

The Online Student







Impact of Course
Modality on
Engagement

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In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced most community colleges across the country to radically shift the ways in which they provided instruction to a majority of their students. Over the last three years, these institutions have no doubt learned how to better support students who take online courses. But as the dust of the pandemic settles, continuing to investigate and understand how course modality impacts student learning and engagement will be invaluable in helping students reach their goals.

What We Know About Students Who Take All of Their Classes Online

		Online-only students	Not online-only students
	MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE NON-TRADITIONAL AGE	65%	35%
	TWICE AS LIKELY TO BE MARRIED	34%	16%
	MOST ARE FEMALE	78%	59%
	MAJORITY ARE PART-TIME	54%	29%
	ALMOST HALF WORK 30+ HOURS PER WEEK	48%	26%
	MANY HAVE CHILDREN LIVING WITH THEM	39%	21%

RESPONDENTS

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) was administered in spring 2022 to 82,824 students across 181 institutions. One in five of the survey respondents reported taking all of their classes in spring 2022 online and are also identified as “online-only” throughout this report. Students who took at least one in-person class are identified in a variety of ways, such as “not online-only,” “students who take face-to-face classes,” or “students who take in-person classes,” throughout this report.

“I think ... the benefit of an online class is being able to get it done whenever you want, whenever you have time. If you have work or you have other priorities that need to be taken care of, you can always jump in and get the schoolwork done whenever you have the time.”

-Student

“I think taking online classes has really pushed me and made me a better person. ... It's taught me to better plan my days out and really work efficiently to do my homework in the time period that I'm given. I've taken a lot of online classes, and I do not like it, but I suck it up and get through them.”

-Student

“Okay, so I don't like taking online courses. I find them very stressful. I have to teach myself all the materials. I do like that I can do it on my own time and make my own schedule. I'm a single mother, and I have a son who likes to bother me at all moments of the day. It's not very efficient.”

-Student

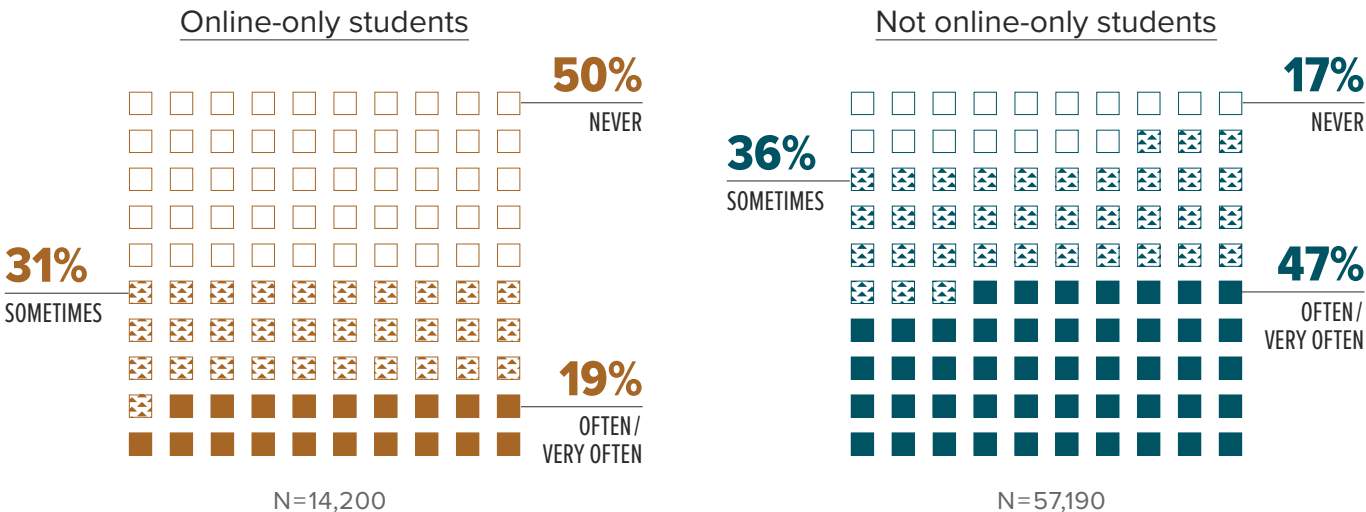
The Student Experience by Course Modality

INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER STUDENTS

Through collaborating with others to solve problems or master challenging content, students develop valuable skills that prepare them to deal with the kinds of situations and problems they will encounter in the workplace, the community, and their personal lives. Yet students who take only online courses are much less likely to experience collaboration with their peers.

CCSSE ITEM
4f

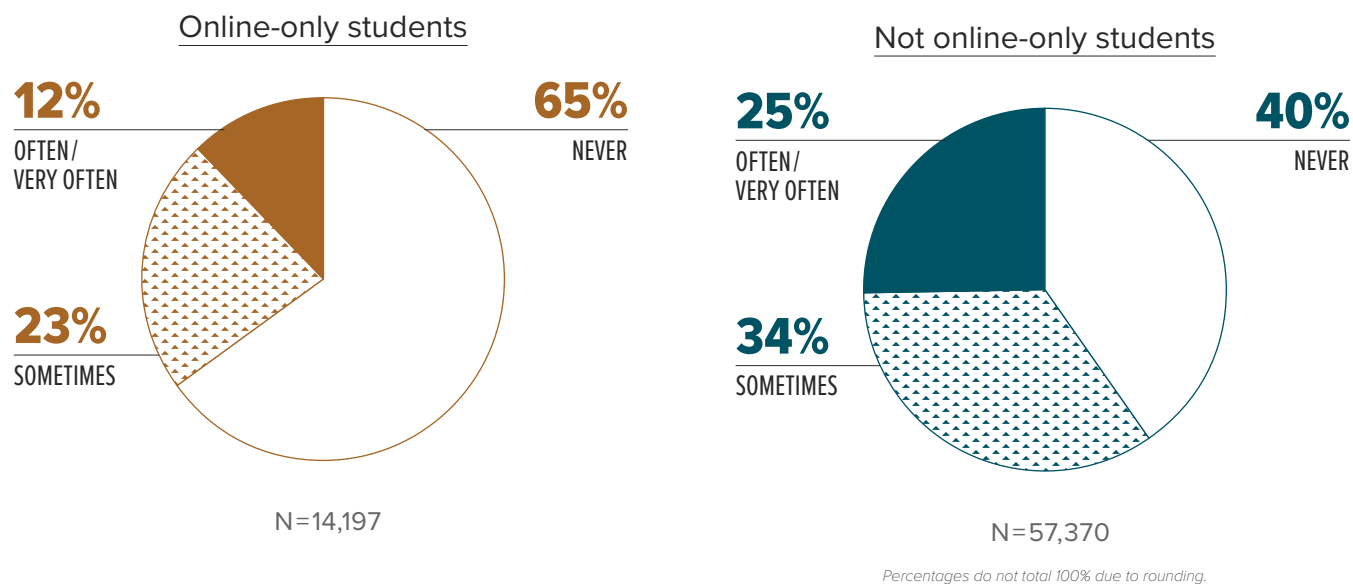
In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you worked with other students on projects during class?



“I can’t say I’ve had any special memorable experiences. The entire class was all just read the chapter, answer these questions, take a test. That was it. There was nothing special about any of the assignments.”

-Student

In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments?



Further, students who take only online classes do not seem to have the same opportunity as their peers who take in-person classes to interact with students who differ from them. Over half (53%) of online-only students (N=14,195) report *never* doing this, compared with 39% of students who take face-to-face classes (N=57,467).

"I think peer interaction in my online courses is pretty normal, I would say. It's not that different from face-to-face. If we have any questions for each other, we'll email each other, and we keep in contact. When there are questions, [we] set up study groups—stuff like that. It definitely helps us get through the course that way."

-Student

"How I feel when my peers are not with me is—it's disappointing because you can't get other people's feedback from it. One person might have a different perspective on this piece, and you have a different one, but you can somehow meet in the middle."

-Student

INTERACTIONS WITH INSTRUCTORS

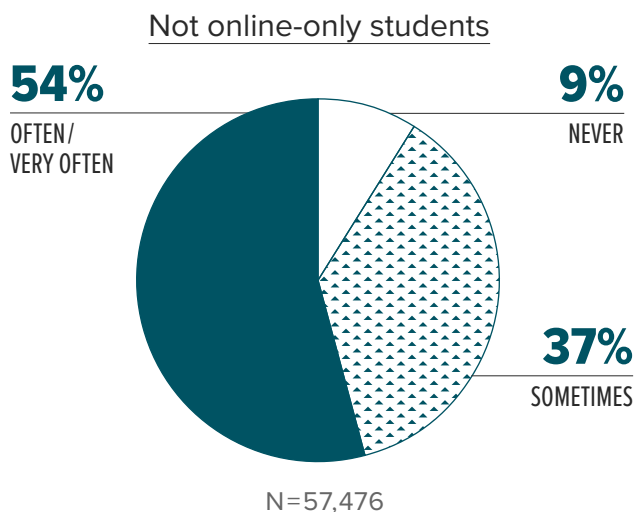
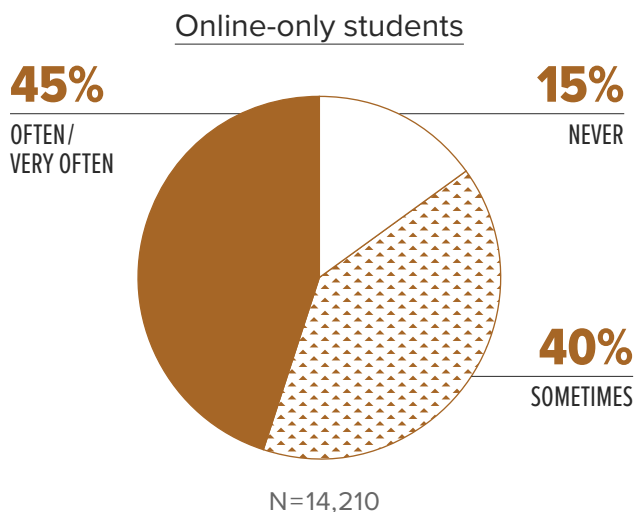
In general, the more interaction students have with their instructors, the more likely they are to learn effectively and persist toward achievement of their educational goals. Personal interaction with faculty members strengthens students' connections to the college and helps them focus on their academic progress. And working with an instructor on a project lets students see firsthand how experts identify and solve practical problems. Through such interactions, faculty members become role models, mentors, and guides for continuous, lifelong learning.

In addition to being much less likely than students who take in-person classes to interact with their classmates, online-only students also interact with their instructors at lower rates.

CCSSE ITEM

4k

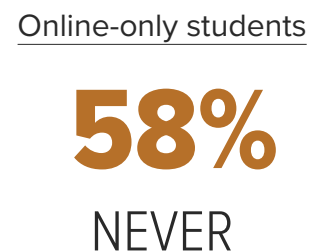
In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you discussed grades or assignments with an instructor?



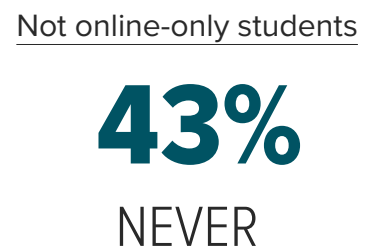
CCSSE ITEM

4m

In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you discussed ideas from your readings or classes with instructors outside of class?



N=14,180



N=57,173

“I had a favorite online course just because of how the teacher taught the class and how interactive he was with us. He posted lecture videos almost every day and did multiple Zoom calls and was just very interactive with us. It made it a lot easier to do the class and to learn.”

-Student

“I think my level of engagement depends on the course because if the teacher’s more involved, I’m definitely more engaged. If I never hear from the teacher, never see any assignments, I don’t think about the class.”

-Student

“What I like most about online learning is that you are given more time to do your assignments. What I like least about online learning is that many of my teachers don’t actually have Zoom classes, Zoom calls, or meetings.”

-Student

SUPPORT SERVICES

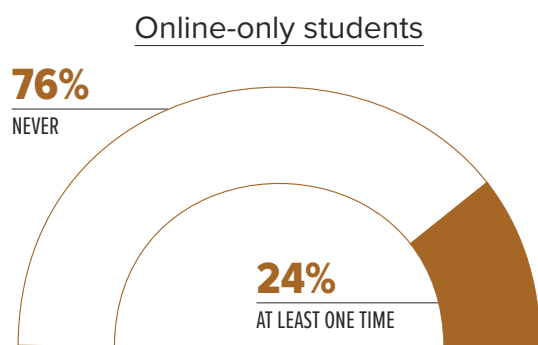
Online-only students and students who take classes in person interact with academic advisors at roughly the same rates: Sixty-three percent of online-only students report that an advisor helped them develop an academic plan before the end of their first academic term at the college, compared to 65% of students who are not online-only. Additionally, 82% of online-only students report meeting with an advisor at least once in the current academic year, and 84% of students taking face-to-face classes convey the same.

Regardless of course modality, most students do not take advantage of support services such as tutoring or skill labs. However, online-only students are even less likely to use them than their peers who take face-to-face classes.

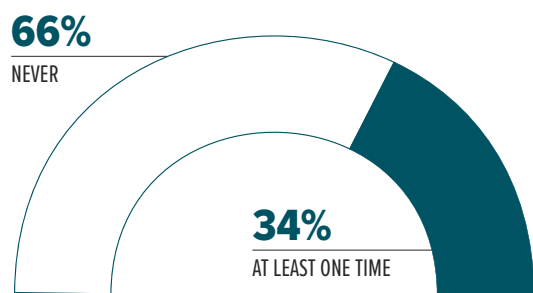
CCSSE ITEM

12(1)d

How often have you used peer or other tutoring services during the current academic year?



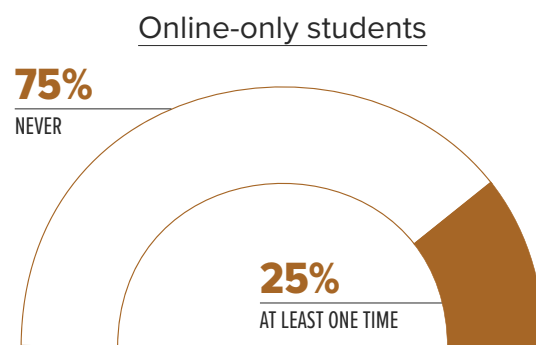
Not online-only students



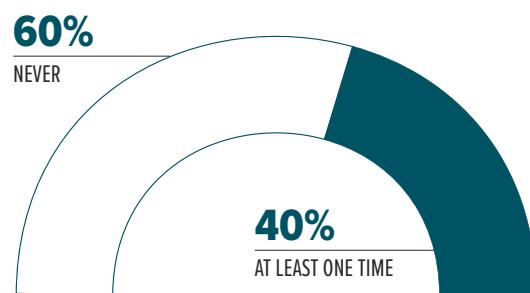
CCSSE ITEM

12(1)e

How often have you used skill labs (writing, math, etc.) during the current academic year?



Not online-only students

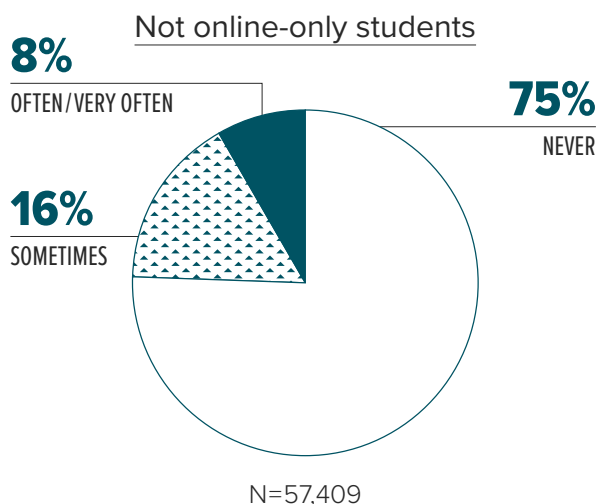
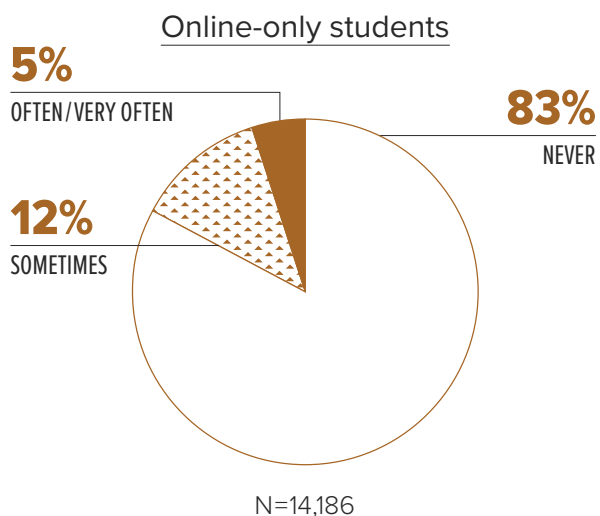


APPLIED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Applied learning experiences can occur in or out of the classroom and often encourage students to integrate and extend the knowledge they have acquired through their coursework. These experiences can also help prepare students for life beyond college through the development of the background, skills, and perspective necessary for success in the labor market. While the majority of all community college students—regardless of whether they attend full time or part time or which type of course modality they elect—do not participate in applied learning opportunities such as internships and service-learning activities, students who take only online classes are even less likely to participate in these sorts of activities.

CCSSE ITEM 4i

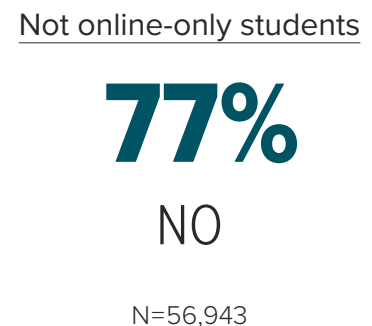
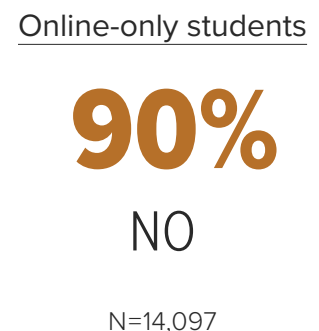
In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you participated in a community-based project (service-learning activity) as a part of a regular course?



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

CCSSE ITEM 8a

Have you participated or are you currently participating in an internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment?



CHALLENGE AND EFFORT

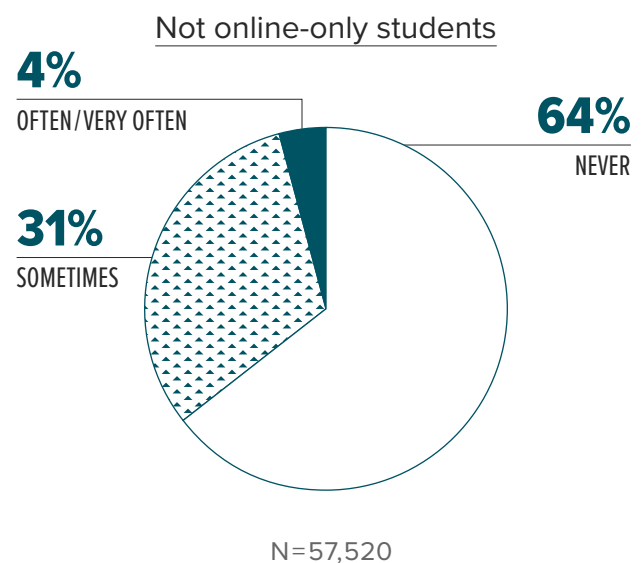
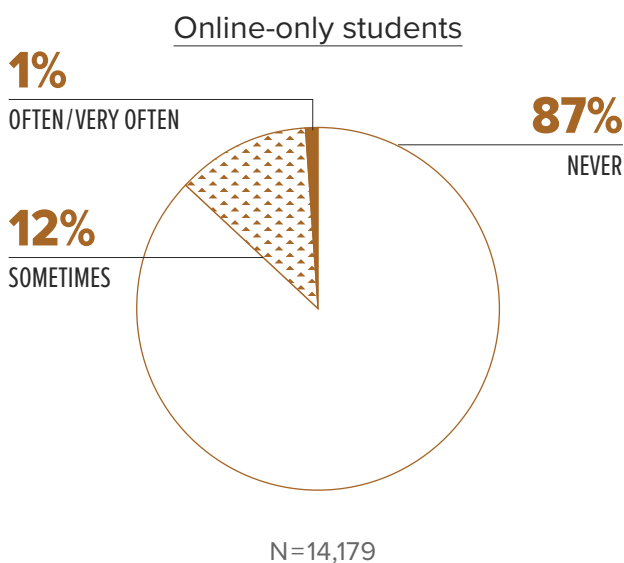
Challenging intellectual and creative work is central to student learning and collegiate quality. Likewise, students' behaviors contribute significantly to their learning and the likelihood that they will attain their educational goals.

Online-only students rarely skip class, and they are less likely than their peers who take in-person classes to come to class unprepared. They also report being more challenged by their instructor's expectations and examinations, which could account for their higher levels of attendance and preparedness.

CCSSE ITEM

4s

In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you skipped class?



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

"I believe that online learning—it takes a person that will be able to get out of the bed in the morning and be driven and go do it. It's not handed to you."

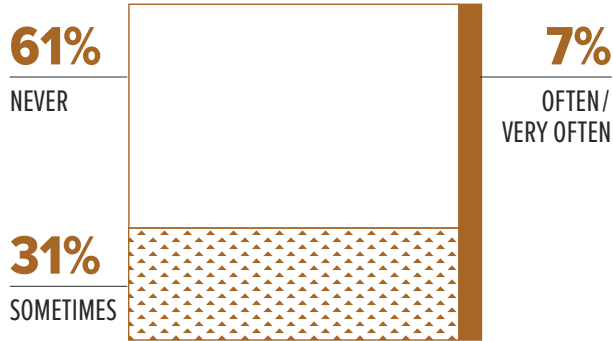
-Student

CCSSE ITEM

4e

In your experiences at this college during the current academic year, about how often have you come to class without completing readings or assignments?

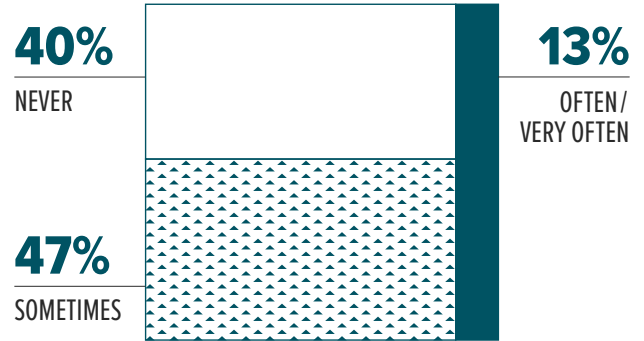
Online-only students



N=14,189

Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Not online-only students



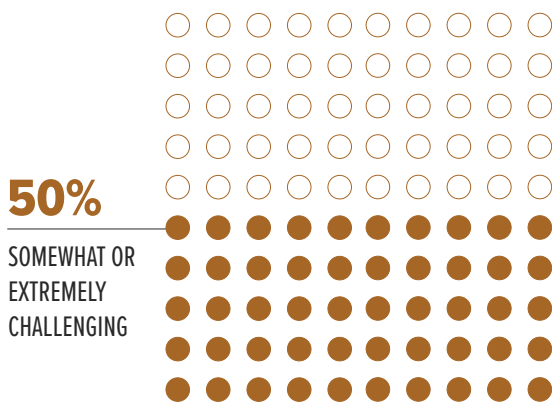
N=57,412

CCSSE ITEM

7

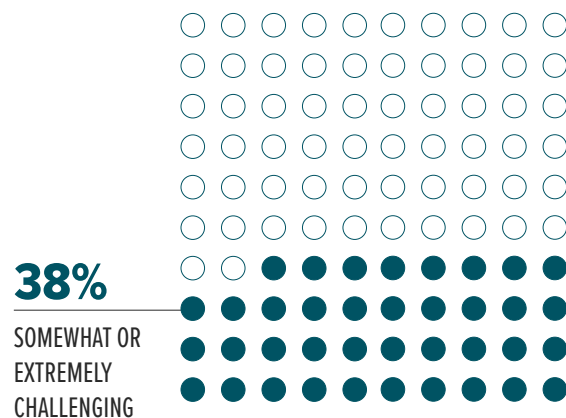
Mark the extent to which your examinations during the current academic year have challenged you to do your best work at this college.

Online-only students



N=14,214

Not online-only students

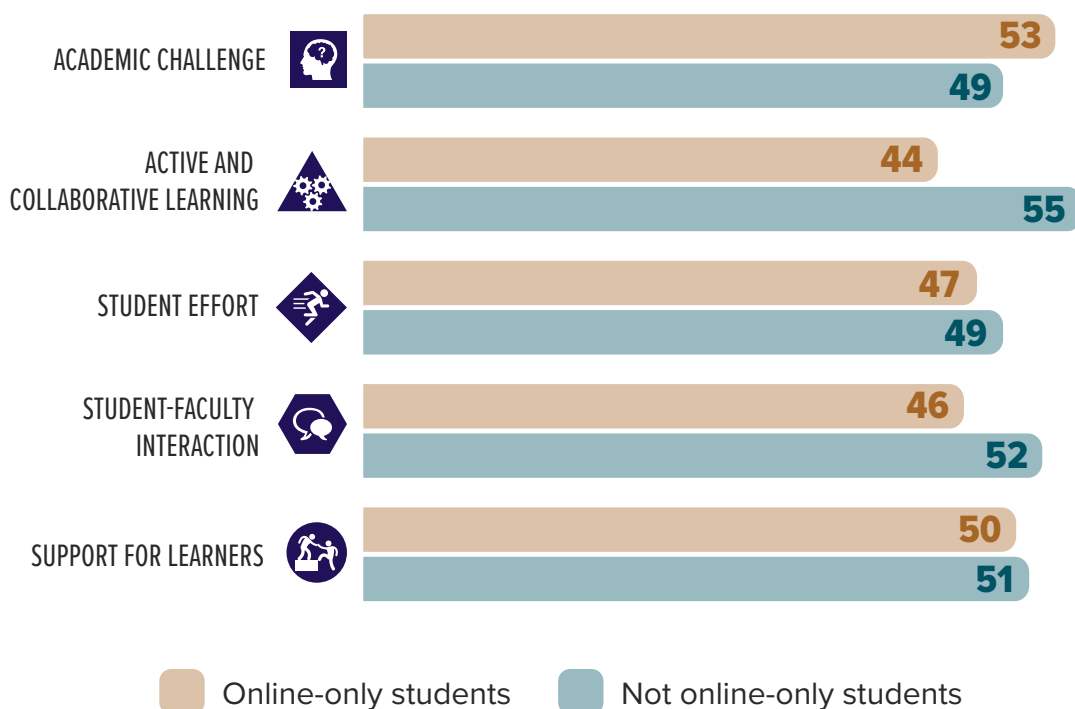


N=55,539

The Engagement Impact

As many students have shared in focus group interviews, online coursework affords flexibility for students who are likely to have competing demands on their time. Students also report enjoying the self-paced nature of many online classes. But does the virtual student experience bring with it a related loss of opportunity for engagement and relationship building? The CCSSE benchmark indicators would suggest that this is the case, as online-only students have markedly lower scores in the areas of Active and Collaborative Learning and Student-Faculty Interaction. The only benchmark area in which online-only students score higher than students who take in-person classes is Academic Challenge, which suggests that online-only students perceive that the nature and amount of assigned academic work, the complexity of cognitive tasks presented to them, and the standards used to evaluate their performance are more elevated than for students who take in-person classes. It is worth noting that online-only students and not online-only students have very similar benchmark scores in the area of Support for Learners, indicating that both groups feel that their colleges are committed to their success and are benefiting from services such as academic advising and career counseling at similar rates.

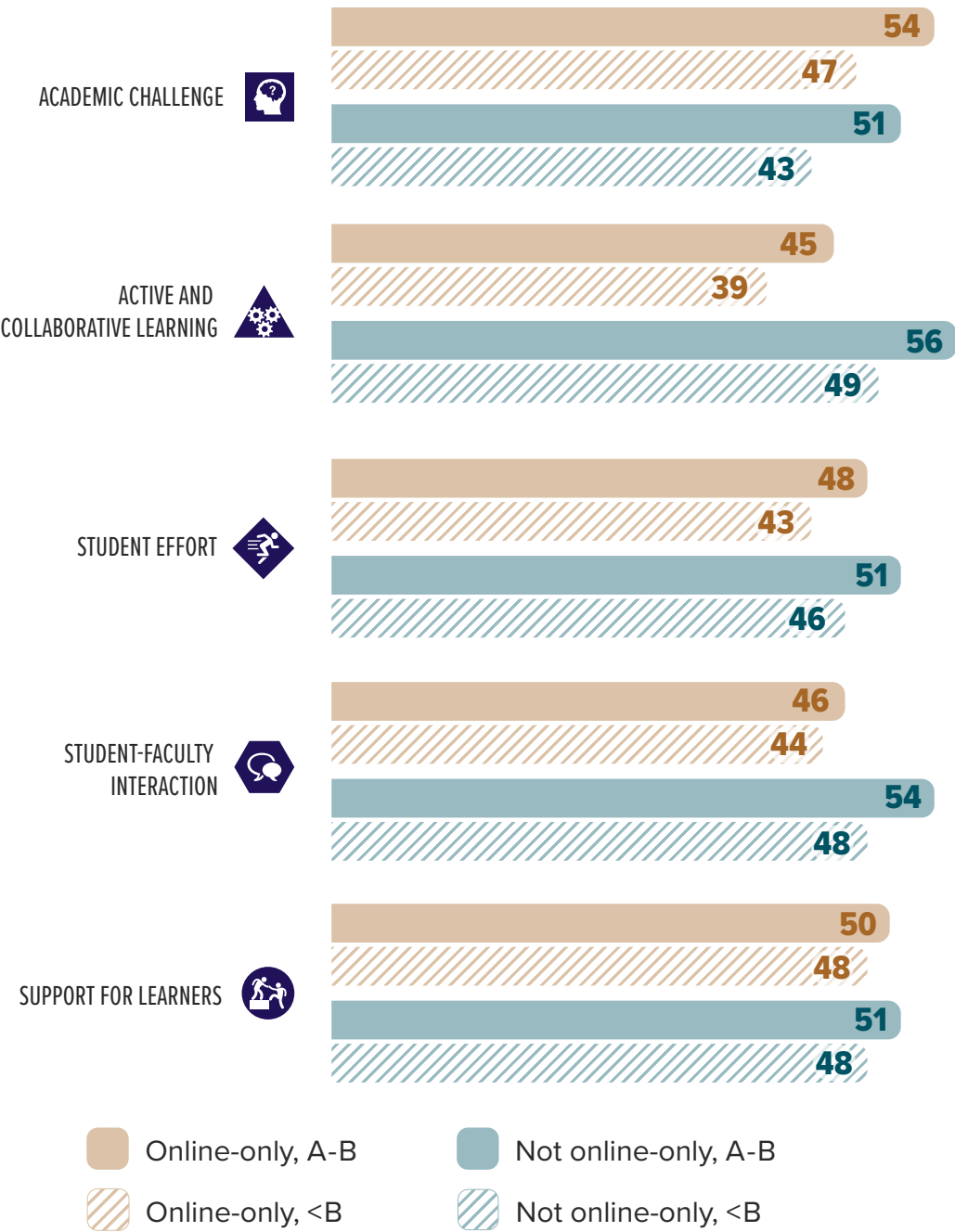
CCSSE Benchmark Scores: Online-Only Students vs. Not Online-Only Students



Students who take online-only classes tend to be older and female—two student groups that CCSSE results have historically revealed to be more engaged in their educational experiences—but they are also much more likely to be part-time, to work 30 or more hours per week, and to care for children at a higher rate than their peers who take in-person classes, all attributes that pose challenges to student engagement.

Setting aside differences in engagement between online-only and not online-only students, higher levels of engagement are associated with higher outcomes for both groups, as measured by self-reported GPA. *Therefore, engagement clearly matters for online-only students.* Just like their peers who take in-person courses, online-only students who self-report higher grades are more engaged than online-only students who report grades lower than B.

CCSSE Benchmark Scores: Higher Engagement Correlates With Higher Self-Reported GPA



All of these findings beg a question: If engagement opportunities were equivalent across virtual and in-person experiences, would more students who take online courses have better chances of successfully completing their course of study and succeeding beyond earning their credential or degree?

Questions for Consideration

The questions below can be used to prompt discussions about deepening connections and strengthening engagement with students in online settings.

- » In what ways is our college designed to serve online-only students? In what ways is our college not designed to serve online-only students?
- » Are we helping students make decisions about whether online courses are the best fit for them?
- » How do our faculty and staff members build relationships with online students so that they feel a sense of belonging at our college?
- » Do our advisors know which of our students are taking all of their classes online?
- » How do we encourage and train faculty and staff members to talk with students who are taking all of their classes online about balancing work and school?
- » What opportunities can faculty create for students to collaborate with their peers in online courses?
- » How often are online students required to meet with their instructors outside of class?
- » How often are faculty sharing feedback with online students about their progress in their courses?
- » How can we use the online classroom to inspire or require engagement elsewhere (e.g., the use of support services)?
- » When needed, can support services such as peer tutoring be integrated into the online classroom experience?
- » How are we helping faculty integrate active and applied learning experiences into their online courses?
- » What kind of professional development can be provided to full-time and part-time faculty to strengthen student engagement in online courses?

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CCCSE is a service and research initiative of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. By delivering “aha” moments about the student experience based on insights that matter, CCCSE assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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