



University of Dayton

Undergraduate Student Attitudes Toward Online Learning

Fall 2021

The Center for Online Learning





University of
Dayton

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ONLINE LEARNING OPTIONS ARE DESIRED

And face-to-face is here to stay.

The transformation to higher education from the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged instructors, staff, and administrators to adapt to the signs of the times and think broadly about how to continue to help students learn in this changing environment. As the pandemic continues, it is clear that some elements of online learning should be retained – but which elements and how much?

In order to better understand how University of Dayton students are thinking and feeling about their online educational experiences, the Center for Online Learning posted a survey on the homepage of Isidore that was open from Monday, Nov. 29th through Thursday, Dec. 9th, 2021. The central research questions of the survey were:

- Do students want more online learning options?
- Why do students want or not want more online learning options?
- What are students' preferences for online classes?



501 undergraduate students finished the survey at a completion rate of 60%. Responses were evenly distributed across the academic years with slightly more records from First Years (28%) and Sophomores (28%). 54% of respondents identified as women and 40% of respondents identified as men. 76% of respondents identified as white. More detailed demographic breakdowns are included in the Appendix.

With these students' responses, we can begin to answer the research questions and start the discussion of what changes, if any, UD should make to its online offerings.

The survey and this report were prepared by the Center for Online Learning in consultation with Justin Keen, Director of Assessment and Student-Centered Analytics.

Results: Pandemic Experiences

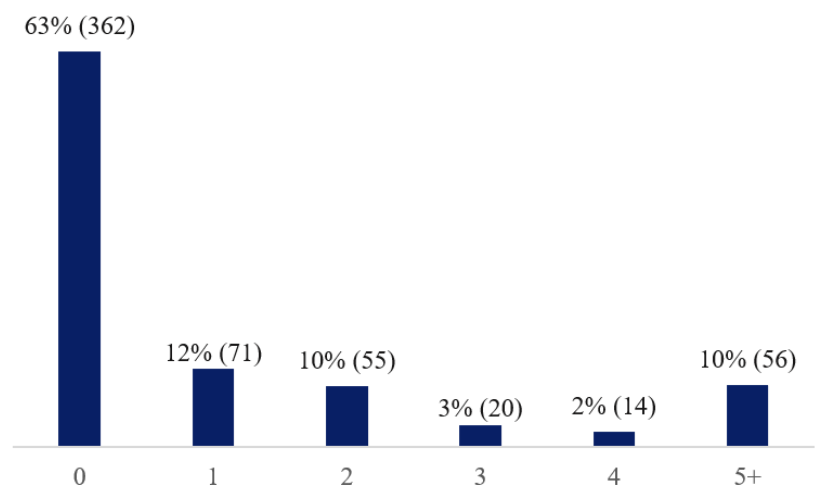
STUDENTS DID NOT HAVE MUCH EXPERIENCE WITH ONLINE LEARNING PRIOR TO COVID-19

Their experiences were a mixed bag, but generally positive.

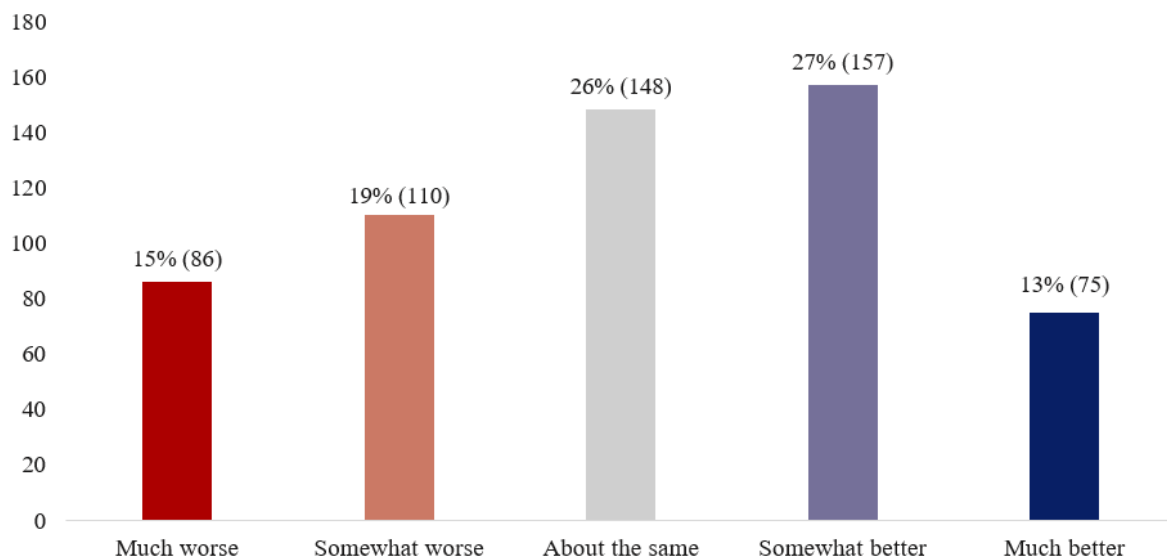
Undergraduate students have distinct needs and preferences when it comes to their online learning preferences and experiences. 63% of UD undergraduate students had never taken an online course prior to the pandemic. This means that the majority of students' first – and only – experiences with online learning occurred in classes that were not designed for an online format.

Given the challenge of converting classes to a fully online format in late Spring 2020 and then further adapting classes to a hybrid or flexible model in Fall 2020, we might have expected most students to report an entirely negative perception of online classes; however, only 34% of students reported a negative change - 40% of students actually reported a positive change.

How many college-level online classes had you taken before the COVID-19 pandemic?
Total responses to question = 578



How has your perception of online classes changed from before the pandemic to now?
Total responses to question = 576



Students were asked to explain why their perception has changed. Below are the summarized themes from their open-ended responses.

What factors contributed to the change in perception of online learning?

Negative Change in Perception	Positive Change in Perception
1. Difficulty in learning online	1. Realized value of online learning
2. Online courses during pandemic lacked quality and engagement	2. Positive experiences with instructors
3. Lack of personal motivation	3. Online learning saves time
4. Negative experiences with instructors	4. Online learning offers convenience and flexibility
5. Burn out from too much time online	5. Ability to rewatch lectures
6. Realized preference for in-person learning	6. Classes were more accessible and better structured
7. Increased workload in online classes	7. Positive experiences with Zoom
8. Lack of interaction with peers	8. More comfortable to learn in own space

“I have a very hard time paying attention during all-online classes. It is much easier for me to stay engaged in class when I am physically present in a room with a teacher or professor.”

“Personally, it's less stressful. With online classes it would be easier to attend class. Sometimes I struggle with that. To make it in time to class or even make it at all. So I think it's beneficial and more easy to participate.”

“The lack of face-to-face interaction with both peers and professors made the whole experience less genuine and enjoyable.”

“I feel that online instruction proves to be a much more flexible and accessible option for every student.”

“Motivation was much more difficult to find, as work in online classes culminated in pushing up a number on Isidore. I also noticed the constant screen time caused eye strain and headaches, which was exacerbated by nearly all assignments being on a computer as well.”

“Recordings of class periods. It makes so much more sense for difficult classes to be recorded so that struggling students can go back and listen to the professor again instead of trying to understand their hastily scribbled notes.”

“At the beginning of the pandemic, many teachers were thrown into online classes and they didn't know much of what they were doing. After the first semester, they majorly improved but the content learned still lacked majorly. Online classes were easy, enjoyable, but not adequate in teaching the content required for the course.”

“I just did not know much about how online classes operate. The idea of them scared me because I assumed you receive no connection with the professor and little to no real instruction. I now understand, in most of my cases, that was not true at all.”

Results: Online vs. Face-to-Face

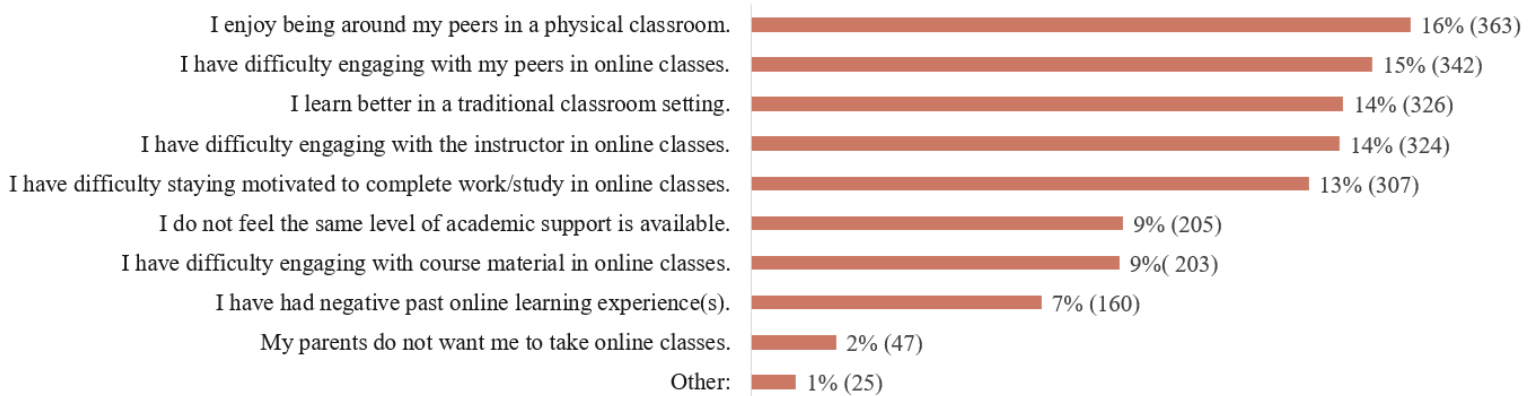
STUDENTS HIGHLY VALUE PEER AND INSTRUCTOR ENGAGEMENT

But online classes provide much-needed flexibility.

While students generally feel positively towards online classes, they recognize the incredible value of interacting with their peers and instructors in face-to-face courses.

What are some reasons you might NOT want to take an online class?
(select all that apply)

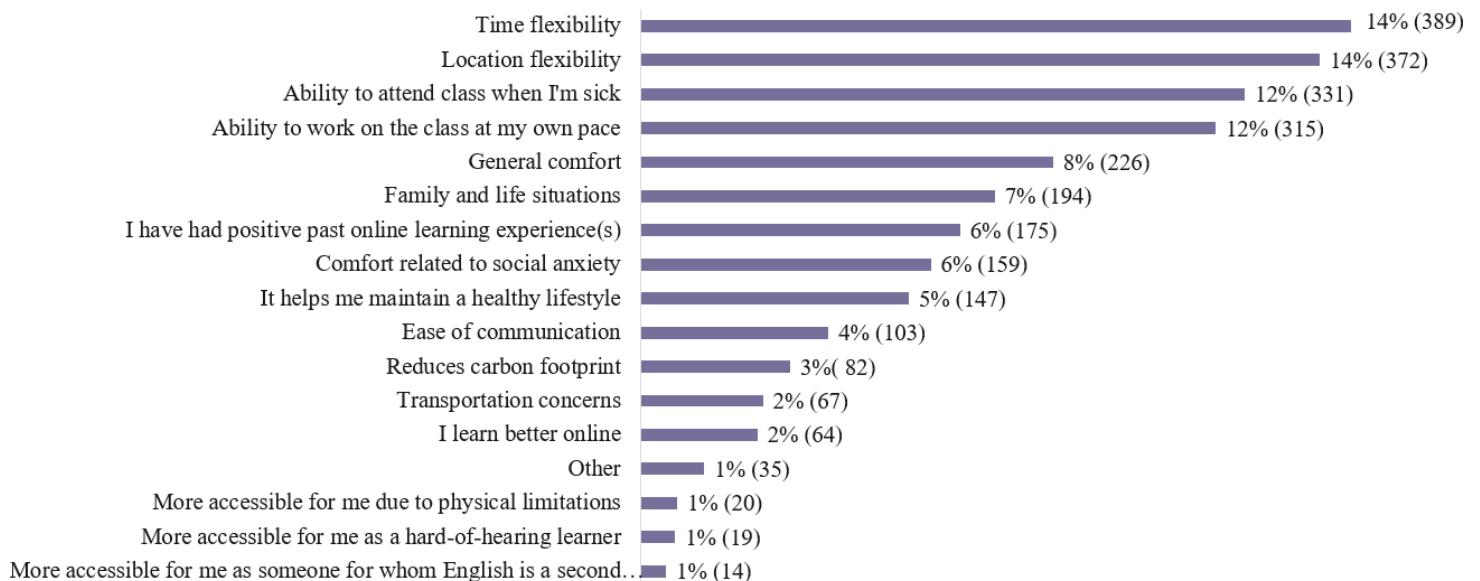
Total responses to question = 509



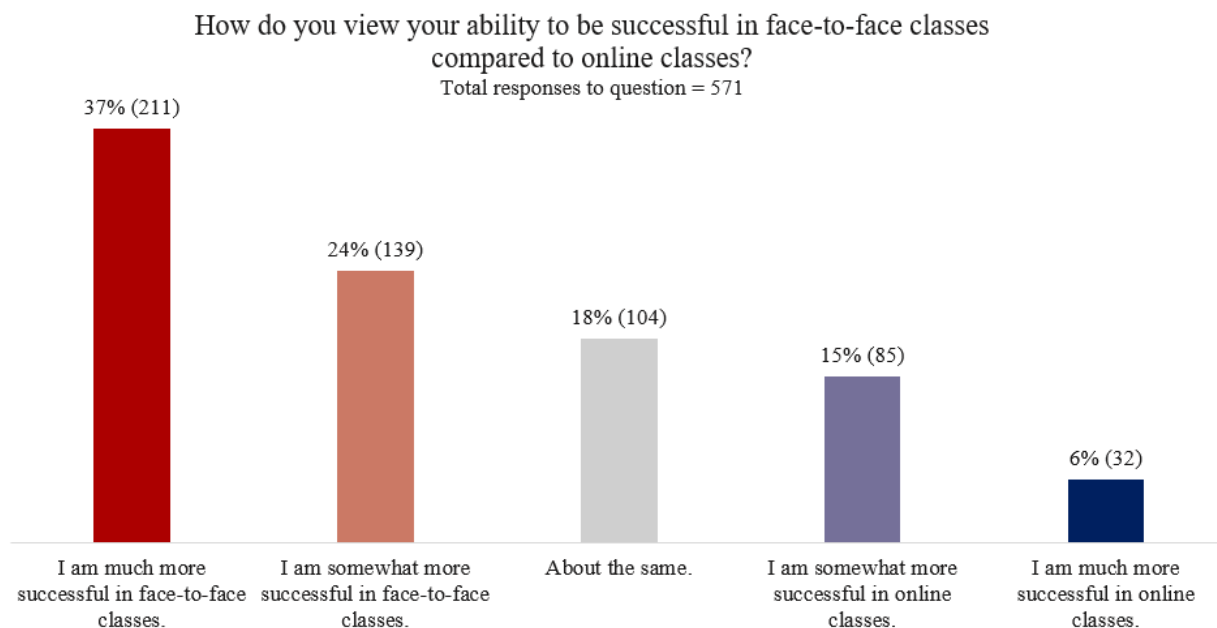
However, the flexibility afforded by online learning is also highly desired with 28% of students selecting time and location flexibility as the top two reasons for interest in online classes.

Why are you interested in taking more online classes?
(select all that apply)

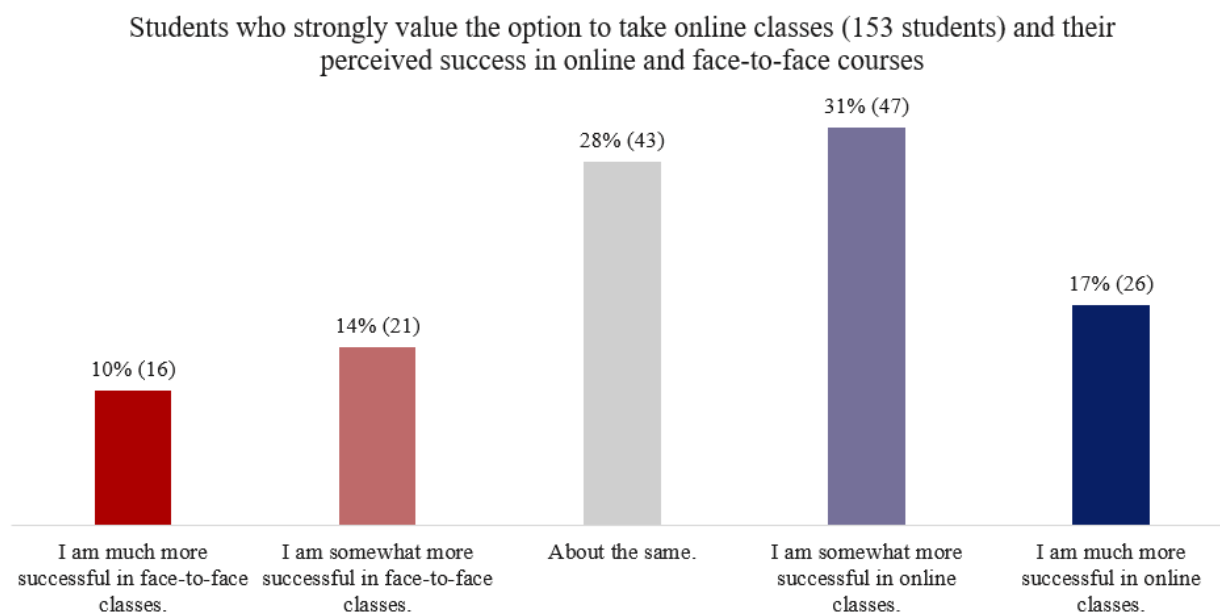
Total responses to question = 446



The third most common reason why students might not want to take an online class is that they learn better in a traditional classroom setting. 61% of students reinforced this when they indicated they are more successful in face-to-face classes.



In contrast, of the students who strongly value the option to take online classes (153 students), 76% of them are as successful or more successful in online classes.



One student who strongly values the option aptly summarizes how students are most successful when they can take classes that are best suited for their learning preference:

“I feel that students should be given the options to either take online courses or in class course because every student has different needs. Social anxiety and online classes help me learn so much better! I can also have the flexibility to travel with family and learn at the same time. I feel more comfortable online during class!!!”

Students who were more successful in face-to-face classes often recognized that their experiences with online learning during the pandemic were not necessarily reflective of well-designed, well-taught online classes:

“The online courses that I took previously were engineered to be online classes, while many of the classes I have taken virtually due to the pandemic were not. I think that professors should be educated on what makes an online course effective and manageable for students to help ease planning and mitigate constant changes to the course and dates throughout the semester.”

Students seem to be hopeful that future online experiences can be improved given that 57% of students indicated that they would be interested in taking more online classes at UD.

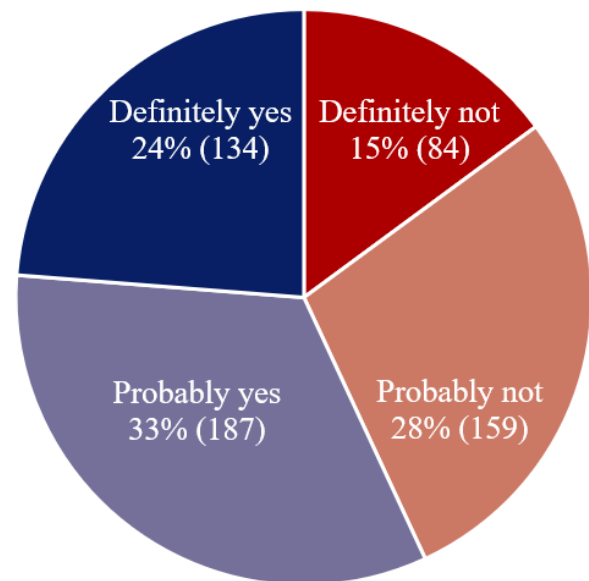
Among the students who said they would “definitely not” be interested in taking online classes, 82% reported a negative change in perception of online learning as a result of the pandemic.

Even among those students whose perceptions of online learning became more negative, though, 19% of those students are **still** interested in taking an online class.

All students who reported a “much better” perception of online learning said that they would definitely or probably be interested in taking more online classes at UD.

Would you be interested in taking more online classes at UD if offered?

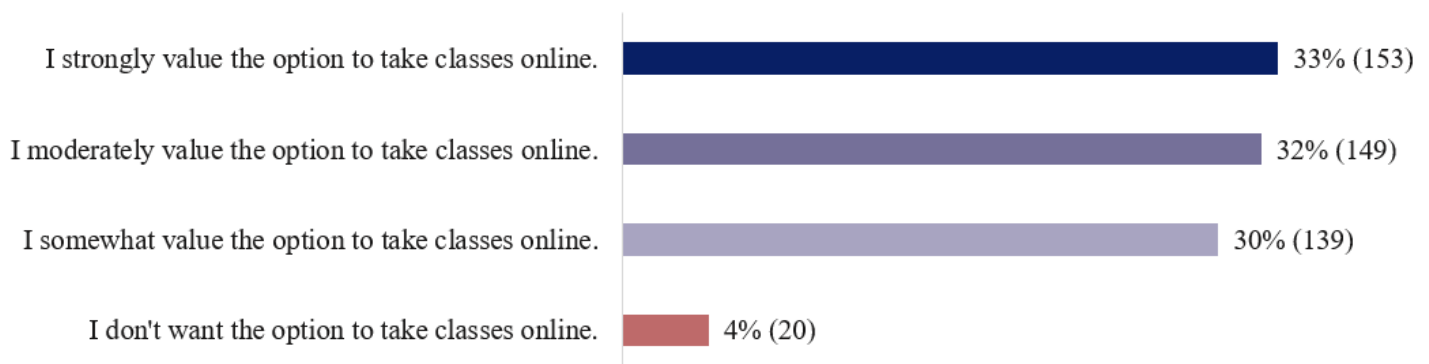
Total responses to question = 564



Among the students who indicated they would be interested in taking online classes at UD, 65% strongly or moderately value the option to take classes online at UD.

Which option best describes how much you value the option to take classes online at UD?

Total responses to question = 461



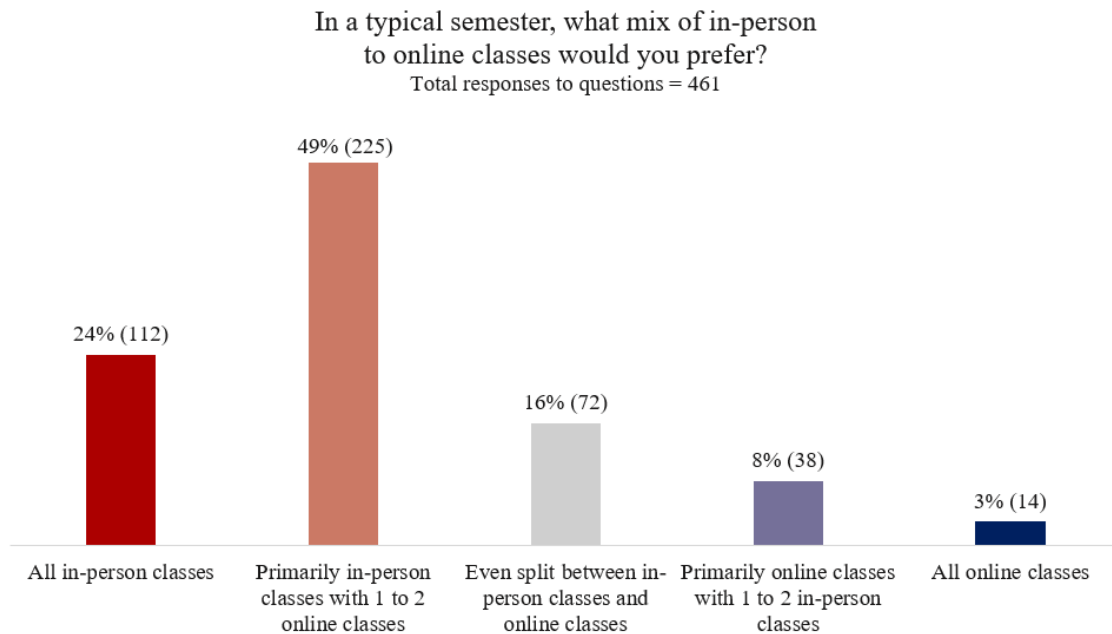
Results: Online Preferences

STUDENTS WANT A VARIETY OF ONLINE CHOICES

It will be best to start with manageable increases to online options.

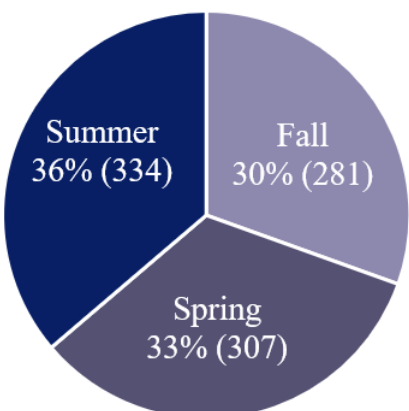
It will be challenging to meet every student's desire for a variety of online learning selections. A diversity of preferences arose from the survey, but there are a few key takeaways the University should pursue for future semesters.

49% of students prefer primarily in-person classes with 1 to 2 online classes in a typical semester.



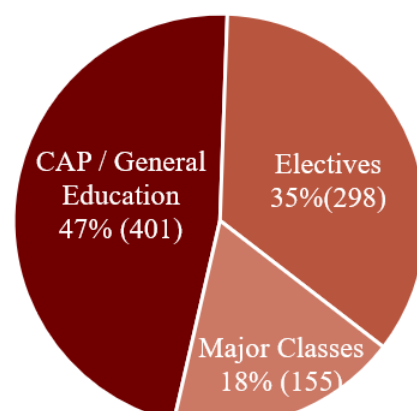
Students are interested in taking online classes relatively evenly across all semesters with a slight preference for more online summer classes (36%).

Which terms would you be interested in taking at least some classes online?
(select all that apply)
Total responses to question = 441

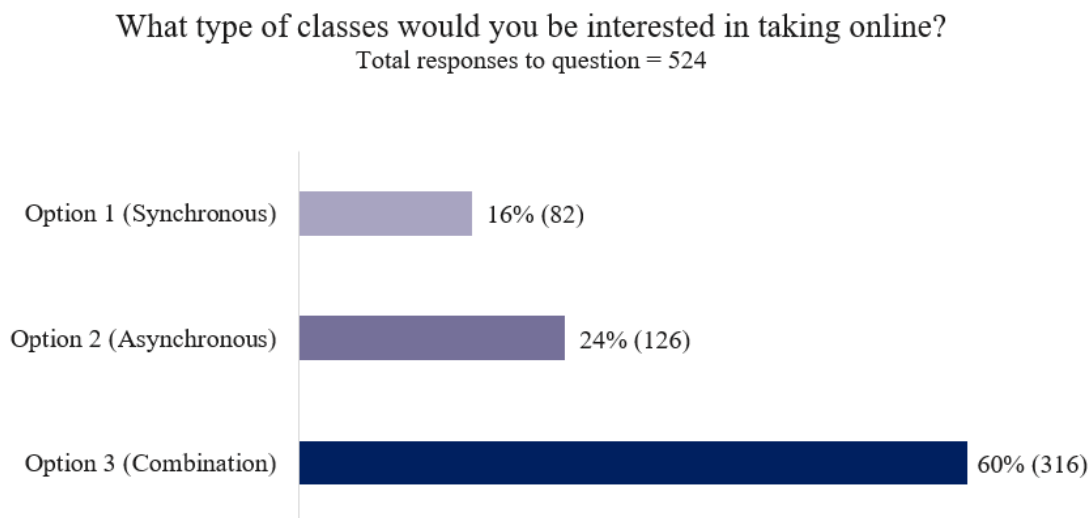


Students prefer online options for CAP or general education courses (47%) compared to electives or classes for their major.

What type of classes would you be interested in taking online?
(select all that apply)
Total responses to question = 432



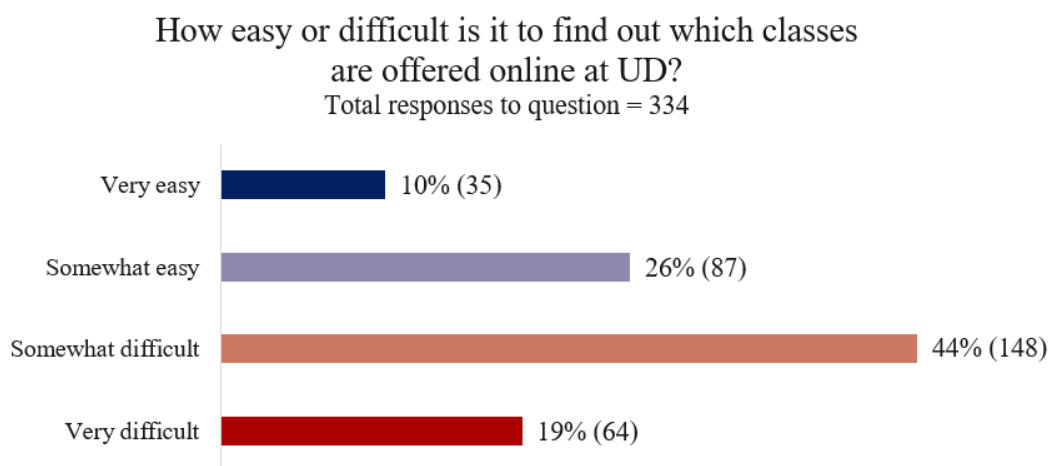
Course format or modality will be one of the most important things to address before introducing more online options to UD. 60% of students prefer “combination” style courses where there is a “mix of some required class sessions on Zoom and coursework completed independently in Isidore with weekly deadlines.”



The question of modality also arose when students were asked what recommendations they had to improve online learning at the UD with 10 students noting that it was difficult to find or understand how online classes are listed within the registration system:

“Lay out the classes that are offered and be precise if synchronous or not.”

63% of students have had difficulty locating the listing of online classes when they are planning their schedules.



Results: Student Recommendations

STUDENTS RECOMMEND IN-PERSON AND ONLINE

With flexibility paramount no matter the modality.

One of the final questions of the survey was an open-ended question asking students for their recommendations to improve online learning at UD. Their responses reinforced the diversity of student preferences we've seen in the results throughout the survey. Out of 251 responses, the most commonly occurring theme is to increase the number of online course offerings. The fourth most commonly occurring theme is to maintain the existing number of face-to-face classes.

"What recommendations do you have to improve online learning at UD?"

1. Increase the number of online course offerings
2. Improve the design and facilitation of online classes
3. Increase engagement and interaction in online classes
4. Keep offering face-to-face courses
5. Provide instructors with technical and pedagogical training
6. Enhance flexibility of face-to-face courses so students can learn remotely as needed
7. Record live class lectures or create pre-recorded lecture videos
8. Improve discoverability of online classes

Even though enhancing flexibility of face-to-face courses was a less commonly occurring theme, this theme profoundly resonated throughout many students' responses across all open-ended questions. With the increase in illnesses, mental health disorders and anxiety, and lack of motivation, many students wanted to convey that just having the option to attend a face-to-face class remotely would alleviate stress and help them stay on track as life circumstances come up that prevent them from attending class.

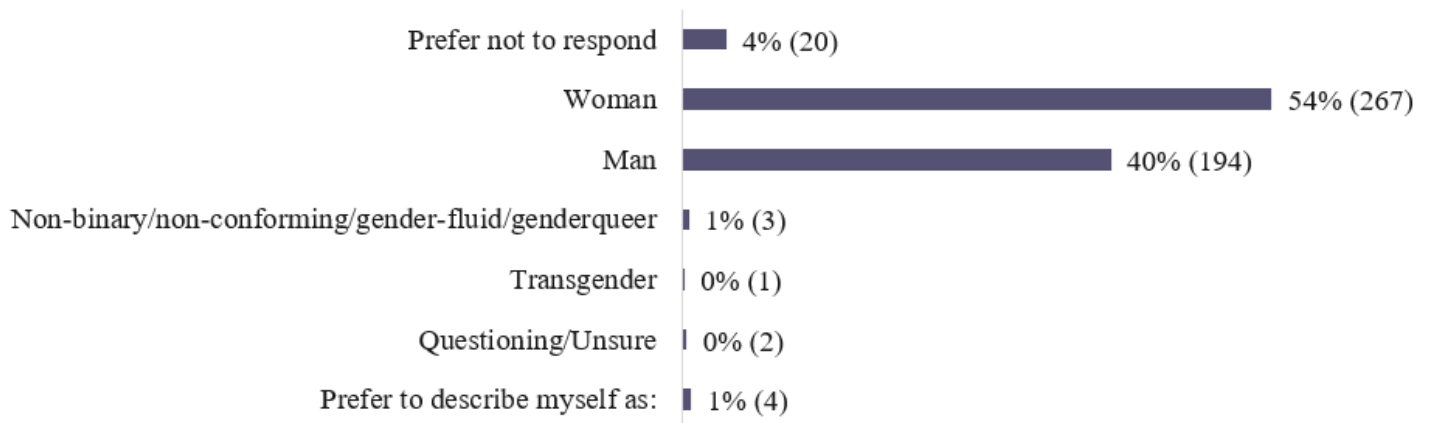
"Listen - the pandemic is still going on and now that students know online school is a possibility that for the most part works, it shouldn't be completely off the table just because administration has moved on. For example, I recently had a death in my family. There were 3 days in between when I went home and said goodbye to that loved one and when I had to go back home for the funeral - I do not live close to Dayton. I begged the administration and even my individual professors to let me do online school for those 3 days so I did not have to drive back and forth twice in such a short period of time, but I was denied because, as my advisor said, "Dayton is trying to move away from online education." I only had one professor, out of 8, willing to make accommodations for the situation. It would have been much less disruptive for me to have been online for 3 days that it was to drive back and forth. Plus, it is not difficult to set up a zoom call, especially since, most of my classes just involve lectures. I also had professors tell me their classes were not built for zoom which is so stupid because we just had online school for 2 years. So were certain classes just not offered for 2 years? Make it make sense."

Appendix: Demographic Data

Gender Identity

What is your gender identity?
(select all that apply)

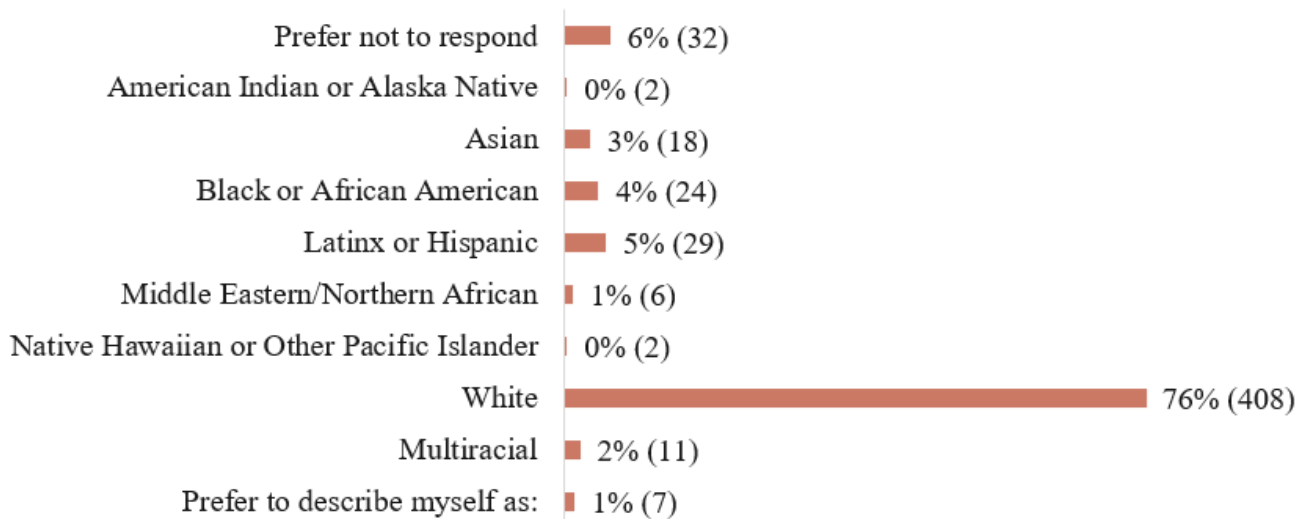
Total number of selections = 491



Racial Group Membership or Origin

What is your broad racial group membership or origin?
(select all that apply):

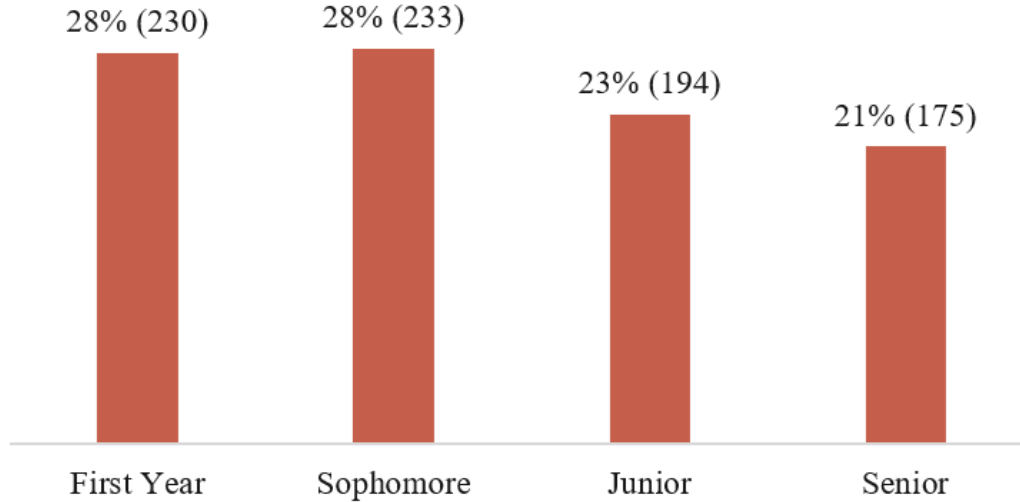
Total number of selections = 539



Academic Standing

What is your current academic standing?

Total responses to question = 832



Academic School

In which school are you enrolled?

(select all that apply)

Total number of selections = 848

