

Engaging Learners Online in COVID-19: An Actionable Framework

Guided by a few simple best practices, you can help learners feel more capable of growth and success, experience greater ownership over their educational journeys, and build connection to their learning communities—all of which can [motivate](#) them to stick with their learning.

Creating Growth-Focused Learning Environments

Learners are more likely to persevere through learning challenges if they feel like they are capable of success and see their progress toward their bigger-picture goals.

Barriers	Desired Result	Recommended Action
<p>Learners without food or other basic needs can't learn.</p> <p>Food and housing insecurity, financial strain, time poverty, and other barriers can impact a learner's success. During the pandemic, these issues have intensified.</p>	<p>Learners receive basic needs support from their institutions. They are more likely to come back for further learning, even if they do need to stop out for now.</p>	<p>Take steps to address learners' basic need satisfaction, and choose relationships over compliance.</p> <p>Keep in mind that every learner has a different life situation they're dealing with in relation to COVID-19, and lean toward flexibility, understanding, and support.</p>
<p>Learners without access to technology and the internet can't learn online.</p> <p>35% of Americans do not have access to high-speed internet at home.</p>	<p>Learners can make progress toward their academic and career goals, regardless of their tech assets.</p>	<p>Make available additional ways for learners to connect and learn.</p> <p>Provide mobile-friendly, downloadable, and offline options for learning, in addition to online connection opportunities.</p>
<p>Learners may struggle to adapt to new modes of engagement.</p> <p>Adjusting to new instruction and assessment techniques can make some learners feel unsure about how they're progressing. Discomfort with the online environment can lead learners toward less healthy learning mindsets and disengagement.</p>	<p>Learners engage in active learning, develop growth mindsets about learning online, and receive ongoing constructive feedback to guide their learning. As a result, they feel hopeful about the progress they're making toward their goals.</p>	<p>Provide frequent, formative feedback.</p> <p>Give learners opportunities every few minutes for feedback through quick self-assessments, quizzes, group discussion, practicing new skills, and reflection. Make all feedback <i>informational</i> rather than judgmental to emphasize growth.</p>
<p>Learners may experience displacement from in-person supports.</p> <p>As they face novel challenges at home and at school, learners may not know where and how to access support in their changing online worlds.</p>	<p>Learners know where to find individualized support and can easily access it at any time.</p>	<p>Proactively offer support to learners.</p> <p>Delgado Community College has paved the way for learners to access support online with their centralized Online Welcome Desk website, linked prominently from the top of their homepage. They're reaching out by email and phone to learners who may need extra support during this time.</p>

Creating Learner-Driven Learning Environments

To help learners feel greater ownership over their education, provide them meaningful choices about their learning experience and support that aligns with their goals, values, and priorities.

Barriers	Desired Result	Recommended Action
<p>COVID-19 has eliminated many traditional opportunities for learners to connect with employers and intentionally prepare for the next stages of their careers.</p>	<p>Learners further their career prospects in ways that align with their schedules, tech capabilities, and goals.</p>	<p>Consider virtual internships or online 21st century skills microcredentials.</p> <p>Central New Mexico Community College is leveraging 21st century skills to help UnityBPO's IT workers provide more efficient, effective support to the healthcare industry during this pandemic.</p>
<p>Some learners face tough circumstances as their home environments change in response to COVID-19.</p> <p>Intensified family obligations, financial strain, mental health issues, and other stressors can keep learners from working at the time and/or pace they might otherwise.</p>	<p>Learners can combine learning with the rest of their lives in ways that work for their schedules and circumstances. They feel a sense of ownership over their learning and support from the institution in continuing their journey.</p>	<p>Give learners choices about when, where, and how they learn.</p> <p>If you've designated times for learners in a course to meet virtually each week, also offer options for asynchronous participation instead.</p> <p>Allow for greater flexibility with course deadlines, and make it painless for learners to take incompletes and convert courses to pass/fail. Consider relaxing grade requirements for admissions in the future to account for this crisis.</p>
<p>Learners need support with wayfinding.</p> <p>Amidst so much disruption in the economy and within their institutions, learners may question how to plan their learning journeys and prepare for the next stages of their careers.</p>	<p>Learners feel like they're in the driver's seat and strongly supported. They continue to prioritize their learning through this tough time, as they see its alignment with their career goals.</p>	<p>Empower learners to envision and plan their futures.</p> <p>Encourage use of both self-serve academic planning resources and meetings with advisors to help learners consider options toward their goals.</p>

Creating Belonging-Oriented Learning Environments

Sense of belonging in a learning environment can [improve learner motivation and success](#), especially if they feel both supported by their school community *and* like they're making meaningful contributions to it.

Barriers	Desired Result	Recommended Action
<p>Learners may feel disconnected from other students, faculty, and their institutions as a whole during this socially distanced time.</p>	<p>Learners experience warm, personal relationships with faculty, staff, and their fellow learners. They feel supported by and invested in their learning community.</p>	<p>Proactive, personalized outreach from advisors, mentors, and instructors can remind learners that their institution cares about them.</p> <p>Work with learners to set up inclusive community spaces and moments that focus not just on academics but on students' broader lives.</p>
<p>People worldwide have experienced increases in depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns during the pandemic.</p> <p>80% of college students have reported that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health.</p>	<p>Learners receive the mental health support they need to cope during this trying time. They feel cared about as whole people and more connected to their institutions as a result.</p>	<p>Connect learners to mental health resources and tips for balancing school, work, and life.</p> <p>UT Austin's Counseling and Mental Health Center has collected resources, launched COVID-19-specific support groups and workshops for their community, and boosted availability of therapists to learners.</p>
<p>Within new online learning environments, less confident learners may feel more out of place, unsure of what they can contribute, and unclear about how they're performing, leading to disengagement.</p>	<p>Each learner feels like they have something uniquely valuable to offer their learning community. They feel celebrated.</p>	<p>Celebrate learners' contributions.</p> <p>Invite learners to share in online classes and communities—and make sure they receive feedback about how they've contributed to their community .</p>