

A 2022 Outlook for Professional, Continuing and Online Education

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Outlook for 2022: 10 Trends to Consider for Professional, Continuing and Online (PCO) Education

In 2021, the higher education community was hoping for recovery and a return to some form of normalcy after the upheaval of 2020. That did not happen as the COVID-19 global pandemic continued to rage on throughout the U.S. and the rest of the world, creating uncertainty and instability, affecting both domestic and global markets. One goal of higher education is to prepare the workforce for an anticipated economy, but with the long-term picture uncertain, colleges and universities have had to plan for the short term and implement stopgap measures to preserve continuity.

Over the past two years, higher education has been able to adapt, establishing a precedent for the content and delivery of education. Online and hybrid learning have become ubiquitous in how adult learners worked through the pandemic. With the availability of vaccines, institutions anticipate a return of some level of in-person learning. Nevertheless, higher education still faces both old and new challenges. UPCEA has formulated an outlook for 2022, identifying 10 trends to consider as we navigate through another year of pandemic restrictions and engage with students, especially the professional, continuing and online (PCO) learner.

1: Increasing Number of Dropouts

More than half a million of U.S. students are dropping out of college, due much in part to the pandemic's restrictions and challenges. According to a National Student Clearinghouse Research Center study, US colleges saw an unprecedented 13% drop in their first-year enrollment last fall compared to previous years with low-income student numbers dropping at an even higher rate of 29% for four-year colleges and 37% for community colleges.¹ The high number of dropouts has pushed many of these adult learners into an uncertain and unprecedented job market. Most college dropouts stated that they left due to financial pressure, leading to one of the highest dropout rates over the last decade.² During the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of low-skill jobs around the U.S. were eliminated and now, after some progress, millions of those jobs have reopened with little fulfillment.³

According to a joint study by UPCEA and StraighterLine in 2021, overall disengaged learners most often cited financial reasons. When analyzed across generations, 32% of Mid-Millennials also cited family and personal commitments and Generation Z said because their school was not the right fit. As enrollments decline, institutions are trying to solve the challenge of how to retain current students. In this survey, students were asked if there was anything their institution could have done to keep them engaged, and their answers varied by demographic.

¹ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/>

² <https://educationdata.org/college-dropout-rates>

³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/about-us/covid-response-center/inclusive-economy/covid-19-crisis-pushes-us-students-into-an-uncertain-job-market>

Overall, 70% of students said institutions could offer certificates for credit and 62% indicated that providing courses at lower prices could help address their needs and keep them engaged.⁴

To meet the needs of new student demographics, institutions can look to alternative credentialing methods with flexible and adaptable programs. With the increasing number of dropouts, institutions need to have strategies in place for engaging these disengaged learners and look to possible degree expansion or completion programs as a means of attracting students back to higher education.

2: Pass/Fail Grading

During the pandemic, as learning changed to online, schools instituted a pass/fail grading system to adapt to students' remote exams. This gave students a pass grade if they ended the semester with a C or above while less than a C was a fail grade. This allowed students to opt out of the traditional letter and numerical grades that institutions often refer to as a benchmark metric for their acceptance. Institutions ran into an issue when using the pass/fail system as an evaluation tool due to the already low rate at which academic credit transfers across institutions. Many competitive higher education programs found it difficult to accept those courses as part of their transfer admission requirements.⁵ Some institutions offered a pass/fail system with the option of a letter grade while other top schools like Columbia, Stanford, and Dartmouth gave no other option. Many experts stated that the biggest impact on undergraduates and those looking for higher education opportunities will be when they look to transfer or re-enroll in an institution.⁶ This aftereffect may be most intense for community college students who wish to later transfer to four-year institutions. Those who transfer to those schools are projected to lose 56% of the credits they have already earned, setting them back further in their academic career and increasing the probability of them dropping out.⁷

Pass/fail grading was often viewed as a temporary measure to create an equitable system of measuring progress and competency, and institutions could utilize a badging system to address specific competencies and achieve the same result while also developing a new product. Professional, continuing, and online education units have an opportunity to integrate badging as an alternative to pass/fail processes brought on by the pandemic.

⁴ <https://upcea.edu/new-research-answers-question-every-college-wants-to-know-why-do-students-leave-and-how-do-we-get-them-back/>

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/pass-fail-grades-may-help-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-but-could-cost-them-later>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

3: Student Loan Relief Aftereffect

Student loan relief enacted through the Cares Act and signed into law by President Trump has provided more than 41 million students across the U.S. some temporary relief as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, after three extensions under two different administrations, the Biden administration declared first that it was no longer going to extend the loan relief past January 31st, 2022, in an effort to guide the economy back to normalcy.⁸ In October 2021, it also announced a new expansion of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program to help wipe out federal student loan debt for borrowers after 10 or more years of public service employment. It stated that it had already provided almost \$13 billion in targeted federal loan relief to over 640,000 qualified borrowers.⁹ However, as the Omicron variant of COVID began to spread rapidly in the U.S., the administration announced on December 22, 2021, that it as extending the deadline to May 1, 2022.

In addition to the extension, the administration plans to make several major changes to student loan repayment that may help student learners adjust in the coming year. These include easier enrollment processes, a delayed income recertification deadline, and a self-reporting system for reporting direct income on a student loan.¹⁰ The U.S. Department of Education is set to reevaluate new proposals and methods to aid students in their repayments over the next year. The student loan program has often had problems throughout the years and the administration has attempted to fix the program to reassess borrowers' applications and recount their payments.¹¹

As individuals transition to paying back their student loans, the effects of more than a year's worth of student loan relief will be an interesting and important aspect, both on the individual and federal side, to monitor. Potential adult learners may perceive value differently and be waiting on the sidelines for a more favorable financial aid situation or be holding out for the possibility of free community college. Potential learners may also be hesitant to invest in their education until more concrete developments occur regarding a new and more automated economy.

4: Stagnant International Student Recruitment

Borders across the world were closed to international travelers for months with the United States just opening again to vaccinated individuals on November 8, 2021, after more than an 18-month shutdown. The U.S. enrolls more than one million international students in higher education, but these enrollments have plateaued at 5.5% since 2017. Data shows that between 2009 and 2015, enrollments were steadily increasing each year until 2016.¹² International students have long been recognized as an essential part of enrollment and an important source of revenue for many institutions. A 2018 report found that international students contributed

⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2021/11/15/prepare-for-the-end-of-student-loan-relief/?sh=34af629b37fc>

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2021/12/22/student-loans-white-house/>

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2021/12/16/biden-wont-extend-student-loan-relief-but-student-loan-payments-will-be-easier-in-2022/?sh=71d856667874>

¹¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/28/what-you-need-to-know-about-public-service-loan-forgiveness-overhaul-.html>

¹² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hequ.12365>

roughly \$41 billion to the U.S. economy, but with the onset of the pandemic, many students had to return home and were not admitted for reentry for more than a year later.¹³ In the U.S., international student enrollments decreased about 2.9% in the undergraduate sector and about 0.9% in the graduate sector.¹⁴ The decline in international student enrollment may take a few more years to rebound and grow, if at all, at the rate it once did.

PCO units have a great opportunity to engage and embrace these international students who have temporarily stopped out due to the pandemic and immigration issues. Institutions with a significant portfolio of courses can offer international students in a holding pattern a low-risk pathway into the college or university through individual online courses.

5: The Great Resignation

In November 2021 alone, a record 4.53 million Americans quit their jobs following a pattern of resignations across industries over the last year.¹⁵ However, it's important to look at the demographic of those quitting their jobs and identify the factors triggering these patterns of behavior. It appears to be low-wage, frontline, minority, and lower-level employees who are more likely to quit their jobs and leave in comparison to the average employee.¹⁶ Prior to the November resignations, many were a result of early retirements.¹⁷ Employers added 199,000 new jobs in December, below the monthly average of 2021 (537,000). The unemployment rate improved further, ticking down to 3.9% in December from 4.2% in November.¹⁸

Psychological stressors triggered by the pandemic have caused many employees to rethink their options and priorities. Many are looking to find jobs in higher wage sectors and identify opportunities to work remotely, so some are looking to higher education for additional skills and training to elevate them to those opportunities. This is a good time and place to start in designing online short courses and stackable certificates and programs that can provide these job-seeking workers a relevant degree for advancement.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/04/jolts-november-2021-record-4point5-million-workers-quit-their-jobs.html>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2021/11/16/the-great-resignation-actually-a-mass-retirement/?sh=2a0bd91518ba>

¹⁸ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/december-jobs-report-unemployment-rate-2021-11641513402>

¹⁹ <https://upcea.edu/higher-education-role-in-era-of-the-great-resignation/>

6: College Tuition Rising at a Slow Rate

Traditionally, the cost of a higher education gets increasingly expensive each year as schools adjust for inflation, new programming, and higher costs of living. However, this past year's increases in tuition and fees are at historical lows. For the 2021-22 academic year, the average tuition and fees rose by 1.6% for in-state students at four-year public colleges, and 2.1% at four-year private institutions.²⁰ With inflation surging to 6.2% in October 2021, the average tuition and fees adjusted for inflation declined across institutions. Many institutions are even choosing to hold their tuition and fees flat over the next year, possibly as a result of the pandemic and higher unenrollment rates. Another reason could be the \$74.8 billion the federal government authorized to higher education institutions and students through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, providing enough support to hold these rates and continue to fund students through the CARES Act.²¹

For many colleges and universities, raising tuition is a means for bridging a shortfall between costs and revenues earned plus funding from outside sources such as state and federal agencies. Institutions will raise tuition in the event of an anticipated shortfall. However, many factors are at play here regarding return on investment for education, including less confidence or certainty regarding preparedness in a new economy, the pandemic creating more competitors, and more institutions finding greater cost competitiveness through the use of specific technologies (e.g., Georgia Tech's Online Master's in Computer Science).

With the value equation changing, institutions will need to create more affordable solutions or higher value returns on education as there is skepticism in the marketplace, as well as more choices as a result of competition. Higher value could include innovative programs and degrees that better anticipate the new and evolving economy, but also more stackable components that may build up to a degree. Higher value could also include the ease of the student experience, the use of technology in the classroom, employment after graduation, student retention or even valuing prior learning or work experiences.²²

7: Hybrid Learning Integration

As the pandemic effectively closed down operations across different industries, schools and higher education institutions were one of the most affected areas across the country. From pre-K to graduate school, schools had to adapt to sending their students, teachers, and staff home, all while trying to navigate online learning. Since March 2020, schools have integrated technology and hybrid learning as a permanent part of their learning experience. Many schools have seen that online learning provides new opportunities for students to engage with their classrooms and professors, such as with Arizona State University (ASU) introducing ASU Sync., a mixed-modality approach to classes. Even as ASU moved to fully in-person learning for this school year, ASU Sync continues to be an option for students.²³ In order to continue to

²⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/27/college-tuition-is-now-rising-at-a-rate-lower-than-inflation.html>

²¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/11/college-tuition-increased-at-historically-low-rates-this-year.html>

²² <https://www.salesforce.com/form/sfd/edu/support-new-professional/>

²³ <https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2021/05/making-hybrid-learning-happen-higher-ed>

integrate technology and remote learning into higher-education, there will need to be more training and faculty support to help onboard and equip staff to deliver online instruction. Institutions are also exploring partnerships with major technology firms to help with this transition and resource equipment. ASU worked with Adobe Creative Cloud to help its students engage in creative digital tools and Oregon State partnered heavily with Canvas LMS (Learning Management System) as its hybrid tool of choice.²⁴

Institutions will need to map out their future strategies regarding the use of technology and the development of processes to leverage online and hybrid offerings. For many institutions, the ability to invest in new technologies will be limited as investment capital may not be readily available. As a result, some institutions will continue or develop partnerships with Online Program Management (OPM) companies and other outsource partners, while others will do it alone.

8: Changes in Campaigns to Raise Capital

It's no surprise that fundraising campaigns to improve on-campus infrastructure, introduce new programs, and sustain the cost of operating are a crucial part of an institution's operations. However, during the pandemic, there has been a major shift towards focusing on raising capital to build virtual campuses. Currently, the highest growth markets in U.S. higher education are for online degree programs and retraining initiatives for new and adult learners.²⁵ In both cases, institutions need to look at building their remote, online, and asynchronous learning programs across various departments. The pandemic has truly accelerated institutions' need to redirect their capital campaigns from infrastructure to their digital classroom. Done properly and at the correct scale, online education can be both high quality and profitable but also less expensive for institutions.

Institutions have cultivated relationships with their graduates primarily based on campus or classroom experiences and memories, including classmate and faculty interactions and social events. With many students going to full-time or part-time online learning, these engagements are very different and will need to be leveraged differently by campus leaders, alumni and advancement offices and others involved with fundraising. Institutions will need to evaluate the connections they have with their online program graduates. Many campuses lock down access to alumni and preserve it for fundraising activities such as a capital campaign, as opposed to fully developing a relationship that goes beyond the "ask" for contributions. A recent UPCEA survey found that many PCO units do not have access to the institution's own alumni for marketing online and continuing education programs.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brandonbusteed/2021/03/16/the-future-of-higher-ed-fundraising-building-the-virtual-campus/?sh=169b8e553f69>

²⁶ <https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Alumni-as-an-Audience-Oct-Nov-2021.pdf>

9: Staff and Student Wellbeing on Campus

As the last two years have shown, physical and mental wellbeing are crucial to the success of students and to the overall performance of higher education institutions. To curb the spread of COVID-19, many schools replaced their traditional weeklong breaks with “wellness days” designed to break up the stress of a full semester. A study conducted by the Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association found that in the last six years, student anxiety in higher education jumped from 17% to 31%, with COVID-19 bringing these discussions to the forefront.²⁷ In 2020 alone, college students reported rapid spikes in their anxiety and depression as they were moved into isolation periods and 60% said the pandemic has made it harder to access mental health care.²⁸ Most institutions are taking important action with 50% of university executives stating that they understand the need for more tools to address these issues and 32% of students asking for more resources from their administrators.²⁹

Institutions are now seeing the devastating aftermath of the pandemic in higher education mental health and wellbeing. In October of 2021, Representative David Trone (MD-D) and Senator Bob Casey (PA-D) introduced a bipartisan bill that would establish a national commission to study the mental health concerns at institutions of higher education. This overview would lead to a road map of what actionable things institutions can implement to improve mental health services on campuses.³⁰ Congressional lawmakers emphasize that there is a lot more that the government can do to help institutions such as providing funding to hire and train additional campus counseling center staff, investing in telehealth services, and conducting periodic campus climate surveys to assess the needs of students. The committee is a crucial first step in doing so. Across the nation, institutions are reevaluating and emphasizing the importance of their on-campus resources to combat these mental health challenges for their constituents.

With more challenges impacting the physical and mental health of students, the online learner or continuing education student is not immune. In addition, with more traditionally aged students entering PCO channels, colleges and universities need to be better prepared to direct resources to part-time and online students who do not have access to bricks-and-mortar support units and onsite staff. In the shift to online, many campuses have created a virtual response to supporting students which needs to be further explored for effectiveness and reach to audiences that PCO units serve.

²⁷ https://healthymindsnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Healthy_Minds_NCHA_COVID_Survey_Report_FINAL.pdf

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ <https://www.salesforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/edu-guide-rethinking-wellbeing-highered-051421-v1.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/11/08/legislation-aims-tackle-mental-health-concerns-higher-ed>

10: Accommodating the Nontraditional Student or “New Adult” Learner

Many of today’s college students no longer look like the stereotypical just-out-of-high school 18-year-old dependent on their parents, but instead, they are comprised of working parents, full-time employees, and retirees among others. A nontraditional student is defined as one 25 or older, and often those who have delayed their education, are single parents, veterans, employed full time, etc.³¹ However, some have questioned the use of the term “nontraditional” as the situation for many more entering higher education does not fit the definition. An estimate suggests that 40% of the current undergraduate population at American colleges and universities are considered nontraditional.³² Colleges are beginning to direct more resources into programming and services that can accommodate the nontraditional or new adult learner. Many institutions are realizing that traditional students alone do not generate enough tuition revenue to offset costs. As a result, many institutions are investing in professional, continuing, and personal education that goes beyond the degree, including self-improvement, career advancement, and skills development and retraining courses and credentials.

The pandemic coupled with a rapidly changing economy has also pushed men to the sideline regarding higher education. Young males are now abandoning higher education at record levels and significantly trail their female counterparts in enrollment. According to enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse, at the end of the 2020-21 academic year, women made up 59.5% of college students, a record high while male enrollment dropped to 40.5%.³³ Men in interviews across the U.S. said they quit school or didn’t enroll because they didn’t see enough value in earning a traditional college degree with all of the expenses and effort to obtain one. Many said they instead wanted to pursue other career paths and make money directly after high school. Now, U.S. colleges and universities are facing a decline of 1.5 million students compared with enrollment five years ago, and men accounted for a staggering 71% of that decline.³⁴

The new adult learner could also include traditional age college students who may not desire the campus experience. In the past, this student would be defined as the commuter student, but given the accelerated acceptance of online learning as a result of the pandemic, some of these students would graduate high school and seek out a fully online option for an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. Others may go the route of alternative credentials or build through a stackable pathway in time as committing to a high-cost degree may not be within reach as a result of a weakened financial situation caused by the pandemic.

³¹ https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Hittepole_NASPA_Memo.pdf

³² Ibid

³³ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>

³⁴ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/college-university-fall-higher-education-men-women-enrollment-admissions-back-to-school-11630948233>

Conclusion

The digital change discussed in our previous outlook report of 2021 now looks to be a permanent legacy that institutions will innovate and implement through 2022. These trends show how higher education is trying to navigate and learn from the obstacles and accomplishments during the pandemic. The normalization of integrated technology, implementation of online learning, and adaptation for nontraditional students demonstrate the persistence of higher education dealing with disruptions in learning. Institutions are bracing for what seems to be another year of pandemic-related challenges and learning how to rebound their programs and students for unprecedented changes in the future. In order for higher education to be successful through short- and long-term challenges, institutions must monitor and evaluate these trends to adapt to the permanent aftereffects we see in our economy, society, and culture.

With another year of experience in working through this pandemic, more institutions are going to have to address tabled issues, such as improving quality in online learning or meeting impending enrollment deficits. Institutions are going to need the expertise of PCO units even more to expand their reach, improve quality, combat competition, and innovate in new or evolving areas such as alternative credentials and badging. Now is the time to take advantage of the lessons already learned over the last two years and institute long-lasting change to programming, recruitment, delivery, and other services to support an evolving educational model.