The State of Continuing Education

2021

Exposing the Modern
Learner Engagement Gap

Contents

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Exposing the modern learner engagement gap

It's impossible to talk about the state of any industry without recognizing the paradigm-shifting global pandemic. Whether it's healthcare, food, politics, manufacturing or education, COVID-19 has exposed fissures, gaps and cracks in systems society-wide that also present opportunities for change.
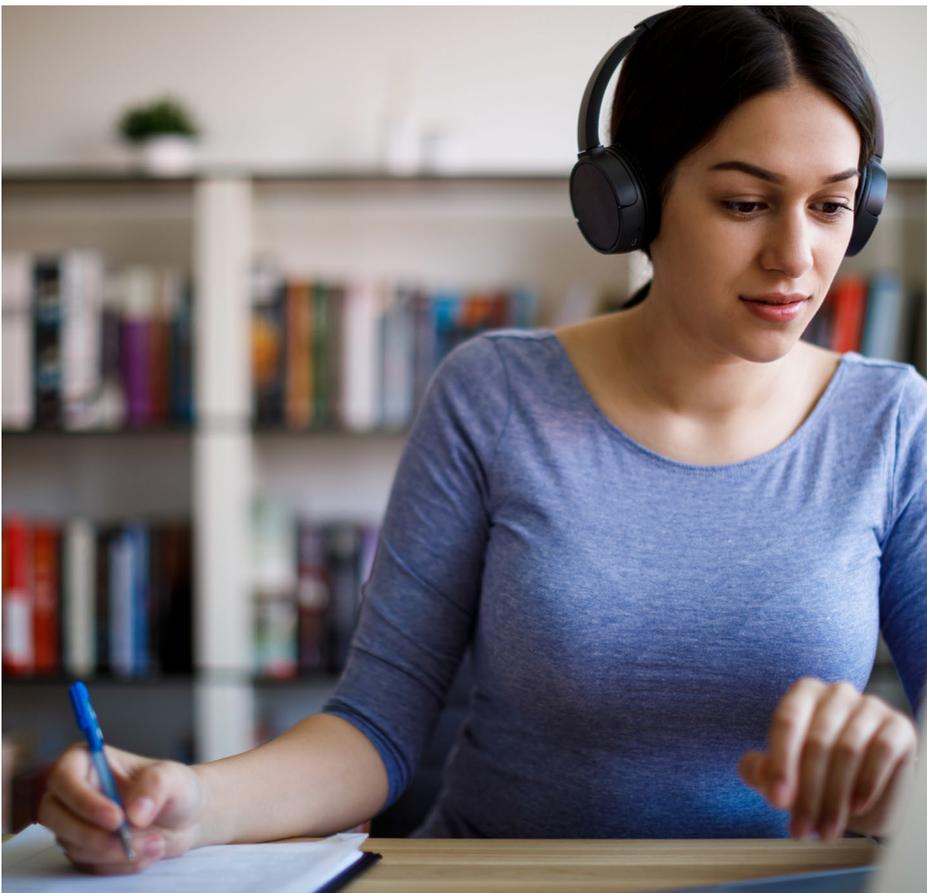
Higher education is no different. Though postsecondary institutions tend to thrive during recessions–bolstered by enrollments of displaced workers seeking to retool–the 2020 pandemic hit this industry hard. Across the board, enrollments in degree programs fell 3% in Fall 2020, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center[1]. Enrollments at community colleges in particular fell 10.1%–the biggest loss of any higher-education sector.

These enrollment drops didn't come out of the blue. An engagement gap between higher education institutions and modern learners has been slowly expanding for decades; the pandemic and resulting recession merely accelerated the split.

1 https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/fall-2020-undergraduate-enrollment-down-4-4-graduate-enrollment-up-2-9/
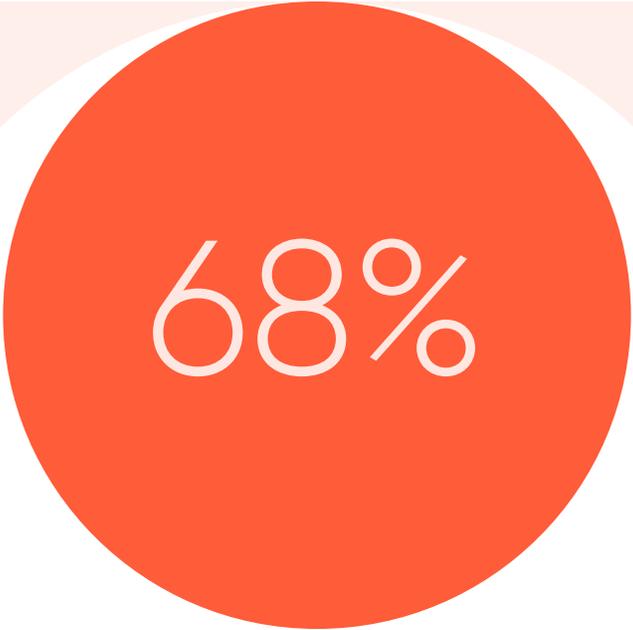
68%

In 2020, 68% of adults considering enrolling in an education program preferred non-degree, alternative programming

Prior to the pandemic, traditional programs offered by two-year public colleges were experiencing challenges. Enrollments for Fall 2018 and 2019 respectively were down 3.2% and 1.4%. The most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics reported the three-year graduation rate for students pursuing a two-year associate degree as 27% compared to the six-year bachelor's degree attainment rate at public colleges of 61%.[2] Writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Brian Rosenberg, president emeritus of Macalester College and president in residence of the Harvard Graduate School of Education called these results a "national disgrace."[3] We've also seen institutional closures and mergers accelerating, with over 60 taking place since 2016.

What's becoming increasingly clear is that student preferences and expectations are shifting away from traditional approaches of delivering traditional credentials to traditional students. In 2020, 68% of adults considering enrolling in an education program preferred non-degree, alternative programming.[4] In terms of priorities, Strada found that 38% of prospective students prioritize program relevance, and 28% are focused on program streamlining and efficiency.[5] Meanwhile, fewer than 50 percent of students at both colleges (47%) and universities (35%) felt their institutions were doing a good job connecting programming to meaningful careers.[6]

While it appears the "modern learner engagement gap" is widening, looking closely at the results unearthed from this year's State of CE survey, we can spot opportunities for colleges and universities to address their respective engagement gaps. What's more, we've identified areas where we believe institutions *think* they've addressed their engagement gap, when in fact it's simply been papered over.

2 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp

3 https://www.chronicle.com/article/
   the-problem-with-bidens-higher-education-plan

4 https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-september-16-2020/

5 https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-august-26-2020/

6 https://cci.stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/
   sites/2/2021/01/Report-January-27-2021.pdf

The state of CE study: methodology and respondent profile

To gain further insight into the world of continuing education at this moment in time, Modern Campus and *The EvoLLLution* conducted its own survey of U.S. and Canadian leaders and managers working on the frontlines of continuing education. Participants in this study were solicited through *The EvoLLLution* newsletter in late November and December 2020.

For the purposes of this paper, we are defining continuing education as encompassing the vast category of nontraditional education including community colleges, online programs, GED, degree completion, corporate training, professional certification and licensure preparation, English as a Second Language, veterans' programs, workforce development, industry associations and conferences, college-based youth programs and alumni and senior programming.

This report summarizes data from 213 respondents from institutions of higher education in the United States (85%) and Canada (15%). They represent people working primarily at universities (60.1%) along with those serving at community colleges (29.6%), regional or state college community college and university systems (7.5%) plus 2.8% from specialty education providers (among them a Traditional Chinese Medicine school, a polytechnic institute, an adult education career and technology center and a not-for-profit international graduate school).

Most survey participants are management-level employees (40%) or executives on the academic or administrative side (18.3% and 11.6% respectively). The majority work at institutions with less than 5,000 (32.4%) students and between 5,000 and 25,000 students (32.4%).

Respondent data

U.S. 85%   Canada 15%   Respondents 213

PRIMARY PLACE OF WORK

Universities
60.1%

Community Colleges
29.6%

Regional or state college, community college and university systems
7.5%
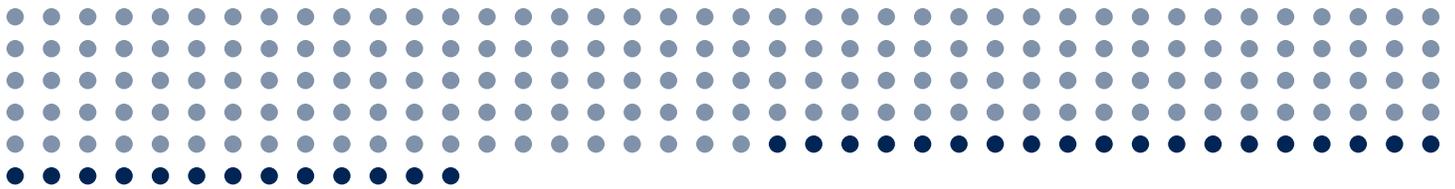
Specialty education providers
2.8%
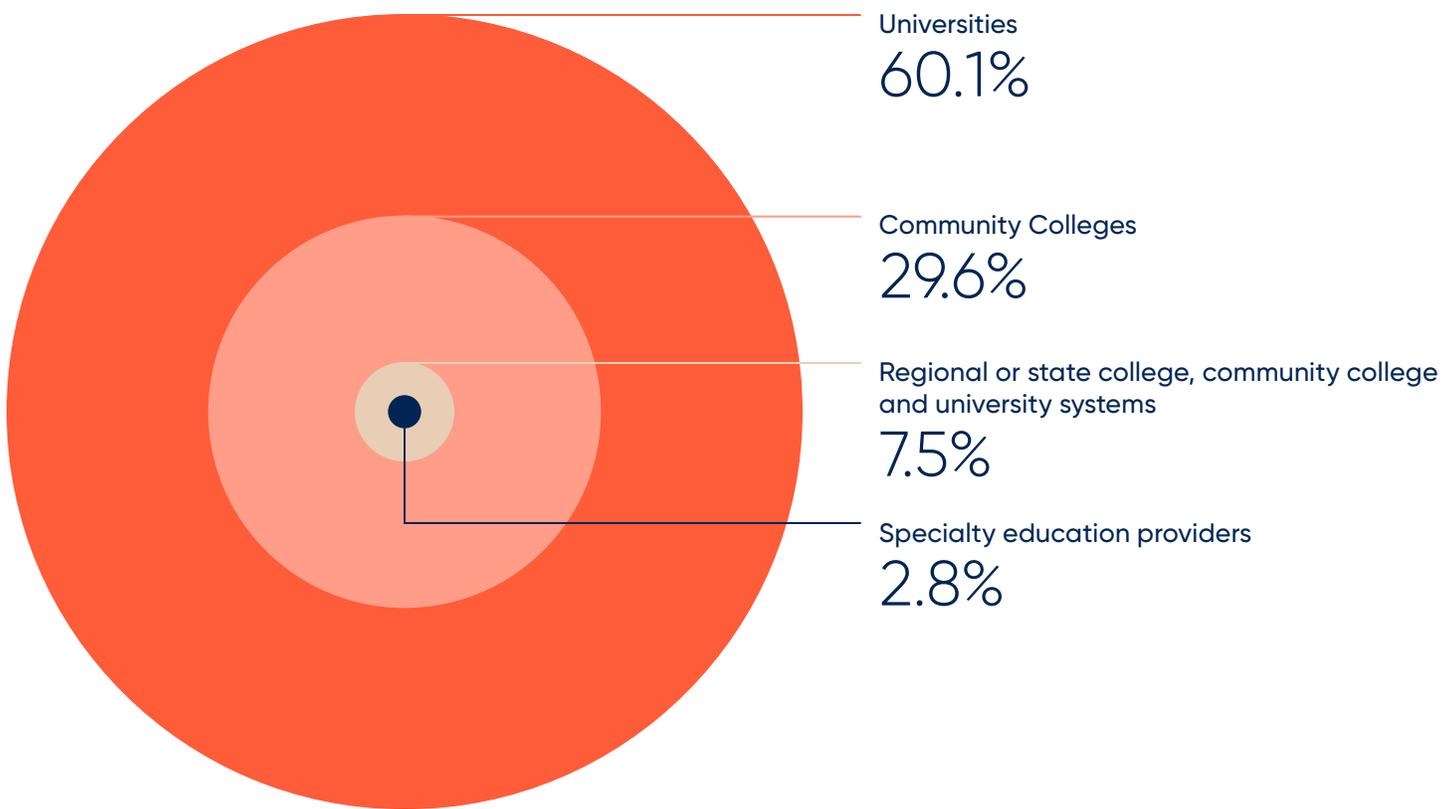
OCCUPATION

CE Manager	40%
Academic executive	18.3%
Administrative executive	11.6%

NUMBER OF STUDENTS

Less than 5,000	5,000–25,000
32.4%	32.4%
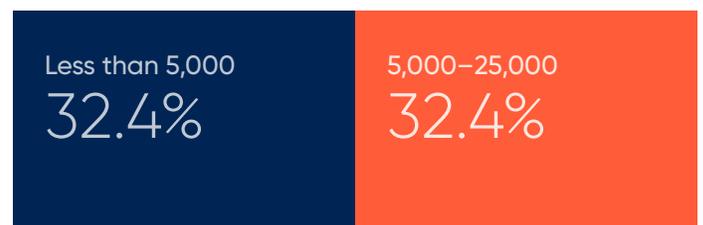
Executive summary

This survey looked at the effects of the pandemic on continuing education providers while also examining whether current institutions and technologies were meeting students' needs and supporting continuing education providers as they work to expand online offerings. Through our research we've identified specific areas where institutions are suffering from a modern learner engagement gap, and highlighted areas where they're actively working to address that gap and others where they might not see the opportunity.

Key findings:

» The pandemic wasn't the continuing education apocalypse. In fact, keyword analysis of our open-ended question about how CE has changed since the pandemic revealed that 36.4% of responses were positive and 49.8% were neutral, while only 15.6% skewed negative.

» The biggest challenges to adding or scaling programs? Concerns about market demand, administrative burdens, cost to launch and time to market.

» The value of continuing education is recognized by institutional executives. 76% of respondents said they had senior leadership buy-in to scale and expand non-degree offerings.

» Digital engagement is more important than ever, but we still have work to do. 73% of respondents say the institutional website should play a leading role in student engagement, but only 10% of respondents say their website is an effective engagement engine.

KEYWORD ANALYSIS OF CE SENTIMENT

How has the role of Continuing Education at your institution changed since the pandemic?

36.4% **Positive**

49.8% **Neutral**

15.6% **Negative**
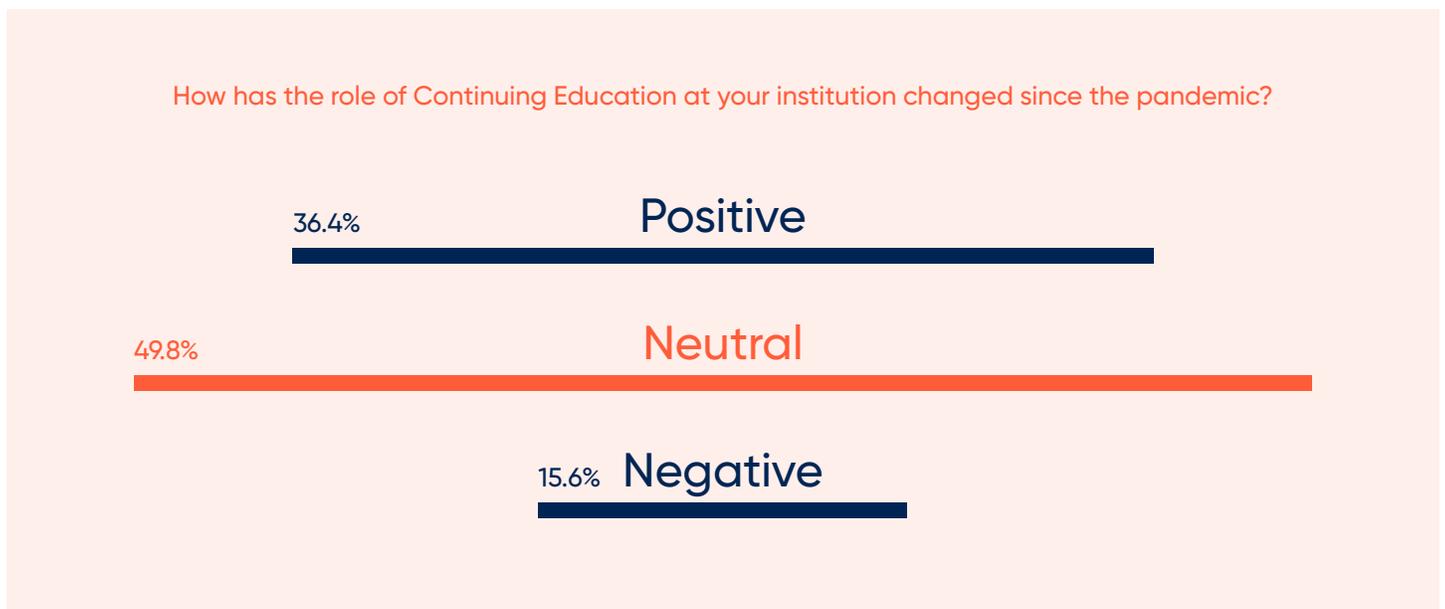
BIGGEST PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Market demand	63.4%
Administrative burden	62%
Cost to launch	52.1%
Time to market	50.7%

LEADERSHIP RECOGNITION OF CE

76.1%
have senior leadership buy-in to scale and expand non-degree offerings

73%

say their website **should** play a
leading role in student engagement

10%

say their website is an
effective engagement engine
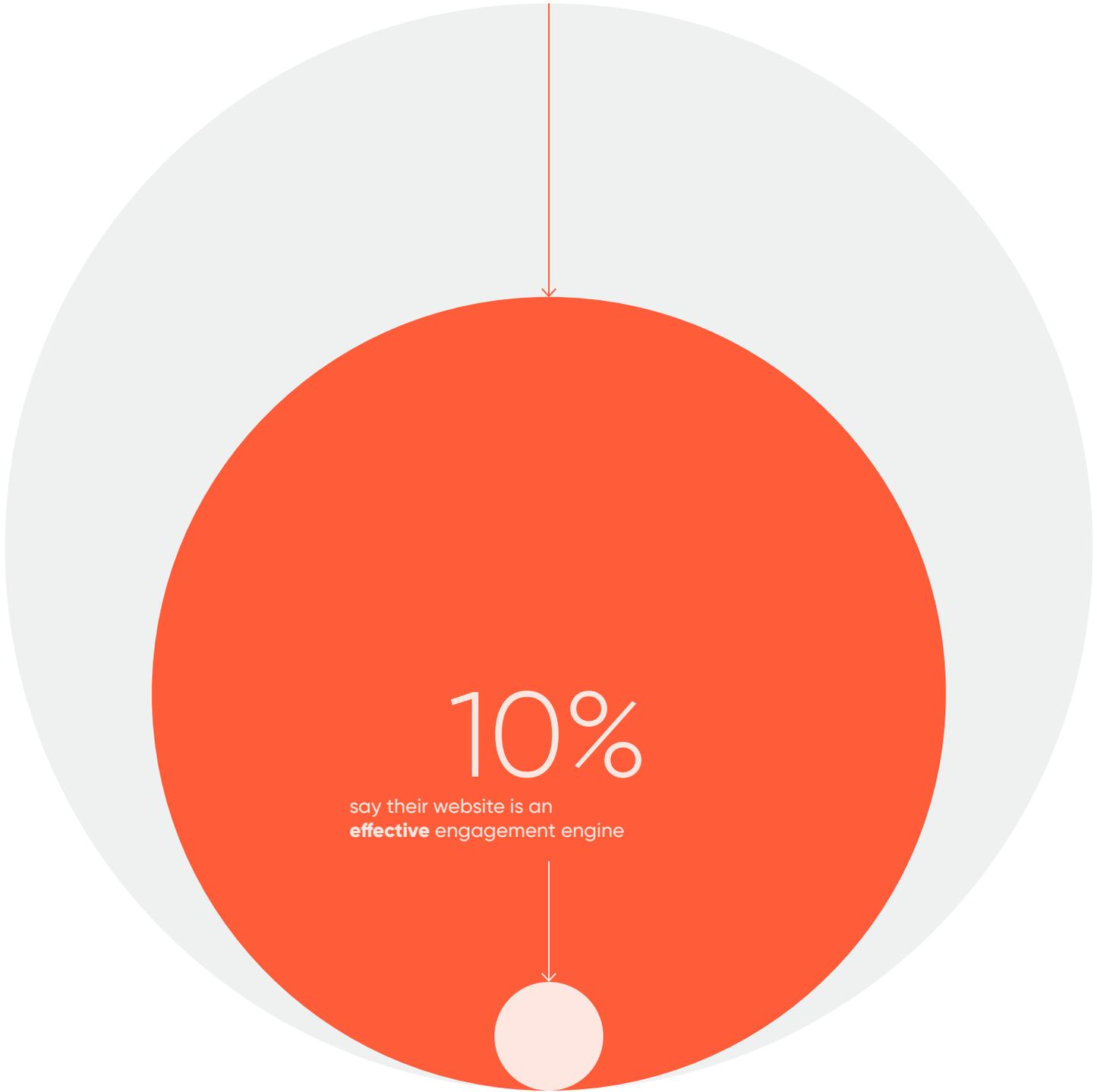
Pivoting during the pandemic

Though COVID-19 introduced countless challenges to the continuing education environment (loss of revenue and adjustment to online learning among them), the pandemic also gave CE shops more exposure coupled with the institutional backing to make necessary changes like streamlining registration, adding online payment and porting courses into online delivery platforms.
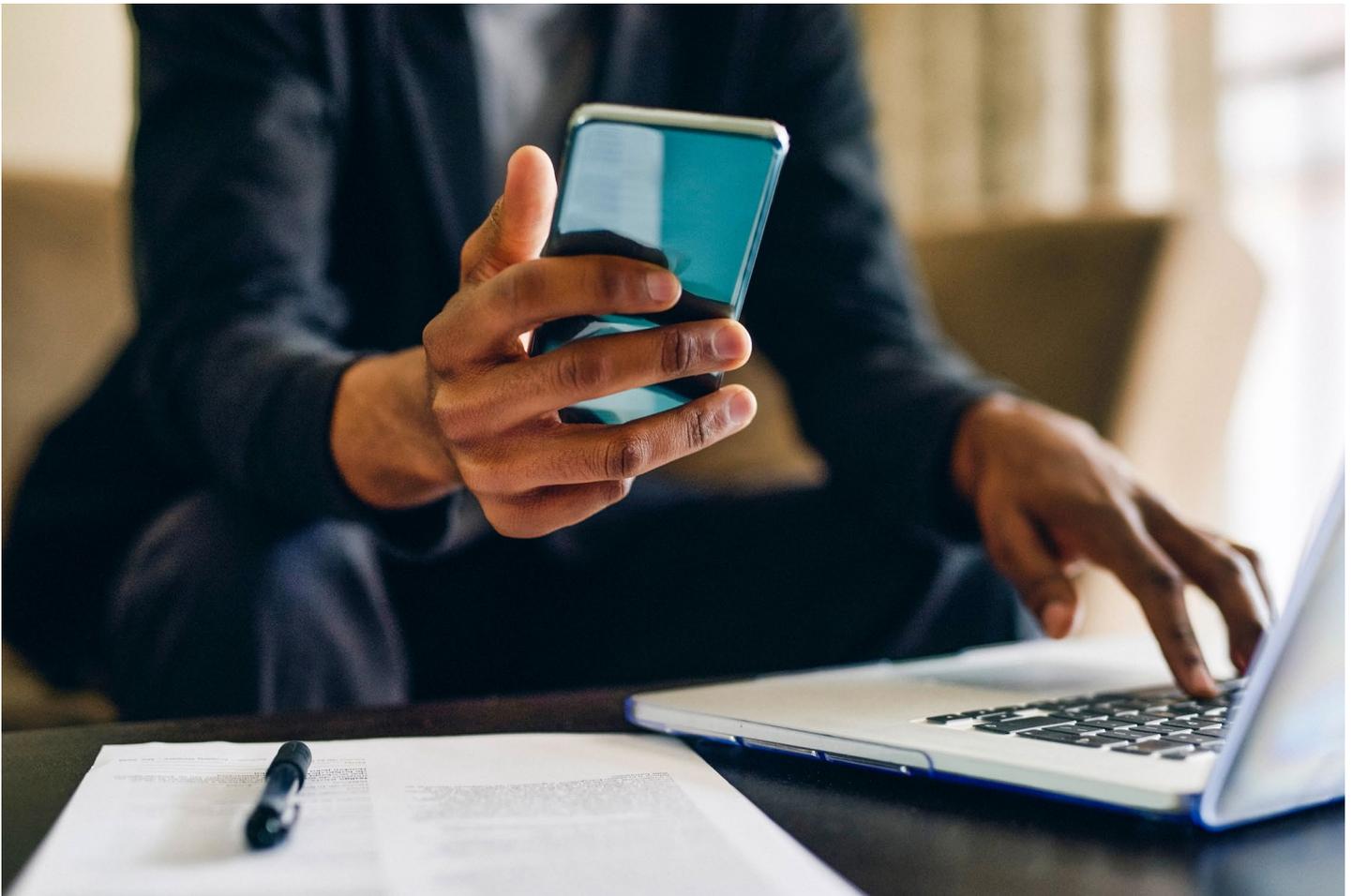
In spite of these advances, respondents nonetheless noted longstanding feelings of marginalization from main campus priorities.

One respondent described this tension like this: "There's more interest in CE as a potential revenue stream but also concern that noncredit programs will siphon enrollments away from degree programs."

This tension between degree and non-degree programming can contribute to the gap between institutional offerings and learner demand. It's essential for programming decisions to be made in based on student needs–regardless of any misplaced concerns around possible enrollment cannibalization.

"There's a widespread notion among credit faculty that CE programs steal their students," explained Scott Cashman, Manager of Continuing Education at Harper College. "But there's very little recognition of the fact that CE students and credit students are very different people with different goals."

Addressing this aspect of the engagement gap delivers a number of benefits. Not only would it create more opportunities for students to access the education offerings they need. It would also position higher education providers to execute on their mission of providing contextual learning opportunities for everyone in their service demographic.

> ❝
>
> Noticeable recognition from leadership/institution regarding CE's role and opportunities it brings. Institution has also approached CE with regards to providing internal staff training (requiring program development) specifically as a result of the pandemic and needs for communications software, project management and service-oriented training.
>
> **SURVEY RESPONDENT**
>
> ❞

Challenges: building and sustaining non-credit programs

By far, the biggest challenges to adding or scaling programs were concerns about market acceptance and the administrative lift required to launch new offerings. Other barriers to growth include cost, time-to-market and a lack of faculty/subject matter experts.

"Regulations must be in place for obvious reasons, but the process of approving, costs, programs of study and the inevitable fear of change, we systematically inhibit the ability to move as quickly as needed to provide current and relevant training and programs. In over 18 years of working in the education field, this has always been the case."

SURVEY RESPONDENT

Given their relative size, specialty programs are hamstrung by costs and worries about selling new programs, whereas larger schools identified the administrative burden and market uncertainties as inhibiting growth.

Though, institutions recognized the following as growth barriers: support from leadership, staff capacity, budget and technology, they also generally agreed (76.1%) that they have senior leadership buy-in to scale and expand non-degree programming.

These results represent a possible disconnect between "voiced" support and "actionable" support accompanied by dollars and cents and clear priorities. This raises the question whether institutional leaders are "walking the talk" of centering their CE enterprises in academic, financial and strategic discussions.

76%

have senior leadership buy-in to scale and expand non-degree offerings

	All Responses	University	Community College
Concerns around market demand	63.40%	**59.40%**	**71.40%**
Administrative burden	62%	**61.70%**	**61.90%**
Cost of launching new access points	52.10%	**56.30%**	38.10%
Time-to-market for course offerings	50.70%	48.40%	**47.60%**
Lack of faculty/subject matter expertise	32.40%	28.90%	46%
Fears of cannibalization	19.70%	25%	12.70%
Inability to deliver tailored experience to chosen demographic	19.70%	20.30%	20.60%

"We're still other. To me leadership buy-in would mean no longer being other."

SURVEY RESPONDENT

What does true executive support look like?

One of the pervasive themes to emerge from the Modern Campus study is the "workhorse complex." In a follow up interview, one respondent described it like this: "We are the arm that generates revenue." But CE units aren't the arm that wields power.

Having to navigate internal obstacles while running successful businesses can lead to resentment and under-performance at a time when colleges and universities are facing demographic and pandemic-induced enrollment drops and budgetary crises.

Higher education providers look to their continuing education divisions as hardworking, market-driven generators of revenue, and in spite of best intentions and perceived support for growth (76.1%), these entrepreneurial units feel hamstrung by challenges with technology, budget and staffing that belie those support numbers.

As one respondent noted, "Support from higherups is common at every stage of the leadership ladder, but it's difficult to *execute* on that support 'when the pie is shrinking.'"

What does true leadership buy-in look like?

1. **Put the "buy" in "buy-in."**
   Rob Westervelt, vice president for strategy and innovation at Lindenwood University, observed that leaders may need to reallocate funds to shore up the disconnect between cheering their CE divisions on and setting them up as true hubs of innovation. "To really play in this space," he said, "you have to resource it."

2. **Create a seat at the table.**
   If your institution has strategically committed to CE as part of your access mission and/or to nurture a student pipeline, consider including your CE leader as part of your cabinet/senior leadership team to increase CE's visibility and more deeply explore the growing opportunities between CE and traditional education.

3. **Embrace change.**
   Centering CE and the entrepreneurialism that comes with it will likely disrupt the status quo. Questions will arise about academic quality, college-readiness of prospective students and competition between CE and main campus. These issues can be resolved by creating interesting opportunities for faculty to participate in CE, developing remediation pathways for college readiness and offering nontraditional students degree pathways and degree-pursuing students add-on certificates and other credentials.

The challenge of serving students at a distance

Though it's tempting to think that technology lies at the heart of serving students remotely–certainly, there are no remote classes without working infrastructure–the real challenge is more subtle: that is harnessing technology to connect with students' humanity.

Ultimately, this is where the modern learner engagement gap between higher education providers and students can take deep root. Truly innovative schools leverage digital ecosystems to serve modern students and build lifelong engagements. Institutions that are lacking, though, try to iterate on-ground experiences online and ultimately create transactional distance that adds to students' physical separation.

The lack of connection students feel to their school, students' reduced engagement with courses that appear to be one-size-fits-all and the inability to personalize learning have emerged during the pandemic as issues central to persistence as well as the institutional brand. Respondents noted issues with students asking for help and faculty understanding student needs in remote classes.
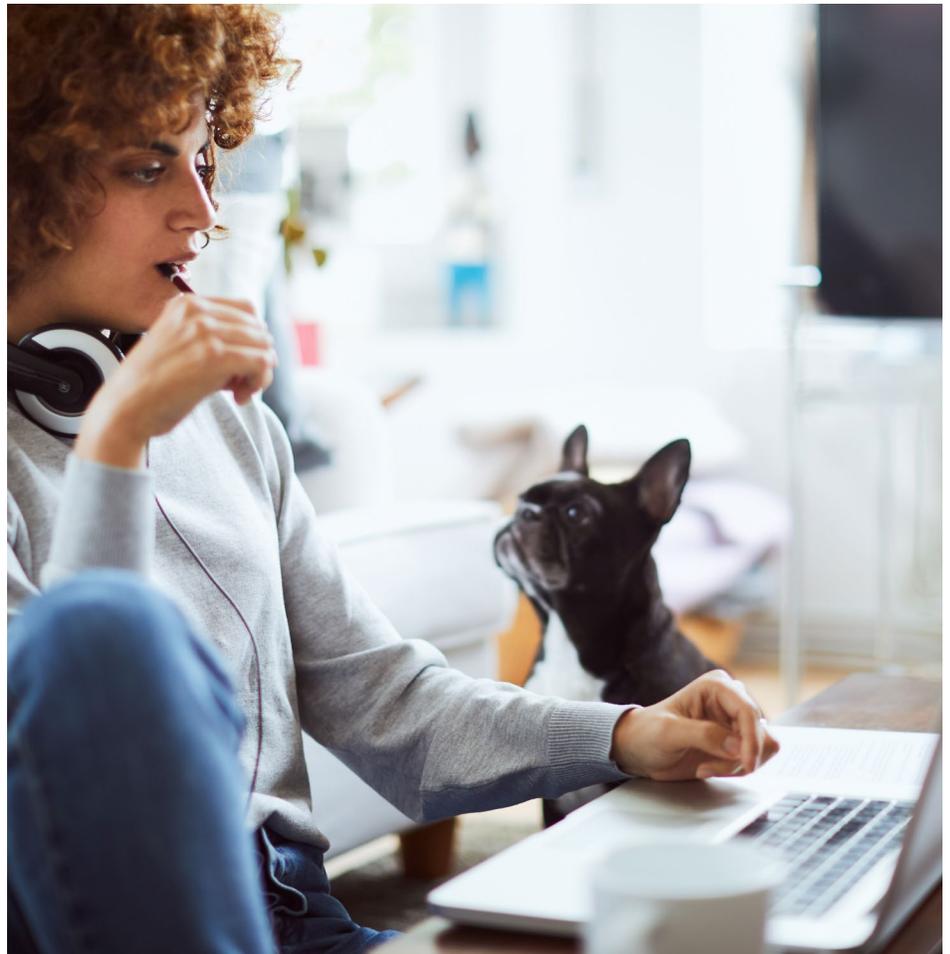
Biggest challenges serving students at a distance

LACK OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE INSTITUTION

27.2%   ALL RESPONSES

29.7%   CE/WD

30.2%   ACADEMIC

34.5%   EXECUTIVES

TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE, REDUCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH COURSE MATERIAL

23.5%   ALL RESPONSES

18%   CE/WD

23.8%   ACADEMIC

30.9%   EXECUTIVES

INABILITY TO PROVIDE A PERSONALIZED LEARNER EXPERIENCE

16.4%   ALL RESPONSES

17.1%   CE/WD

14.3%   ACADEMIC

16.4%   COMMUNITY COLLEGE
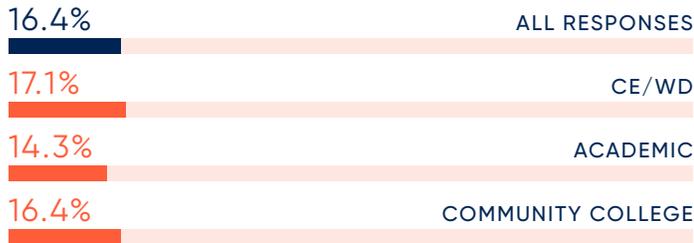
INABILITY TO GET HELP WHEN THEY NEED IT

9.4%   ALL RESPONSES

10%   CE/WD

9.5%   ACADEMIC
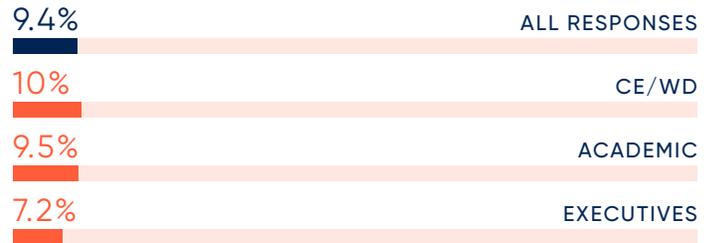
7.2%   EXECUTIVES

INABILITY TO PROVIDE ADVISING ON PROGRAM PATHWAYS OR OPPORTUNITIES

6.6%   ALL RESPONSES

10%   CE/WD

3.2%   ACADEMIC
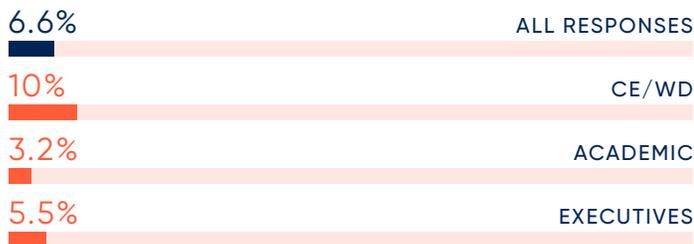
5.5%   EXECUTIVES

ALL RESPONSES N=213 • CE/WD N=111 • ACADEMIC N=63 • EXECUTIVES N=55

Modernizing tools and tech

Though websites are institutions' number one marketing tool, only 10% of all respondents rated their site as "very effective" in driving student engagement, enrollment and retention and 38% rated it "minimally" or "not at all" effective. It's interesting to note that academic leaders and executives rated their websites more generously (74.3% as "very" or "somewhat effective") compared to CE and workforce development employees (47.7%).

Almost all agreed (73%), however, that their website should play a leading role to engage students and facilitate registration. That said, only about one-quarter (27.9%) of Continuing Education leaders say they have the technological firepower to serve non-degree students. Across the industry, 57.7% of respondents said they could only deliver the experience non-degree students expect by papering over technological deficits with significant staff effort. And a further 10% of respondents said their tech stack simply wouldn't allow them to deliver the experience non-degree students need at all.

"Staff effort is significant if we have to manually meet the needs of a lot of students," explained Cashman, from Harper College. "We should be able to provide students self-serve functionalities that minimize their need for direct staff intervention."

Tools and tech play a central role in helping institutions close the engagement gap between learners and their institutions. By creating as much capacity as possible for students to get the information they need from the website—and to then providing them the ability to take

the steps they need to complete relevant administrative tasks–higher ed providers can deliver modern students the digital experience they expect.

Lesley Nichols, executive director of professional studies at Emerson College, expanded on the importance of minimizing staff effort dedicated to basic learner engagement when it comes to improving the student and staff experience–as well as divisional performance.

"The difference between significant and minimal staff effort became incredibly apparent to us since we implemented a self-service registration platform," she said. "It was difficult for students to find courses on our website, and then they had to fill out an online web form to register indirectly. A staff member would manually register the student, manually create an account for them and manually send confirmation emails. All of this made every registration very time consuming, which wasn't sustainable."

According to Nichols, leveraging the right tools has helped them free up an entire staff member's time to focus on divisional growth, programming and more complex student engagement.

"Since we implemented a self-service platform, it's much easier for students to find what they're looking for, add it to their cart, and self-enroll," Nichols said. "We have an integration that feeds the relevant data into Banner to create their account and it automatically manages the complexities of registration and enrollment."

Another glaring area complicating the management of continuing education units is the lack of enrollment data available to them. About 31% can't get any or direct access to enrollment data for non-degree programs.

> **"**
>
> Since we implemented a self-service platform, it's much easier for students to find what they're looking for, add it to their cart, and self-enroll.
>
> **LESLEY NICHOLS**
> Executive Director of Professional Studies, Emerson College
>
> **"**

ACCESS TO NON-DEGREE STUDENT DATA

39.4%	29.1%	20.7%	10.8%
Enrollment data is readily available to me	I have to ask one person for data	I have to ask multiple people for data	I have no access to this data
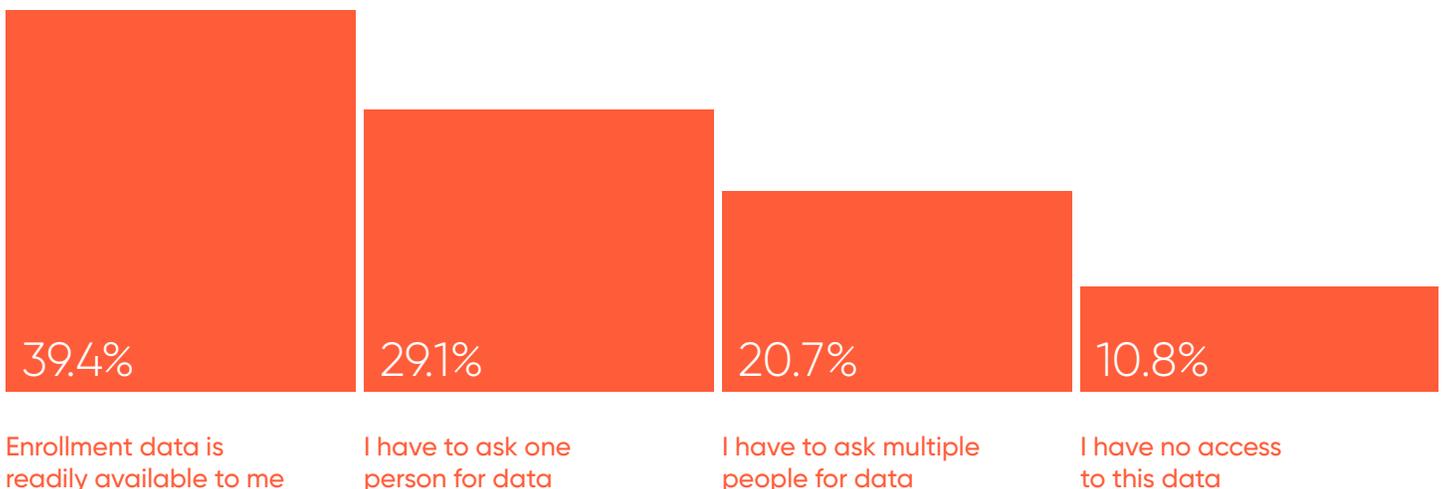
Opportunities for growth

As big as the challenges are in the continuing education/workforce development sector, the opportunities loom even larger.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 87% of workers said that they thought it was essential or important to take part in training and develop new skills throughout their careers–not surprising, given projections about extended lifespans and the growing impact of artificial intelligence and robotics on jobs and careers.

Already CE providers are in the process of either adding or growing their stackable credentials offerings, microcredentials and customized corporate training engagement, though 78% said they were not offering badges yet.

Most institutions recognize the value of connecting the dots between their continuing education students and degree programs not only because of the revenue opportunity it represents but also because of what it can mean for students' futures. About two-thirds offer non-degree programs that can be used as pathways into degree programs with more than 80% expecting to offer these pathways in the future.

Also about 33% said their students in non-degree offerings can earn credit for their enrollment with another 37% who can amass credits in certain circumstances.

But pathways from continuing education non-degree programs to traditional degree programs are not universally embraced. In addition to a lack of faculty endorsement (45%), other barriers to building these pathways include a lack of curriculum alignment and course acceptance, a dearth of market demand and gaps in strategic direction.

According to Cashman, this engagement gap ultimately restricts the capacity for higher education providers to effectively serve learners across their lifetime.

"We have the technology we need to create pathways for CE students to credit-programs. We can issue badges, we can leverage Destiny One's list manager to quickly identify people who have taken courses that could cross-walk over," he said. "We have to combat the fear that CE is cannibalizing credit enrollments and show that we actually support credit-issuing faculty and their programs."

80%

expect to offer a pathway from non-degree programs to degree programs in the future

CE PROVIDERS' PROGRAM GROWTH

	Adding & growing	Status quo	Not adding or growing
APPRENTICESHIPS	32.9%	14.1%	53.1%
INTERNSHIPS	47.7%	30.1%	22.5%
STACKABLE CREDENTIALS	79.3%	8.4%	12.2%
MICRO CREDENTIALS	74.7%	8.5%	16.9%
CUSTOMIZED CORPORATE TRAINING	68.1%	18.3%	13.6%
SENIOR EDUCATION	27.3%	30.5%	42.3%
K-12 PROGRAMS (CAMPS, ETC.)	35.2%	33.4%	31.5%
INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS	39.%	30.6%	29.6%
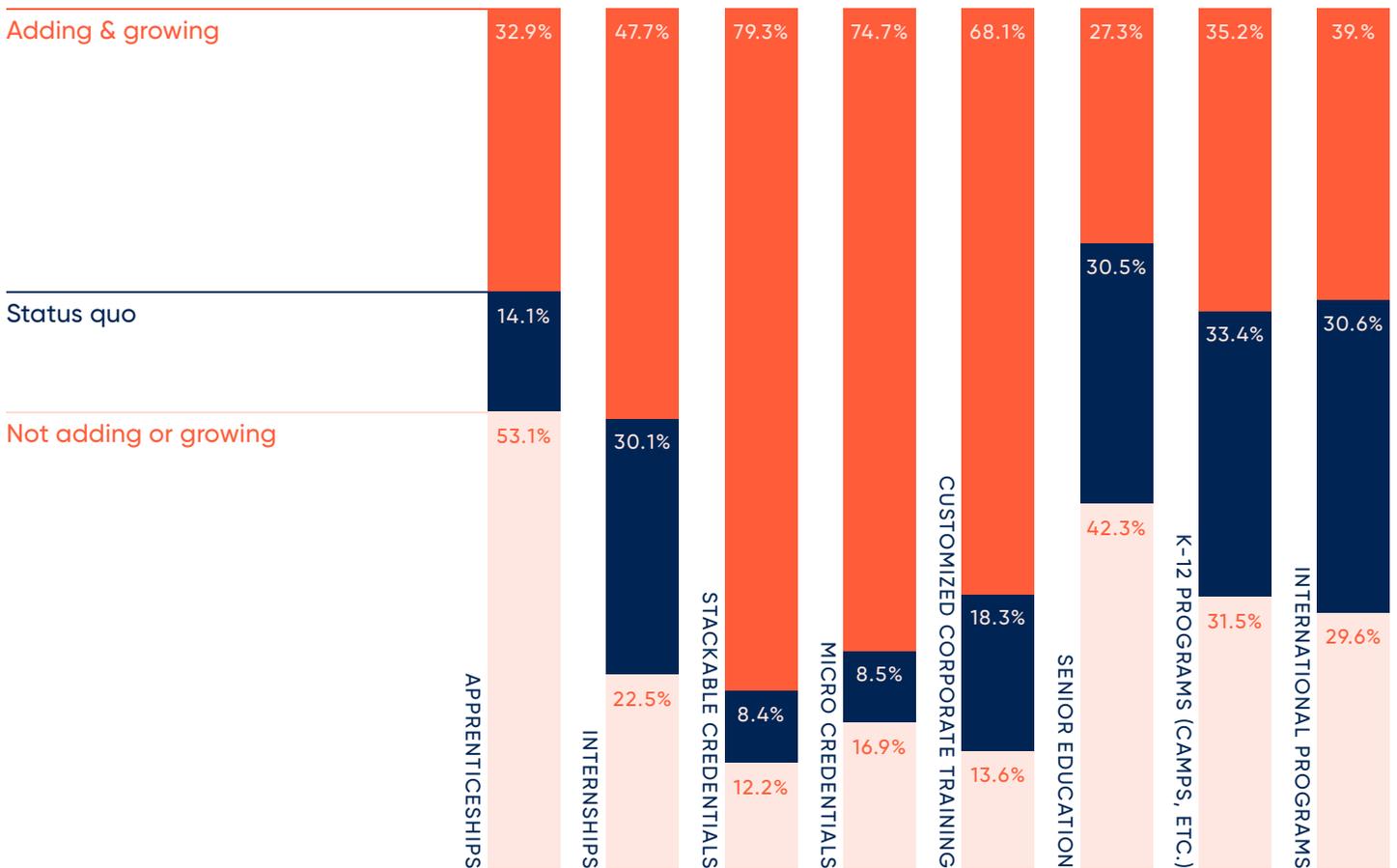
Conclusion
and recommendations

Higher education is at a nexus, a fact made even more clear by the challenges created by the pandemic. Clear tensions exist between traditional and nontraditional operations. CE divisions are under-resourced and under-appreciated. Remote learning has alienated students from their institutions and course materials. Faculty, staff and students are exhausted.

But there are points of light. Schools learned they could move at the speed of necessity when confronted with a catastrophe of existential proportions. Students and faculty have adapted to online learning and this massive shift will one day lead to better online pedagogy and more compelling online experiences.

These points of light help illuminate the pathway to closing the engagement gap separating modern learners from their institutions. These are the key steps higher ed leaders need to take to make sure they're set up for a vibrant and engaging future.

In some cases, institutions have streamlined operations and adopted student-friendly practices in their continuing education divisions as well as mounted new classes in response to market demands. One school initiated a lifelong learning working group of campus stakeholders, another institution has doubled down on CE to address the needs of unemployed workers, while others have positioned CE leaders to support institutional strategic innovation.

Transformation and evolution are occurring in the continuing and workforce education space. There are huge opportunities for programmatic innovation that can help propel institutions to new heights. However, capturing these opportunities takes more than lip service. In order for CE and workforce development divisions to unlock the potential of the lifelong learning marketplace–and effectively close their modern learner engagement gap, they must be appropriately supported and resourced by their institutions– both in the boardroom and on the balance sheet.

Through this support, higher education institutions of all stripes will set themselves up to continue to support the upskilling and reskilling initiatives that will define our post-pandemic new normal, and prepare folks for jobs we can't even imagine today.

Recommendations to close the modern learner engagement gap

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

1 **Prioritize CE strategically and budgetarily** for revenue building and student nurture—from certificate to associate to baccalaureate degree completer and beyond.

2 **Incentivize and pursue buy-in** from campus constituents especially on the academic side for CE growth.

3 **Invest in instructional design and faculty support/professional development** vis-à-vis online/hybrid pedagogy.

4 **Audit institutional website** for efficacy in engaging prospective and current students, traditional and nontraditional.

5 **Offer traditional and nontraditional students clear pathways** from program to profession supported through advising and experiential learning supported by digital website personalization that reinforces these pathways.

6 **Upgrade institutional website** to meet the needs and expectations of modern students with functions such as online registration and enrollment, digital personalization that serves up relevant content for every visitor that includes clear program to career pathways.

NEXT STEPS

1 **Streamline CE enrollment processes** that save staff time and offer students a seamless shopping-cart registration and program management experience.

2 **Consider a CE-specific student information system (SIS)** that provides data maintenance and visualization to gain real-time insights into programs and campaigns.

3 **Ensure any content management system investment or SIS** offers ability to personalize content to students including pathways through programs.

4 **Pursue and/or grow** stackable credentials, micro credentials and customized corporate training engagements.

5 **Resolve any disconnects** between CE and marketing. Ensure new programs are marketed appropriately through central marketing office or CE-specific marketer.

How to cite this study

Study Contributors

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Engagement Evolved™

ModernCampus.com