



Policy Brief

# Online Learning



*Online education continues to grow in popularity, even as the total number of college students decreases. The online format is particularly attractive to working learners, rural learners, and people living in education deserts, who are drawn to the flexibility and accessibility that online learning provides.*

*Although online learning can remove common obstacles to receiving a college education, barriers still exist. Removing these barriers will help ensure that online education, which is the only workable option for many potential students, can be more affordable, accessible, and adaptable.*

## Benefits of Online Education

In the spring of 2020, millions of students switched from in-person learning to online coursework due to the global pandemic. However, online learning is much more than a response to COVID-19. For decades, college and university students have chosen to enroll in online programs. Even as the number of students pursuing post-secondary education decreases, the number enrolled in online programs continues to grow. Since the beginning of the pandemic, total enrollment has dropped by nearly 1.3 million.<sup>1</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), total college enrollment from 2012 to 2019 decreased by almost 5 percent,<sup>2</sup> while online enrollment during the same timeframe increased by 3.3 percent.<sup>3</sup>

In the fall of 2019, more than 7 million students enrolled in degree-granting, postsecondary institutions (37.2 percent of all students) took at least one online course. The number of students exclusively enrolled in online programs was almost 3.5 million, or 17.6 percent of all students.<sup>4</sup>

More and more students enroll in online education because it works for them when traditional learning settings do not. Online learners do not have to attend classes in person. They do not have to quit their jobs to accommodate inconvenient class times. In addition, some online classes

allow students to progress at their own pace or receive credit for relevant work experience.

This flexibility makes online courses particularly attractive to working learners—individuals who are usually 24 and older, work full-time, support families, and have other responsibilities. In 2015–2016, approximately 52.4 percent of undergraduate students ages 24 and up were taking at least one online class, and about 21.6 percent were enrolled in a completely online program. In contrast, 36.6 percent of students in the 15–23 age group took at least one online course, and just 3.5 percent took online courses only.<sup>5</sup>

For many working learners, online learning is not just the best educational option, it is the only option that will fit into their lives. A study of a master’s program in computer science at Georgia Tech found “nearly no overlap” between applicants for the online and face-to-face programs, concluding that “access to the online option therefore increases the number of people pursuing education at all.”<sup>6</sup> As an Australian study of first-generation online learners, most of whom were over 30, found, “Without the opportunity to study online, many of these students indicate that they would not be studying at all—it is only due to the availability and flexibility of online study that they feel able to embark upon this journey.”<sup>7</sup>

Online learning also provides educational access for those in rural areas and education deserts. A study published in 2018 estimated that more than 41 million adults, or 17.6 of the adult population, “live more than 25 miles from a broad-access public university.”<sup>8</sup> The percentages of high school graduates among urban and rural students are similar, but a large difference exists between college graduation rates. While 35 percent of urban adults have a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 21 percent of rural adults do.<sup>9</sup> Online education can help bridge this gap for potential learners who are physically distant from colleges and universities, especially those with work and family commitments that prevent relocation.

## Online vs. In-Person Learning

Comparing online and in-person learning can be complicated. Because all courses and institutions are different, a general statement about the overall quality of courses would be inaccurate. A direct comparison of online and in-person courses may not consider student characteristics and demographics or the quality, format, and design of courses. Additionally, college and K–12 online courses should be evaluated separately when making comparisons to face-to-face learning. The challenges, needs, and requirements of K–12 learners are much different than those in higher education.

Some studies have shown greater long-term success rates with online higher education programs. These studies find that undergraduates who take at least one online class are more likely to complete degrees and that students in online classes complete degrees more quickly.<sup>10</sup>

Data also shows that students find value and quality in online programs. A nationwide survey of 2,000 students found that students thought their online experience was as effective as in-person learning: “Students thought they were able to engage just as well with instructors remotely as they had with their in-person counterparts.”<sup>11</sup> A study of synchronous online classes at the City University of New York found that most students preferred an online format. These students also said interaction with the instructor was easier online, and more than 40 percent of them thought class participation was easier.<sup>12</sup>

## Barriers to Online Education

Although online programs increase the opportunity to complete college, barriers still exist. These barriers can make online learning less affordable and accessible and can prevent online education from adapting to meet the needs of working learners.

### Affordability

Working learners deserve support that allows them to pursue education in the format and at the institution that best works for their unique needs. Unfortunately, state financial aid programs are often unavailable to working learners and others who take most or all of their courses online. Many state programs only fund full-time students, recent high school graduates, or individuals starting college for the first time. Additionally, many state aid programs do not support less “traditional” institutions, such as exclusively online programs without a brick-and-mortar campus or a physical state presence, even if they are accredited institutions with proven outcomes.

For those whose only viable educational option is online learning, financial aid must be available to meet their needs. Affordability is not only crucial to individuals seeking higher education, but it also affects industry and the workforce. If individuals cannot afford the training needed to enter or upskill in the workforce, there will be shortages in areas that require higher education and specialized training.

### Accessibility

For many individuals, especially working learners and those in rural areas and education deserts, online education is the only viable pathway to a college degree. However, lack of access to high-speed internet or a computing device, along with low levels of digital literacy, can pose major obstacles. According to the nonprofit organization EducationSuperHighway, about 23 percent of U.S. households lack a high-speed internet connection. While about one-fourth of these households are in areas where internet is not available, the majority (about 47 million people) have access to, but cannot afford, an internet connection.<sup>13</sup> Even students with internet access can find their connections

unreliable.<sup>14</sup> There are also millions of adults who lack the digital literacy needed to work and study online. A 2018 research brief from NCES found that about 16 percent of U.S. adults are not digitally literate. It also states that “compared to digitally literate adults, adults who are not digitally literate have a lower rate of labor force participation and tend to work in lower skilled jobs.”<sup>15</sup>

Online education has the potential to cut through geographic, social, racial, and economic boundaries and make learning more equitable. However, if individuals lack the tools to access online education, this equity cannot be achieved.

## Adaptability

For too long, students have been asked to adapt to an outdated educational model, rather than asking education to adapt to students. This is evident with working learners, who are often asked to fit themselves into a model built for recent high school graduates that emphasizes traditional, face-to-face learning. While online learning does provide more flexibility, some elements, such as the following, could be strengthened to offer greater chances of success for online learners:

- **Tailored support:** Some online learners benefit from support services that address their unique circumstances. If academic counseling and other student services are only available in an on-campus setting during standard business hours, or if they are designed for traditional, full-time students, they will not be helpful for working learners.
- **Quality course development:** For an online course to be effective, it cannot simply be an in-person course that has been transferred to an online format. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many face-to-face courses made the switch to online learning, with little time available for in-depth planning or development.
- **Focus on workforce:** Generally, working learners enter college with a goal of career advancement. Whether that goal relates to earning a credential that opens a new career path or receiving training to upskill in their current field, most working learners have a strong understanding of their career needs and the education needed to achieve them. Institutions and training providers who serve online students can work with employers to develop curriculum workforce pathways that help working learners achieve their goals.
- **Transfer credit:** Many working learners have received college credit from previous institutions. If this credit is not recognized by their transfer institution, they may have to repeat courses. Because time is a precious commodity to online and working learners, the thought of taking courses for a second time may dissuade them from pursuing a degree.

## Policy Recommendations

For working learners to succeed, online education must be affordable, accessible, and adaptable. By helping remove barriers to online education, policymakers can work to ensure that all students, especially working adult learners, receive the educational opportunities they seek.

### Affordability

To help make college more affordable for working learners, policymakers can revise financial aid criteria to include more educational methods and modalities, such as online course delivery. Policymakers should also examine existing policies to determine if financial aid covers part-time students, since most working learners in online programs fit into this category. If not, they can build customized aid programs accessible to working learners.

## Recommendations in Action

- The Illinois Monetary Award Program allows residents enrolled in a minimum of three credits access to state financial aid, which provides access to adults enrolled in one course at a time.<sup>16</sup>
- Utah recently enacted the Adult Learners Grant Program, which provides financial assistance to adult learners pursuing an online degree or certificate in a high-need field.<sup>17</sup>

## Accessibility

For working learners to thrive in online education, they must have the proper connections, equipment, and digital skills. Policymakers can investigate allowing the costs of online learning (such as internet connectivity and equipment access) to be included in financial aid or other student supports. Institutions and educational systems can partner with private corporations or public entities to make access more available and affordable. In addition, policies and programs that provide digital literacy support and training can help working learners succeed.

## Recommendations in Action

- The Affordable Connectivity Program is a federal initiative that offers eligible households a \$30 monthly benefit for high-speed internet. Twenty leading internet providers have committed to offering a \$30 monthly plan to eligible households, so that families who apply their discounts to these plans will pay nothing for internet access.<sup>18</sup>
- Missouri's jobs website provides job seekers with links to free online courses and tutorials, such as those offered by Microsoft, in areas like computer proficiency and digital learning and technology.<sup>19</sup>
- Higher education institutions can partner with broadband providers and others to close the digital divide for learners. For example, Western Governors University worked with major cellular carriers and broadband providers to offer Online Access Scholarships, putting quality online education within reach for thousands of learners.<sup>20</sup>

## Adaptability

Education must move from a one-size-fits-all model to one that meets learners where they are. To improve access and success for online and working learners, policymakers can enact funding measures that help institutions offer more support services that support the whole learner. They can also support incentive programs that allow instructors to devote more time and resources to the development of quality online courses. Finally, policymakers can adopt measures that allow previously earned credits to transfer among institutions, across state boundaries, and between different instructional platforms.

## Recommendations in Action

- Western Governors University offers a variety of programs to support online learners. These services include program mentors, writing labs, career services, and other learning resources.<sup>21</sup>
- Some institutions provide faculty incentives to develop quality online courses. For example, the University of Nebraska Omaha offers stipends and grants for activities ranging from digital learning workshops to online course development.<sup>22</sup>
- California joined many other states in 2021 by enacting two bills designed to make transfer easier, Assembly Bills 928 and 1111, which called for the creation of a standard course numbering system at all community colleges, coordination between California's higher education system to increase transfer, and formation of a general education pathway that meets transfer requirements for the state's universities.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Online education provides millions of working learners with the chance to improve their lives and gain workforce opportunities. Despite online learning's demonstrated popularity and need, barriers still prevent potential learners from enrolling in online programs. Removing barriers to online education will help working learners enroll in programs tailored to their needs and create pathways to opportunities and success.

## About WGU

Established in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors with a mission to expand access to high-quality, affordable higher education, online, nonprofit WGU now serves more than 130,000 students nationwide and has more than 277,000 graduates in all 50 states. Driving innovation as the nation's leading competency-based university, WGU has been recognized by the White House, state leaders, employers, and students as a model that works in postsecondary education. In just 25 years, the university has become a leading influence in changing the lives of individuals and families and preparing the workforce needed in today's rapidly evolving economy. WGU is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, has been named one of Fast Company's Most Innovative Companies, and has been featured on NPR, NBC Nightly News, and CNN, and in The New York Times. Learn more at [wgu.edu](http://wgu.edu) and [wgu.edu/impact](http://wgu.edu/impact).

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