

What online learner outcomes tell colleges and universities about portfolio strategy

Online learning increases confidence for learners and drives intent to continue to learn

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The confidence connection

Results of recent Huron-supported research into the personal and professional outcomes of online learners can provide insight for college and university leaders considering the role of online educational offerings, including short-form credentials, in their academic portfolio mix. Survey results from over 55,000 completers of courses and certificates on Coursera revealed increases in learner confidence as well as interest in continued education: 62% of learners felt more confident and 98% intend to continue learning. More specifically, 38% of learners intend to enroll in a degree program, and 80% of those learners intend to enroll in an online degree program.

These findings, coupled with Huron's observations and experiences with 500+ institutions of higher education, support existing market sentiments that a primary benefit to institutions of online learning, from a business perspective, is that they create "stickiness" related to re-enrollment, serving as pathways to enroll adult learners in higher margin degree programs. It further illuminates that increased learner confidence may be a driver of re-enrollment.

IN BRIEF

- Huron-supported research from Coursera highlights learner outcomes related to professional and personal growth, including an uptick in career progression and fulfillment of social and emotional milestones.
- Fully 62% of online course completers reported increased confidence, and 98% were planning further education.
- A significant portion, 38%, of surveyed learners are considering degree programs, and of those, 80% are interested in pursuing these degrees online.



Learner outcomes report findings

Huron provided research support to Coursera in early 2023 to understand more about learner outcomes. The results of this research are captured in [the 2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report](#). Over 55,000 learners who recently completed a program or course on Coursera responded to survey questions about how their online learning led to career progression. Seventy-seven percent of learners reported measurable career benefits such as an increase in job interviews, a new job, a promotion, or demonstrable skills.

The survey also explored how online learning impacts learner confidence. Sixty-two percent of learners felt more confident after completing online learning offerings. Given the natural lag between increasing one's confidence and the application of that increased confidence to a job search or on-job performance, it is fair to hypothesize that this increase in confidence may be a leading indicator of career outcomes.

These findings also have practical application to an institution's growth strategy, the role of online learning in an institution's mix of academic offerings, and the timeline to financial benefit realization.

Confidence as an enrollment driver

Nearly 100% of survey respondents indicated an intent to further engage in learning. This suggests that in addition to the more easily measurable functional benefits of completing an online course or certificate — receiving a promotion, getting a new job, or obtaining a new skill set or a certificate that may support a case for career advancement — learners are also leveraging online learning offerings to address social and emotional goals or milestones, such as expanding their network; demonstrating success to colleagues, friends, or family; or feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Online learning represents low-cost (or no-cost) and low-barrier opportunities for learners to prove to themselves — and perhaps friends, family, or colleagues — that they can keep up with new content, improve their skills, find clarity in their pathway, balance a full work and life schedule and add online learning, and engage meaningfully with classmates and professional networks. For 38% of learners who intend to pursue a degree, these broader social and emotional milestones translate into an interest in pursuing an online degree.

Huron perspective: What does this mean for college and university investment in online learning and learner success capabilities?

The perspectives reflected in this section include context from Huron's broader work across higher education, in addition to findings in the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report*.

There is no shortage of commentary on the impending demographic cliff for traditional-aged undergraduate populations. At the same time, data from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) indicating 40.4 million adult learners in the United States with some college but no degree are regularly cited by institutions searching for new strategies to alleviate financial pressures with new revenue streams from degree completion, continuing education, and graduate-level offerings.

While institutions like Southern New Hampshire University and, more recently, the University of North Texas serve as success stories in the online learning marketplace, this remains a challenging and increasingly crowded market with, [as of 2020, more than 2,500 colleges offering online programs and nearly 50% of that market concentrating to the top 100 providers](#).

Beyond the clear benefits to a college or university's mission, online learning should ideally drive re-enrollment to serve as a meaningful component of a growth strategy. Through engagements with a diverse set of college and university clients and through observations of the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report*, Huron has observed that despite a lower emotional, social, and sometimes financial barrier to enrollment, the cost of acquisition of adult learners for most institutions is high, particularly for institutions seeking to enroll learners on a national or international scale.

While not directly tied to the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report*, in support of college and university financial forecasts, Huron found that learners completing a short-form online course or certificate likely produce a narrow or negative financial contribution margin and certainly not a large enough margin to alleviate the margin squeeze created by rising costs and slowed undergraduate enrollment growth. However, this calculus changes when considering the expected lifetime value of the average learner based on an effective approach to driving re-enrollment.

With these market and institutional economics factors in mind, Huron believes colleges and universities will benefit from being reflective and intentional about building operational infrastructure to support a different recruitment and service model for adult learners compared to residential on-campus students, how to enter the online learning market (content, format, infrastructure, etc.), and the expectations regarding the time to financial benefit realization. Otherwise, institutions may risk devoting resources to low-return programs. Institutional leaders may take the following into consideration as they assess their institutions' online learning strategies:

1. The operational infrastructure to recruit and retain adult learners is fundamentally different than what is needed for traditional learners. Some institutions have already mastered these competencies. Others will benefit from being intentional and deliberate about building parallel recruitment and student success mechanisms with tailored competencies focused on lead generation, lead conversion, automatic credit transfer agreements, industry-tailored content, pathways to degrees, and tailored academic and career advising, among other capabilities.
2. Leveraging a third-party platform may accelerate go-to-market or provide valuable lower-cost testing of institutional strategy related to online learning offerings. Third parties leading in this space have highly mature market research functions, access to large learner pools, scale related to recruitment and re-enrollment efforts, and well-supported technology infrastructure.
3. Online offerings best aligned to degree pathways tied to labor market demand, general market semiotics associated with successful candidates (e.g., STEM and health degrees), or clear career advancement are likely to have higher re-enrollment rates.
4. From a financial and contribution margin perspective, this is an intermediate- to long-term strategy and may need to be balanced with other measures to address or preserve more near-term financial margins. The institution will require time to recruit adult learners to short-form offerings, allow time for completion, and then estimate the percentage that will re-enroll in a higher margin degree offering on their second or third re-enrollment.

Huron takeaways: Looking ahead

Huron's takeaway from the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report* for higher education decision makers is that it reinforces the potential efficacy of online learning offerings as a pathway to degrees; growing this set of offerings has the potential to be a successful model for institutions effectively positioned to test and pursue these markets.

Given the current imperative for data capture — metrics, KPIs, success factors — institutions will be compelled to market career advancement, the value of upskilling, and the functional impact of courses and certificates on careers. These anecdotes and data are valuable to the continued recruitment of adult learners.

The data collected through the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report* research provides valuable insights into learners' goals, intentions, and outcomes. Institutions may benefit from measuring and tracking the personal, social, and emotional benefits learners attribute to their online course experiences, such as increased confidence. This data will help institutions understand the learner profile and the emotional and career outcomes that may contribute to re-enrollment and inform a successful institutional growth strategy that includes online offerings.

Note that all commentary in this section represents Huron's interpretation of data in the *2023 Coursera Learner Outcomes Report* and reflects Huron's application of that data in the context of Huron's industry expertise.



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