (BIT-Cyber for short) is a work-based program designed to remove barriers for students in the Greater D.C.-metro area who may be from diverse, nontraditional backgrounds. “We can reach people we didn’t reach

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CHRIS VALLUZZO FOR VIRGINIA TECH

Instructors in Food Science and Technology at Virginia Tech teach a course with an in-class kitchen workshop component. To accommodate strong student demand, a second, remote kitchen workshop was connected to the first using videoconferencing equipment.

before,” Holloway says. “They can then transition into our master’s programs. That’s the type of innovation we see ourselves likely to do.”

Other online courses were designed around the needs of working professionals, such as the [Master of Information Technology program](#), which offers interdisciplinary and customizable courses in information technology, business, data science, and cybersecurity, among others. In that same vein, Virginia Tech wants to serve an emerging cohort of young, entrepreneurial students — those

who might have launched a business in high school. “We talk about nontraditional adult students, but this is another segment of nontraditional,” Holloway says.

With a flexible-learning environment, administrators at Tech realize that support services need to accommodate students as well. Like many other institutions, instructors now offer virtual office hours so students can get help from almost anywhere. “You don’t have to make a 20-minute walk across campus to ask a 10-minute question,” Holloway explains. This flexibility also accommodates the

needs of faculty members who may be teaching remotely or have an irregular schedule. Academic advising is also available virtually, Holloway adds.

Even with so many options, Virginia Tech emphasizes that it's a residential institution and that students choose it to enjoy the full college experience. While the university offers a robust slate of online courses, the overwhelming majority of the university's classes are taught in the classroom, a spokesman says. Case in point: This semester more than 90 percent of Tech's undergraduate courses include an in-person element.

Nonetheless, online tools are key to enhancing in-person learning. These can range from basic discussion boards, polls, and chat functions to live, streaming presentations from industry experts. One Virginia Tech professor taught a class on the American Revolution that was simultaneously attended in person by

“We’re designing around students, understanding their trajectory through their college career. Online courses are one way to make it easier to get a degree and avoid bottlenecks.”

students in Blacksburg and virtually by students in Great Britain. “We’re designing around students, understanding their trajectory through their college career,” Holloway says. “Online courses are one way to make it easier to get a degree and avoid bottlenecks.”

Colleges are looking beyond the panic of the pandemic, with many now embracing online courses as a way to boost enrollment and improve student outcomes.

“There are a lot of shining-star examples where online is becoming the new normal — classes and institutions are using more digital tools than ever before,” says Pelletier, the director of the Teaching and Learning Program at Educause.

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More research is needed to gauge the effectiveness of the various modalities

over the long term, but initial studies are promising. [A 2021 paper](#) published in the journal *American Educational Research* found that access to online courses not only makes it more likely that students will graduate, it also slightly accelerates the time it takes them to earn their degree. Shortening the timeline to graduation appeals to students who need to lower their overall tuition costs and/or want to start earning a paycheck sooner.

Colleges can promote other financial benefits, especially at a time when students are demanding more value from their tuition dollars. Many fully online degree programs charge in-state tuition, regardless of where the learning takes place. This creates more opportunities for out-of-state students to earn a degree from a highly ranked college in their field of study. Remote learning also has the potential to reduce students' living expenses. “They have everything they need without the cost of campus housing, dining halls and other expenses,” Virginia Tech's Holloway notes.

Ultimately, online courses may not help colleges dodge the demographic cliff, but they may help administrators overcome their fear of its heights.

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