

Instructor Sentiment Report

2020 and 2021

Exploring the intersection of
technology and community



Foreword

The pandemic served as a stark reminder that interacting with one another is a crucial part of our mental, physical, and spiritual health. All the time spent isolating indoors gave us space to think about everything we were missing by not being together. And now, as we navigate a slow and steady return to being in-person again, rebuilding that sense of community must be our top priority.

But at the same time, it's not quite right to say that the COVID-19 years have been totally community-less. It's popular, of course, to argue that the online, remote ways we interacted during the pandemic were worse than face-to-face interaction. But making that argument misses an important and more nuanced truth: it's possible to create community in other ways. As a matter of fact, there are times when online communities are the best kind.

This is a lesson I've learned firsthand after more than two decades of experience in online learning. When I began my career as an educator serving adult learners without the time or resources to pursue traditional higher education, the rise of the internet opened up entirely new possibilities. In many ways, we built stronger communities online than we ever had in person. Even in my first few years as an online instructor, I was having all sorts of conversations — often with students who I knew wouldn't have been as comfortable or confident speaking up around a table.

The novelty of online learning, not to mention our (often justified) skepticism about new models, had

an unexpected side effect. We paid attention to the design of online educational programs in ways we'd never done for in-person classes. We developed whole new fields, like instructional design, and whole new approaches to inquiry-based learning and engagement. No education system is perfect, and we still have so much to learn about the right way to implement technology in the classroom, but it's also clear that approaching online learning with intentionality is starting to pay off.

That's why I wasn't surprised to see that community topped the list of instructors' interests and priorities in the survey outlined below. It's not that faculty members were completely devoid of community interaction in online settings. It's that the remote environment helped them understand what kinds of communities can form both online and off, how those communities differ, and how they complement each other.

In the wake of the pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to approach this new normal with the same kind of care and structure that many of us took in the early days of online education. If we do that, who knows what kind of amazing communities we have yet to build?

Dr. Marie Cini

Dr. Marie Cini is acting CEO of Ed2Work. She previously served as Provost of the University of Maryland Global Campus and President of The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

About the survey

2020 was a tumultuous year for higher education, and 2021 proved to be complex new territory of its own. Packback surveyed our network of over 5,000 instructors nationwide to ask about their experiences teaching during COVID and into 2021, and it's clear what has remained consistent for faculty and their students — **the importance of community and accessibility in and out of the classroom.**

“Invite students to tell stories about themselves.
Stories enable connection.”

In this report, you'll learn more about the instructor experience over the past year and explore what faculty and students need as we move towards the future of higher education;



How has COVID transformed teaching practices moving forward?



What did student motivation look like during COVID? How have faculty perceptions of student motivation changed since then?



What is technology's role in shaping courses that are engaging and resilient in the face of uncertainty?

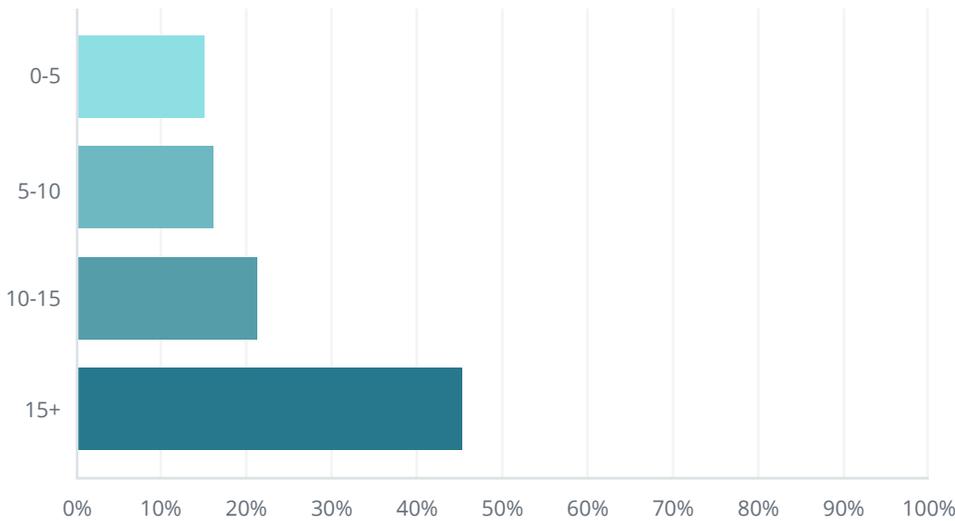
“Students need to learn how to learn in teams again. The inability to do so was already evident before the pandemic, but the key question is if COVID-19 made the situation worse, or if it is a unique chance for educators to turn the tide. **I believe that it is in our power to shape the answer to this question.”**

A Packback Professor

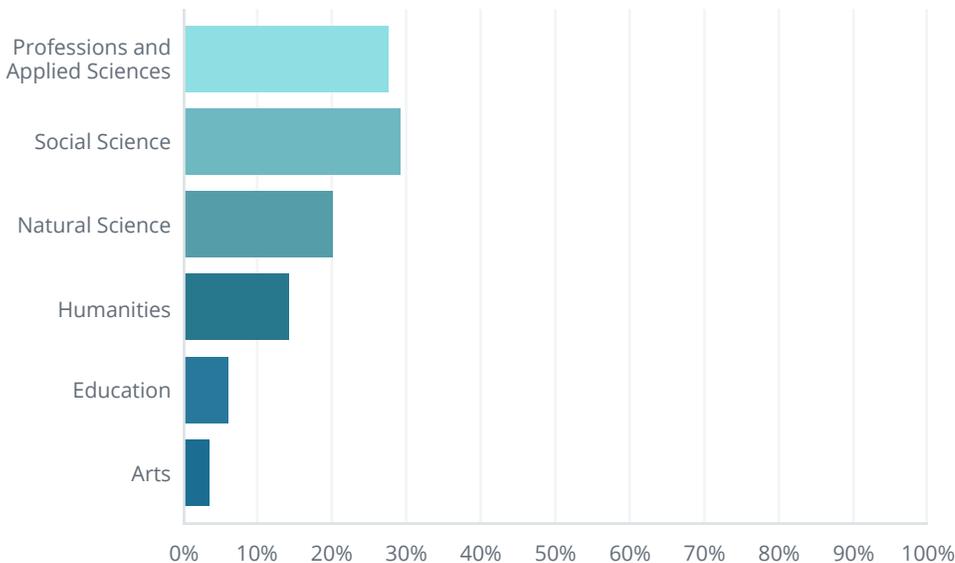
Who are Packback users?

Professors who use Packback are a dynamic group of educators with varying levels of teaching experience, diverse backgrounds, and rich perspectives. Take a look at who our professors are:

NUMBER OF YEARS TEACHING EXPERIENCE



AREA OF STUDY



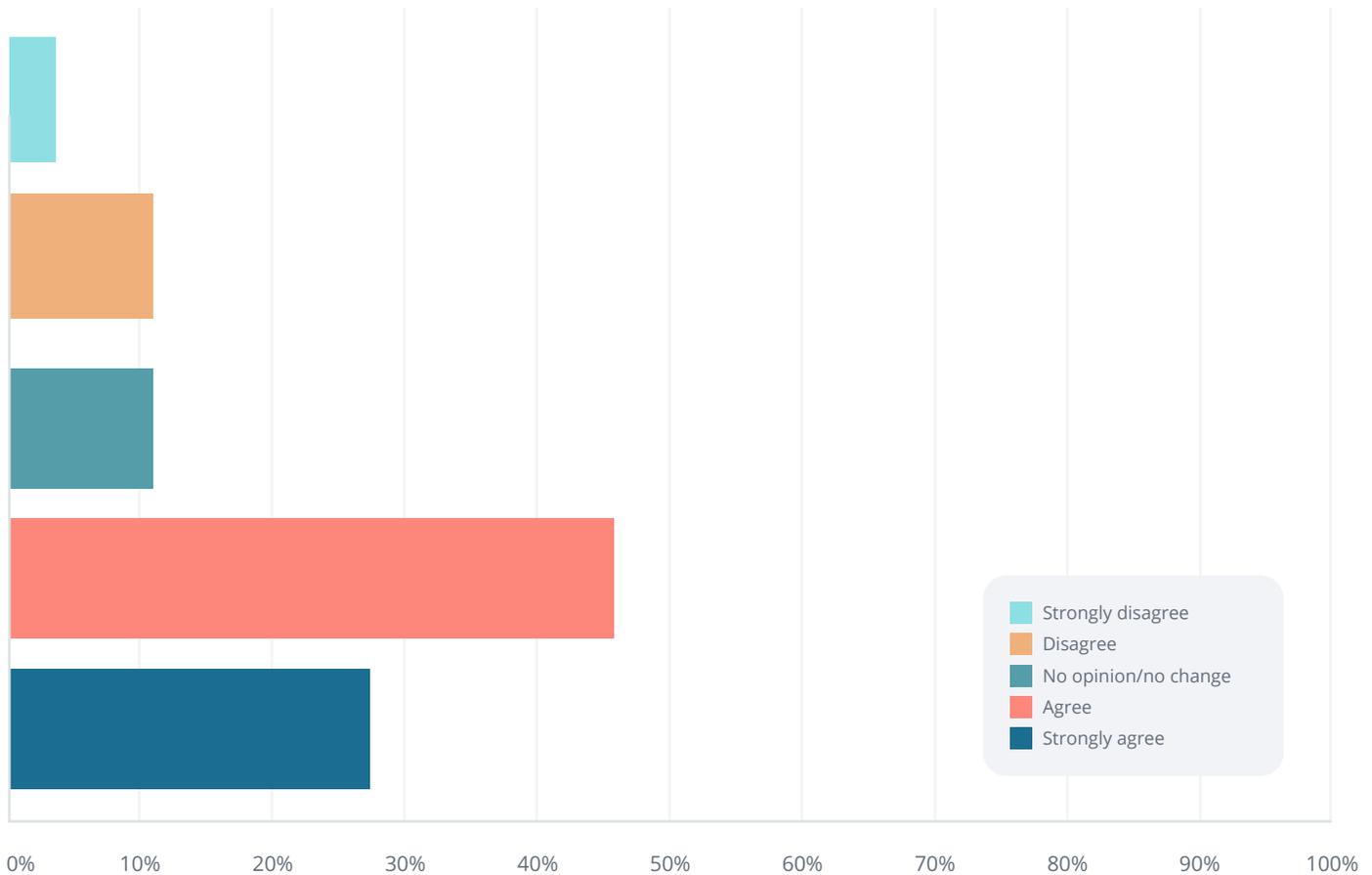
Faculty Sentiment

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

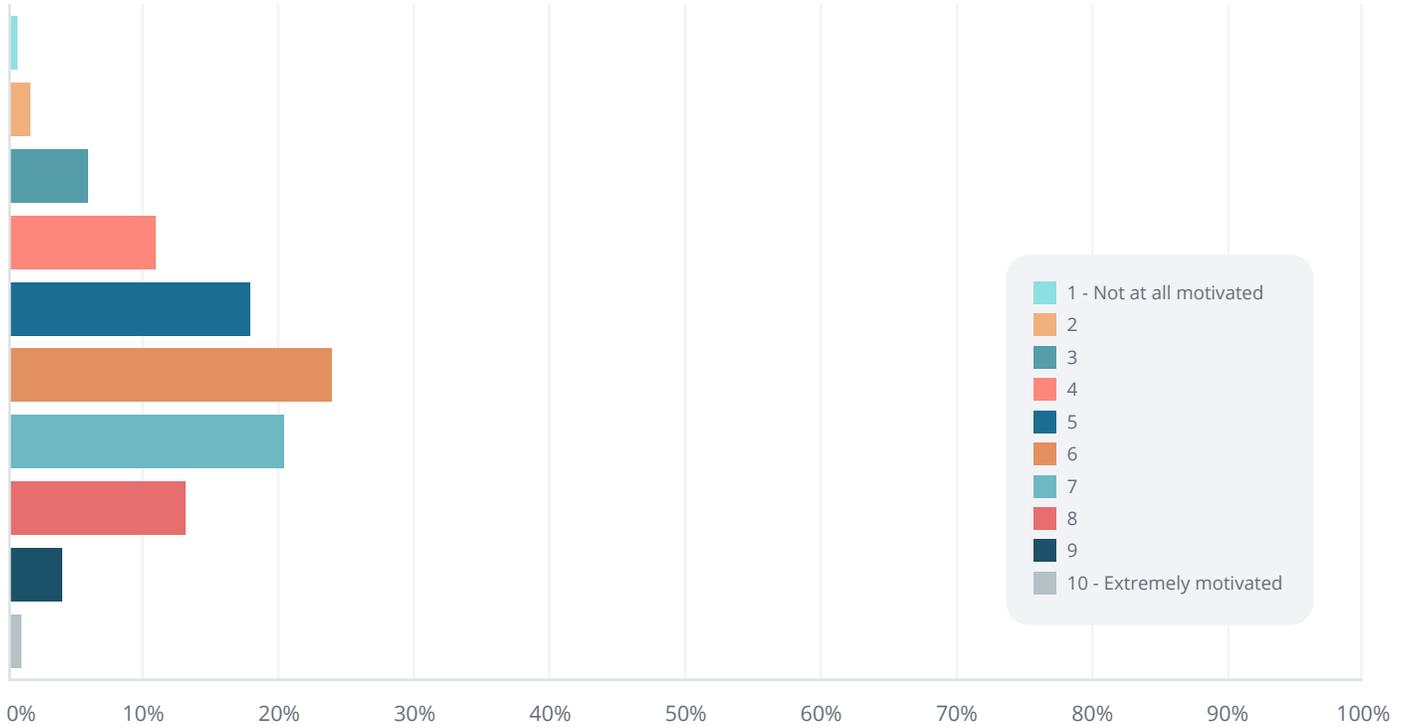
2020 and 2021 presented instructors and their students with numerous challenges; while students left behind what a “normal” college experience looks like all together, professors had to support their students through this transition. Professors saw their students struggling to stay engaged in 2020 — and throughout the course of 2021, they turned towards cutting-edge solutions to freshly engage students amidst the “new normal” college experience.

Cutting-edge solutions were (more often than not) hybrid and flexible, and employed technology as a tool that could both increase access and simulate a sense of community — even without the classroom.

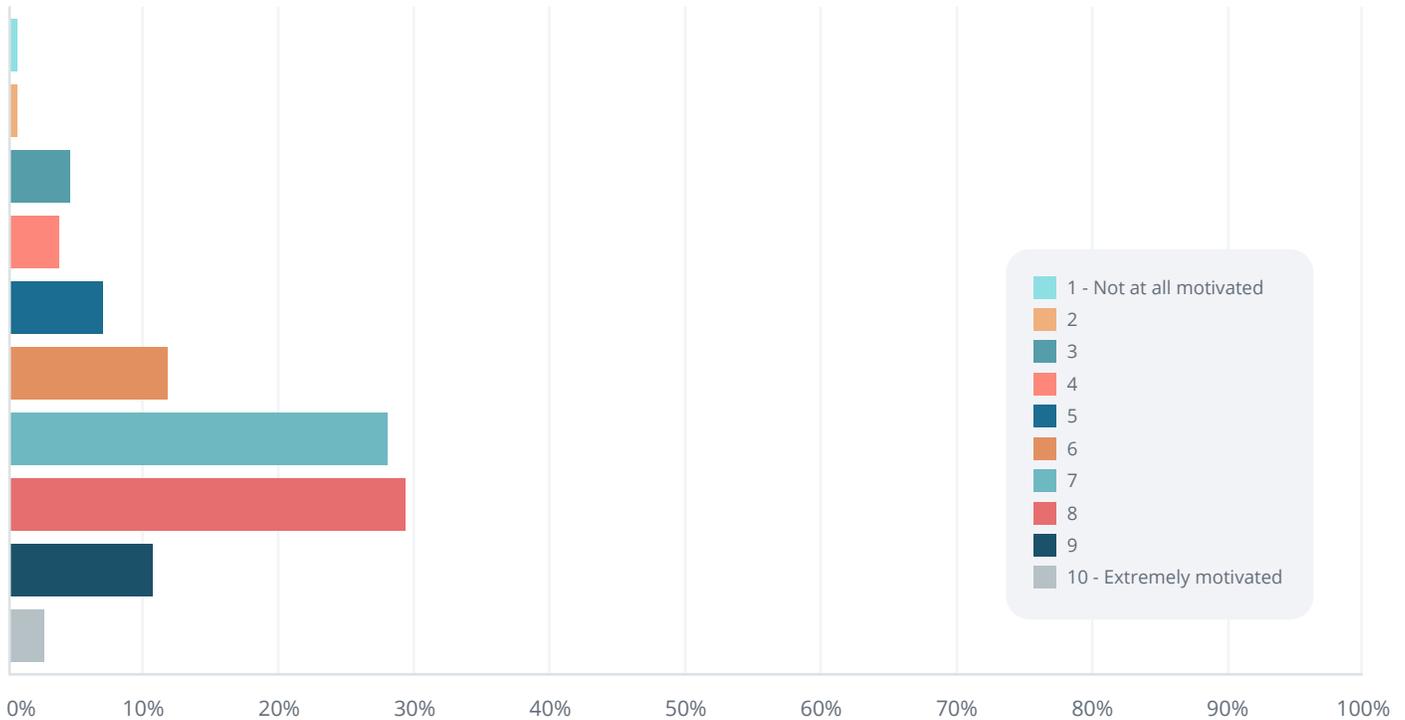
RATE YOUR AGREEMENT WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT: HYBRID COURSE OPTIONS ALLOW STUDENTS FLEXIBILITY THAT IS BENEFICIAL TO THE LEARNING PROCESS.



OVERALL, HOW MOTIVATED DID YOU FEEL YOUR STUDENTS WERE TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR COURSE MATERIAL IN 2020?



OVERALL, HOW MOTIVATED DID YOU FEEL YOUR STUDENTS WERE TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR COURSE MATERIAL IN 2021?



Looking Forward

One thing COVID made abundantly clear is **the increasing importance of technology in higher education**. More than just general tools, faculty found that implementing easy to use, student-driven technology is essential to building resilient, engaging courses that can thrive in any modality.

As higher education continues to move towards an increasingly digitized future, the introduction of the right technology not only makes courses more resilient — it can even make them more *human*.

What criteria are faculty considering when choosing a technology moving forward?

How should technology and community interact?

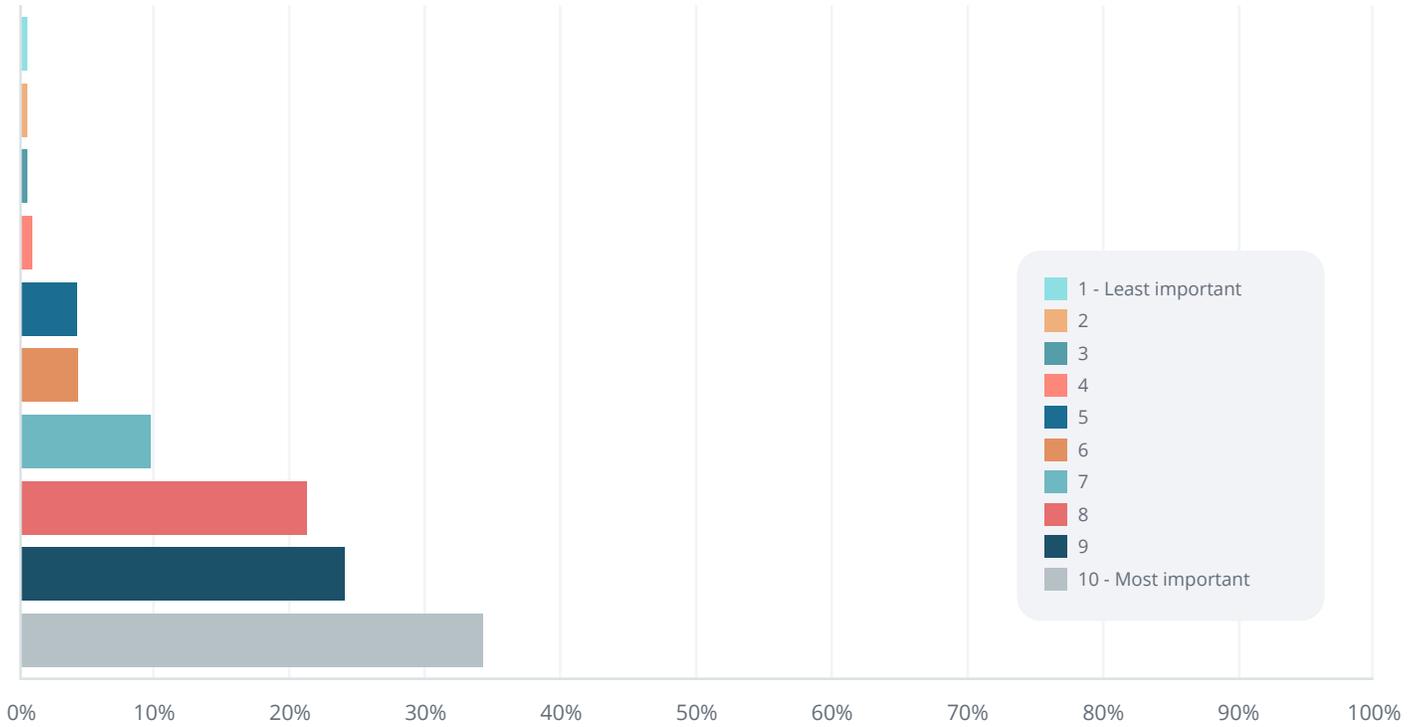
What is technology's role in shaping the future of higher education?

It's important to use technology to encourage students to interact with one another, sharing ways course content is relevant to their own lives. By doing activities in small groups (break-out rooms), students are able to develop a sense of community with their classmate colleagues.

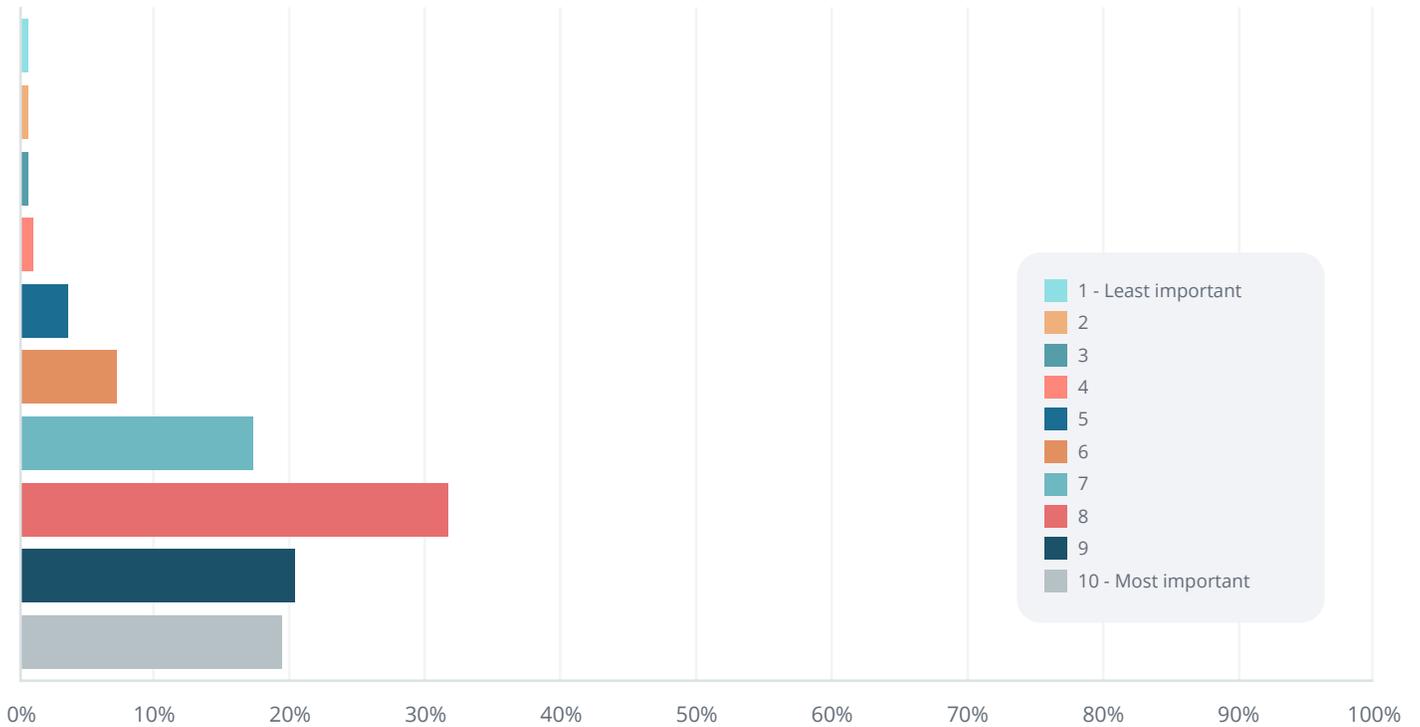
The fusion of physical and digital learning with purposefully chosen education technologies to enhance the learning quality, not just storing documents. It requires careful technology choices and a proactive approach to learning design.

I want to see more empathy and less emphasis on traditional teaching methods for the sake of tradition.

HOW IMPORTANT WAS TECHNOLOGY THAT SUPPORTS STUDENT COMMUNITY IN YOUR COURSES DURING COVID-19?



HOW IMPORTANT IS TECHNOLOGY THAT SUPPORTS STUDENT COMMUNITY TO YOUR COURSE IN THE FUTURE?



HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU BELIEVE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING PRIORITIES ARE FOR INSTITUTIONS TO FOCUS ON AND INVEST IN FOR 2022 (AND BEYOND)?

	1 Least Important	2	3	4	5 Most Important
Investment into technology for student motivation and retention	0.42%	5.00%	16.67%	40.00%	37.92%
Investment into faculty well-being and retention	0.83%	3.32%	13.69%	44.40%	37.76%
Student motivation and retention	0.00%	0.42%	7.92%	35.83%	55.83%
Investment into faculty and student health (Physical, Mental, Emotional)	0.00%	3.75%	15.83%	36.67%	43.75%
Investment into campus buildings-and-grounds	6.75%	18.57%	34.60%	29.54%	10.55%
Investment into career readiness for students	1.25%	5.42%	17.08%	42.50%	33.75%
Investment into technology for hybrid/remote learning	2.49%	6.64%	20.75%	46.06%	24.07%
Investment into training and development to align courses to hybrid/remote learning best practices	2.07%	10.79%	19.50%	42.74%	24.90%
Investment into inclusion & DEI	4.22%	6.75%	23.21%	34.18%	31.65%
Other (open-ended)	36.36%	0.00%	27.27%	4.55%	31.82%

Faculty Tips for Engaging and Inspiring Students

Inspiring student motivation while creating authentically curious learning environments has been one of the most challenging parts of instruction during COVID. How did instructors keep students engaged with course material? What new best practices emerged from remote and hybrid learning?

We asked instructors to share the activities, tips, and methods they employed for creating student community and connection in remote and hybrid settings. The most important factors? **Creating community first, leaning into simplicity, and letting students' interests lead the way.**

“Students teaching each other in the online format with well-crafted prompts, on issues that are immediately relevant. Teaching online is challenging, but seeing learning happen in discussions is one major takeaway from the pandemic. **It would have never occurred to me to use these platforms when teaching in person. I will never NOT use them now.**”

You have to shed authority. Some aspect has to maintain leadership and be a resource, but that does not need to mean being authoritative and 'owning' the classroom. **Leading the classroom as a community of peers who want to learn the material is the best method**, in my experience, for keeping students motivated and getting them to communicate their needs.

Giving them time to be students. **Asking them questions where they can use their imagination and be who they are** rather than just a square on the screen.

I ask the students to **create or find memes that are related to our weekly topics.** I end up using them in different instances throughout the semester. The students appreciate this since they see their work used to engage others.

We engage and foster connections with each other when we can relate to who they [students] are as a person.

Conclusion

Community is one of the bedrocks of higher education. Students and instructors thrive in collaborative settings where course concepts can take on new meaning and motivation can be found in shared experience.

After COVID changed the higher education landscape, “community” has taken on different forms and developed new meanings. In the wake of a global pandemic, with less certainty around face-to-face interactions and an increasing dependence on new technologies, faculty and students need solutions that drive community regardless of the setting.

The future of higher education depends on technology that empowers students to make meaningful connections with their peers. Learning is at its richest when peer-to-peer interaction is possible; when students connect with one another, they find encouragement, motivation, and gain new perspectives. While 2020 taught us that change is inevitable, as we near the end of 2021 and look forward to 2022, the importance of human connection is as constant as ever.

