

Own and Transform Your Online Success

Institutional Online Readiness: Best Practices Guide



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Introduction

One of the most important aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic for institutions of higher learning was the massive exposure it gave students to online and remote learning. While it is unlikely that the rate of distance learning will remain at the 2020 levels (45 percent of all undergraduate and 52 percent of all graduate enrollment), it is also unlikely that it will snap back to levels prior to the pandemic (15 percent of undergraduate and 32 percent of graduate enrollment).

As institutions absorb these realities and consider either the launching of their first set of online programs or the expansion of their existing online programming, it is imperative that all administrative and academic processes be re-examined to assess their viability and applicability to online education.

The RNL **Online Readiness Rubric** is a 37-point analysis that offers institutional leaders the opportunity to assess the online experience they are offering to their students. This companion guide provides best practices to help leaders apply the results of the rubric to support student success with a focus on the most critical criteria needing attention.

Regulatory Considerations

While there have been significant advancements in regulatory guidance available to institutions since the early days of the pandemic, there are still unresolved issues. Although administrative rule-making related to distance learning was already underway by the U.S. Department of Education when the pandemic began (see rule information as finalized by the Department in the spring of 2021 below), the pandemic very clearly pushed the regional accreditors forward in providing clarity in their processes associated with the expansion of distance learning (typically found under their “substantive change” information). The following is a list of resources to help you to stay on top of the activities and notices regarding regulatory compliance and distance/online education:

- [**U.S. Department of Education Regulations on Distance Education Effective July 1, 2021**](#). Final rule updating USDoE regulations regarding distance education in the aftermath of COVID-19.
- [**NC-SARA Proposed 21st Century Distance Guidelines**](#) (March 2021). Joint statement by NC-SARA and NCHEMS on the future of distance and remote learning.
- WCET Analysis of Proposed [**New Regulations Review #1: Regular and Substantive Interaction**](#) (April 2020)

Information on regional accrediting agencies' distance education policies

- [Higher Learning Commission](#)
- [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#)
- [New England Association of Schools and Colleges](#)
- [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities](#)
- [Southern Association on Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges](#)
- [WASC Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges](#)
- [WASC Senior College and University Commission](#)





Technology and Support

As the pandemic forced institutions to move instruction to online technologies, many leaders were tempted by the plethora of free and trial offerings from various educational technology companies. While experimentation and early adoption are welcome, a time of crisis is not opportune for introducing “new to you” technologies. But that was all that many institutions—particularly those that had not invested in developing their own internal expertise in the development of online programs—were able to do.

In the longer run—and as institutions respond to the increased demand for online education that has been driving enrollment growth for almost a decade—the RNL Teaching and Learning team strongly recommends selecting the educational technology toolkit that keeps your institution in the “driver’s seat.” Those technologies should be offered consistently throughout the student’s online experience. It is important to ensure there are sufficient instructions for use of the tools as well as technical support for students and faculty.

Admissions Requirements

Online students have more options available to them—particularly since the pandemic began—than ever before. While no institution should sacrifice its standards in order to attract students, enrollment growth will be helped or hindered by the number of hurdles that institutions erect on the pathway to enrollment.

What does this mean? Institutions should evaluate each requirement for admission to see if it is essential in the evaluation of the readiness of the student for success in the online program. For example:

- No institution can sacrifice the submission of previous transcripts, but the savviest institutions have processes in place to collect these documents on behalf of the prospective student—saving those individuals hours of time to attend to the many and varied other life responsibilities.
- More and more institutions have made their temporary suspension of their standardized test score policies permanent after realizing that admissions decisions could be made without them.
- Many online programs have discontinued requiring the submission of multiple letters of recommendation—particularly from previous professors/instructors. Given that many prospective online students are many years away from their last enrollment, this is a particularly onerous requirement.

Institutions should consider conducting some “secret shopping” of their own to better understand two critical things:

- 1) What their nearest competitors are requiring for admission.
- 2) What the mega-universities that are siphoning off students who (given more straightforward admissions requirements) would otherwise enroll locally are requiring.

Marketing and Outreach

According to the [2022 Online Student Recruitment Report](#) that surveyed more than 1,600 prospective online students, these students almost exclusively conduct their search for a program online and then predominantly interact with the institutions of interest digitally. With this in mind, institutions must both have a robust online presence that is designed to be user-friendly and presents all the information needed to make an enrollment decision, as well as makes sure that their online programs have sophisticated search engine optimization (SEO) that ensures that prospective students will find the program when looking.

RNL's research also indicates that prospective online students engage with digital marketing—upwards of 70 percent click on digital ads during their search, nearly 60 percent indicate that they rate social media as one of the platforms on which they learned about online programs, and nearly 80 percent watched videos on either a social media channel or on a program page. A digital marketing strategy is essential.

However, before an institution makes any advancement to their marketing, they should ensure that their team is ready to respond on the timeline expected by today's online students. If not, they stand to lose a lot of students for whose expectations they are not meeting.

What are those expectations?



One in four online students expects a response to their initial inquiry within minutes, another 20 percent expect a response within three hours, and another third will be disappointed if it takes more than a day.



While email is the most preferred method of communication, texting has superseded phone calls as a preferred method of communication.



Non-personalized email (auto-responders) may suffice as a placeholder after hours, but in the eyes of online student inquirers they do not “count” as contact. Institutions still need to make personal contact in no less than 24 hours.



Online students most frequently make contact and seek responses during weekday business hours. This reflects a change from pre-pandemic patterns in which evening and weekends dominated.



Three-quarters of prospective online students expect an admissions decision within one week of submitting all of their materials.

Why is this so important? Because with the choices available to them, online students are opting to enroll with the institutions that meet their timing expectations. More than half of online students said they are likely to enroll in the program that responds to their inquiry first, and more than 80 percent that they are likely to enroll in the program that admits them first.



Operations/Policy and Practice

As noted, it is imperative for your institution to examine all of its transactional policies as they relate to online education. A necessary and key change is eliminating requirements for an ink signature or submission by fax. Operations that typically require a student to come to an office for things like advising and registration, student accounts, financial aid, and the like should be moved to an online self-service format as quickly as possible. Savvy institutions that invested in online tutoring/coaching prior to the pandemic as a way to respond to both technologically demanding Gen-Z and Gen X/Millennial students were also in a more advantageous position both when the pandemic began and as they moved toward a fuller complement of online programs for the future.

All of these recommendations are based on the underlying understanding that while a significant share of your online students will be “local,” they do not want to have to come to the institution to attend to administrative processes that they can complete online with any of the other entities with which they interact today. This need may seem obvious, but not all institutions have implemented these critical practices for common transactions such as add/drops or withdrawals.

New Student/Continuing Student Success

RNL’s Student Experience + Engagement content (part of this series) provides several ways to fully engage and support students, both new and continuing. Creating deep affinity and connections to the campus, even from a distance, should be of the highest priority as new online programs are developed. Students need that sense of belonging to encourage persistence and successful progress to graduation.

This can be done through a number of mechanisms, but the most critical is a coaching philosophy and structure to provide proactive outreach and support, connecting students to much needed services and resources on campus. In addition, a comprehensive new student orientation, an intentional communication strategy, and engagement in student organizations can all contribute to the success of your online students.

You may tend to avoid the term “customer service” when referring to interactions with your students; however, RNL survey data indicate that students expect to have phone calls and emails returned promptly, to receive timely feedback in their courses, and to avoid the bureaucratic practices that often leave students frustrated. These same survey data indicate that students reward institutions that do these things and avoid institutions that do not. A commitment to service that is clearly articulated and communicated to students is a great way to keep them connected and engaged.



Faculty

Setting Expectations For the online student, faculty are the most direct and consistent connection they have to your campus. Faculty need to provide—and then abide by—clear expectations regarding how they reply to emails, what available virtual office hours are, and wait times for feedback on classroom activities. Optimally, replies to email or discussion inquiries should be returned within 24 hours of receipt (or 48 hours on weekends or holidays). Formative feedback should be timely, allowing students to absorb feedback and implement it for any subsequent course activities. One of the greatest concerns for online students is a sense of detachment from faculty. To that end, faculty presence in the online course is key for student engagement and success.

Intentionality In addition to faculty engagement within an online course, it is also imperative that every online course is developed and built intentionally. This process requires time and support. Faculty who are inexperienced with the process may become frustrated and overwhelmed; therefore, it is important that institutional leadership set clear expectations regarding curriculum design, with a support infrastructure that includes instructional design and academic technology resources.

Engagement To that end, in order to ensure full faculty engagement, it is a good practice to review your criteria for promotion and tenure to include acknowledgment of the time and effort required for online course development. For adjunct faculty, account for the requirements of course hygiene and refinement in their contracts.

Excellent online teaching requires far more than the time faculty may spend engaging in direct instructional activities.

Conclusion

There are many dimensions to offering a comprehensive quality online learning experience. The institutions that will thrive are those that make the student the highest priority and that focus on connections and learning. This guide will get you started, and RNL's other Quality Online Learning materials have been carefully designed by our industry experts to offer additional support—and will be published as part of our Own and Transform Your Online Success series. If you want additional insights on this or any other topic related to your online transition, reach out and let us know!

Find out how you can power the growth of your online programs

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