Key Findings

- While the majority of students (70%) prefer mostly or completely face-to-face learning environments, specific demographic factors influence these preferences. Students who are married or in a domestic partnership, those who are independent with dependents, those who work 40 or more hours a week, students age 25 and older, and individuals who identified as having both a physical and a learning disability that require technology for their coursework all had a stronger preference for classes that are mostly or completely online.

- Labs and demonstrations, faculty/student conferences, and lectures were rated as the most preferred activities in completely face-to-face environments. Students see in-class lectures as opportunities to engage with instructors, peers, and course content, and they see technology as a means to that engagement. The majority of students prefer some form of blended environment for collaborations or projects with peers, homework/assignment submission, peer reviewing/peer grading, exams, quizzes or tests, and asking questions.

- For the students who use them, online success tools have become increasingly useful in navigating their college experience. Tools related to degree planning and degree auditing were valued the most, and “self-service referral systems for social or community resources” (e.g., community events and crisis counseling) and “tools that suggest how to improve performance in a course” saw the greatest gains in perceived usefulness since last year.

- Dormitories/campus housing and outdoor spaces continue to be rated at the bottom when it comes to reliable Wi-Fi. Outdoor spaces received the lowest marks, with more than a third of students reporting their experiences as poor or fair, while libraries and classrooms still top the list for the best Wi-Fi on campus.
• Two-thirds of students agreed that their instructors use technology to engage them in class, but it is not always with the devices students already own. Significantly fewer students said they are encouraged to use their personal technology as tools to deepen their learning. Half of the respondents said their instructors ask them to use their laptops in class, and only a quarter reported they were encouraged to use their smartphones.

• Only half of the students who have physical and/or learning disabilities and who need accessible technologies or accommodations rated their institution’s support positively. Nearly a quarter said their institution’s support (21%) and awareness (24%) was poor or fair. Of particular concern is the 11% of students with disabilities who said their institution was not aware at all of their technology needs, which suggests many may experience barriers to disclosing their disability, including stigma and their own lack of awareness of available support services.

Recommendations

• Leverage analytics to gain a greater understanding of the student demographics that influence learning environment preferences. Information such as student marital status and the number and ages of dependents gives institutions additional data points that can shed light on the learning environments students choose, as well as the resources that can be offered to help them succeed in those settings. Integrate more intentional use of technology to increase the interactivity of learning tasks and activities students prefer experiencing in face-to-face environments, such as lectures and labs, to maximize face time with instructors and peers.

• Continue to promote online success tools and provide training to students on their use through orientations and advisement sessions. Implement advising tools first with student-facing staff and faculty to communicate the value of such tools and their most effective use. Partner with other campus stakeholders such as counseling services and health centers to market self-service referral systems for social or community resources to reach more at-risk learners and students in crisis. Keeping its risks in mind, explore the possibilities of predictive analytics with the use of success tools as a supplement to the personalized support of student advisors.

• Expand efforts to improve Wi-Fi reliability in campus housing and outdoor spaces. Upgrade wireless networks in residence halls, and explore the benefits of dual network configurations to reduce the number of student-provided access points that contribute to connectivity confusion. Increase the number of outdoor access points, and invest in durable, weatherproof equipment with directional antennas to boost coverage.

• Allow students to use the devices that are most important to their academic success in the classroom. Provide training to faculty on the purposeful integration of student-owned technology for more inclusive, active, and engaged learning. Offer alternatives to in-class tech bans, such as involving students in the development of their class’s technology policy and designated seating for device users.
• Establish a campus community to address accessibility issues and give “accessibility evangelists” a seat at the table. Colleagues and students with disabilities can be valuable consultants who offer perspectives on the barriers they experience with tech inaccessibility in their learning environments. Partner with units across campus such as disability services, advisement, health services, and admissions to educate all students on the available accessible technology services and how to request them. Tap the expertise of teaching and learning centers and instructional designers to train faculty on the universal design for learning (UDL) framework to promote inclusive strategies that benefit all learners.

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