

# CONTEXT MATTERS: SURVEY RESULTS OF INSTITUTIONAL DIGITAL LEARNING DEFINITIONS

Key Themes, Insights, and Challenges

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## COPYRIGHT AND RESOURCES

Please visit the WCET website for a [downloadable copy of the results from the survey](#).

For related resources, see <https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions>

For inquiries or more information contact [wcetinfo@wiche.edu](mailto:wcetinfo@wiche.edu).

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To further the work of WCET - WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, on digital learning modalities definitions, WCET gathered information via a survey in the summer of 2023. The questions in the survey focused on institutional definitions, policies, and procedures related to digital learning definitions and how those are communicated, shared, and impact students. We also conducted follow-up interviews with institutions that volunteered to share more insights into the policies and practices at their respective institutions.

Surprisingly, few institutions reported definitions that vary by college or department, and many still lacked comprehensive definitions, with “distance learning” and “hybrid or blended learning” being the only terms with institution-wide definitions as reported by survey participants. However, we note that overall, the institutions who responded were less online-intensive, with 61% of participants representing institutions for which a quarter or less of their students graduated in a primarily online program.

When it comes to institutional definitions of distance learning or online learning, we observed many similarities in the themes and variations when we researched definitions of distance education in policy, such as an incorporation or adoption of the U.S. Department of Education's definition of distance education as the institutional definition. Across all terms, we noticed variations in the specificity of the percentage of coursework or instruction that would influence the categorization of a course or program into a given modality. Whether a course or program was synchronous or asynchronous also became an important factor in the institution's decision of how to label or define a modality.

Some of the most common challenges respondents reported experiencing were related to implementing policies and procedures on digital learning definitions, mainly due to the lack of consistency and clarity in definitions and adherence to institutional definitions in course delivery. For example, many participants noted that many permutations and nuances of the modalities were challenging for many stakeholders to understand. To address these challenges, many explained how they are removing and/or reconsidering definitions that have caused much confusion.

We suggest that institutions engage students, faculty, and administrators at the institution to learn the definitions of modalities and also to gather data on how to review the efficacy of definitions and how they are communicated. We believe more can be learned from students about the student experience and understanding of modalities. It will also be important to assess how to bridge the gap between the knowledge of digital learning modalities between those working in online learning, students, instructors, and other institutional administrators. We encourage institutions to share how they manage challenges relating to the adherence to course modalities assigned at the time of registration. We also note that we will provide more information on these topics and on proposals from the U.S. Department of Education that will impact digital learning offerings at postsecondary institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Online learning, hybrid learning, hyflex learning, blended learning, distance education, and many more. WCET has analyzed digital learning terms and definitions such as these from multiple points of view, including the extent of agreement with key aspects of these terms, the variation in policy definitions of distance education, and, importantly, what students consider important information relating to modalities<sup>1</sup>.

In developing and analyzing this survey, we wanted to learn more about the practical side of defining digital learning modalities in addition to the more philosophical sides. What are the differences between these terms that necessitate the creation of novel terms for variations of modality? What goes into the institutional decisions on defining these terms? As we will see in this discussion, the individual needs of institutions and their students will result in several decisions being made.

Throughout the report, it is important to keep in mind that the context of the institutions and their own individual obligations and needs matter in understanding how and why an institution chose to define modalities in the way that they did. And often chose not to settle on a definition.

In developing an understanding of the institutional practices relating to digital learning definitions and the challenges that institutions face in defining terms, maintaining compliance, and achieving clarity and transparency with faculty and students, what we hope to accomplish is to provide institutions with, not only an understanding of the policy, but also assistance in finding workable solutions to the challenges faced.

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<sup>1</sup> See WCET “Digital Learning Definition” page for prior research: <https://wcet.wiche.edu/practice/digital-learning-definitions/>.

## METHODOLOGY

WCET - The WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, gathered information relating to institutional definitions, policies, and procedures relating to digital learning definitions (such as distance, online, hyflex, hybrid, etc.) and how those are communicated to, shared with, and impact students. WCET staff developed, administered, and analyzed the survey and utilized Survey Monkey™ for delivering the questions and collecting responses. WCET staff distributed the survey to WCET member institutions via communication through the Predictive Response email platform.

The survey was conducted from July 11 – July 31, 2023. A total of three hundred and sixty-three (363) responses were submitted. The survey consisted of 23 open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The questions covered the following areas: institutional information, definitions of digital learning terms (distance, online, fully online, hybrid or blended, hyflex), institutional practices, and institutional challenges. The appendix includes a complete copy of the survey.

While the main survey responses could not be individually identified, we asked for anyone willing to participate in follow-up interviews to leave their name and contact information. We conducted follow-up interviews with a selected cross-section of those who responded. Their insights and commentary are referenced throughout the analysis and discussion.

### *Analysis and Discussion*

In the sections that follow, we will focus on reviewing the data as it relates to the demographics of those who responded, the themes of the various definitions that were submitted, and a discussion of the challenges that were brought to light throughout the survey.

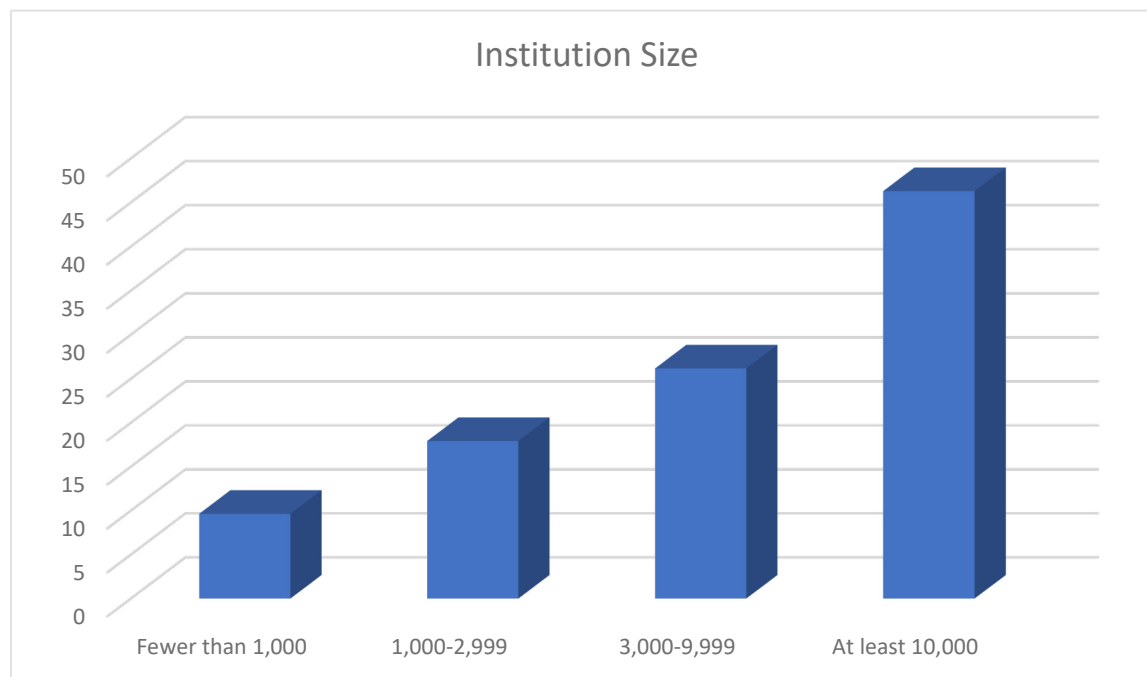
## SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Each responder was asked to indicate their primary role at their institution, with the majority being in an administrative role (62%) or staff role (23%). Eleven (11%) percent of responders were faculty/instructors, and most of the “other” responders included instructional designers. This sample appears to represent WCET’s focus on digital learning leadership at member institutions.

Further, individuals who represented four-year public institutions (41%) comprised the most responses, followed by two-year public institutions that primarily offer associate degrees (28%), and private non-profit institutions (24%). Private for-profit institutions represented only 3% of the responses.

Forty-six (46%) percent of those who responded to the survey represented institutions with at least 10,000 students, whereas individuals who represented institutions with fewer than 1,000 students comprised the least number of responses (9.6%).

**Table 1. Institution Size**



[Please See Data from Institutional Definitions Survey for downloadable data for this and all graphs.](#)

In the survey, we asked institutions to identify the number of their graduates who completed their program primarily online or at a distance in the most recent academic year. Overall, the institutions that responded were less online-intensive. The bulk (61%) of institutional personnel responding to the survey represented institutions for which a quarter or less of their students graduated in a program that is primarily online. Less than 20% of respondents hailed from institutions where more than half their graduates complete programs primarily online.

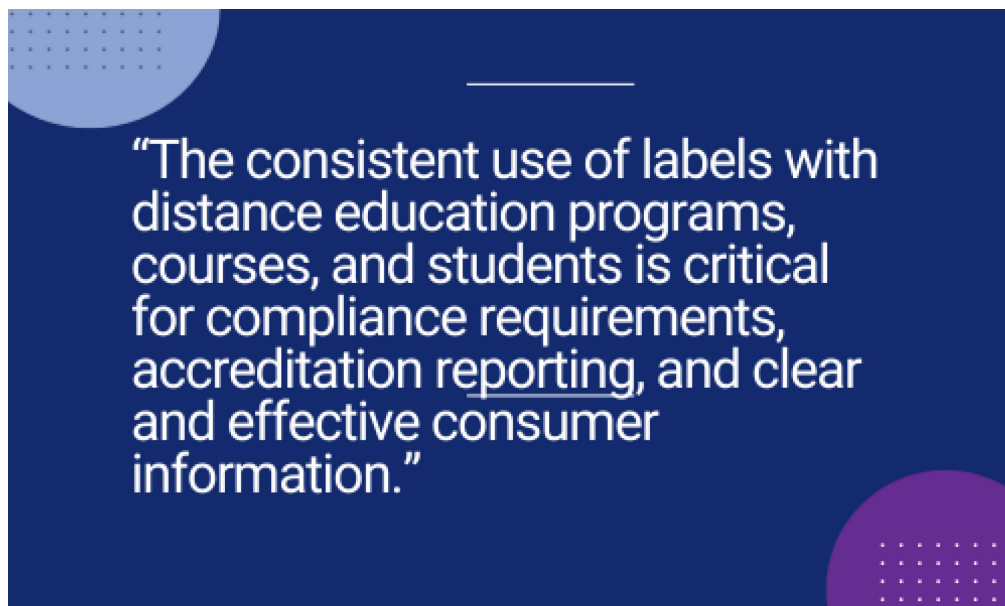
This data is good context for understanding the other responses as these are mostly institutions that still have a preponderance of in-person students, or at least a preponderance of students in campus-based programs.

## REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS

To more specifically describe and categorize learning experiences, institutions and scholars have adopted many additional terms to describe when, how, and where courses are delivered. Some of the more widely used terms include:

- online learning,
- hybrid learning,
- blended learning, and,
- hyflex learning.

Though most of those terms are not specifically defined in policy, the categorization of those courses has important implications for compliance, reporting, and funding requirements.



Our goal in conducting the survey was to gather more information on how these other terms for modalities are defined, how those definitions are communicated to students, and how they impact students.

In the survey, we asked five questions to determine whether the institution defined a given digital learning term. We specifically had one question for five different modalities: distance learning, online learning, fully online learning, hybrid or blended learning, and hyflex learning. For each question, institutions could select one of the following five choices:

- We have an institution-wide definition.
- We have definitions that vary by college or department within the institution.
- We are actively working on creating or updating this definition.



- We have no definition and there is no current work to create one.
- Other (please explain).

For each modality, we also had a question where respondents could submit the text of, or a link to, their definition of each term. Similar to how we analyzed definitions of distance education in policy in the WCET report “[Defining “Distance Education” in Policy: Differences Among Federal, State, and Accreditation Agencies](#),” we will identify the consistent themes and elements to highlight areas of agreement and will showcase some of the variations and nuances. Through examples and discussion, we hope to illustrate the importance of context and clarity.

## BUT FIRST.... SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

1. Few reported variations in definitions for a modality across colleges or departments.

To our surprise in responses across all modalities, few institutions reported definitions that vary by college or department. Based upon prior surveys we expected more variation across a college or university. Not only was that the least chosen response across all terms, but the percentage of responses was much lower than the others, with the highest being 6.6% for hybrid or blended learning.

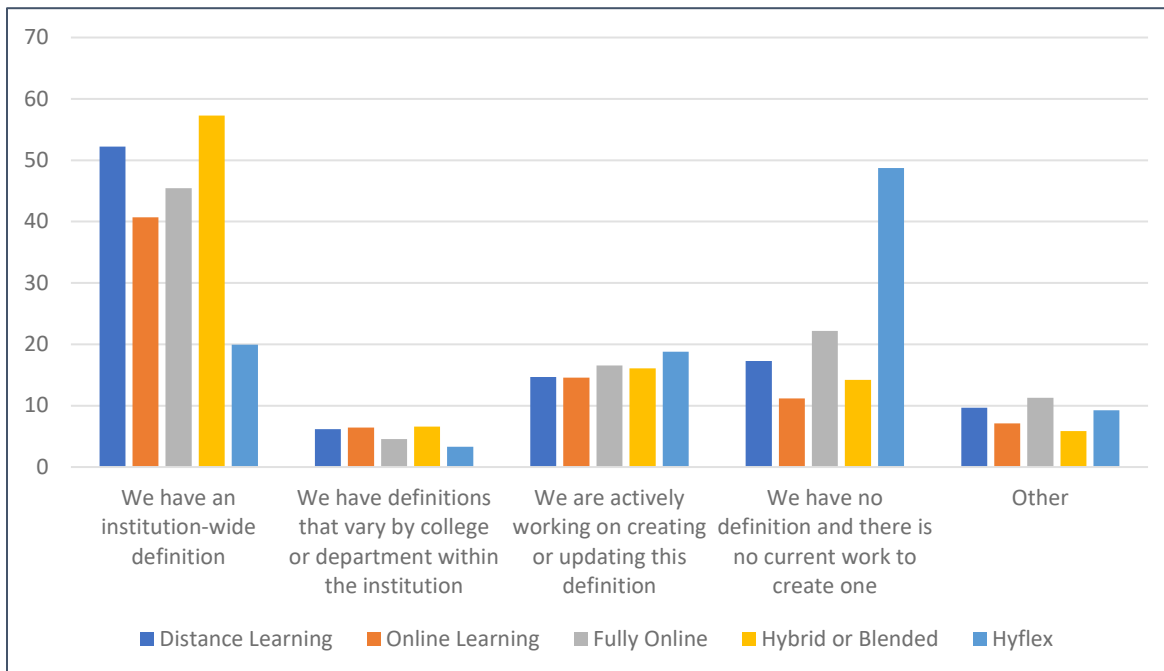
Our expectations for variations in definitions for a modality across an institution were not borne out by the results or in the interviews that followed. It is important to note, due to the fact that institutions could only choose one response here, the number of responses may have been different had institutions been able to choose all that apply. For example, after further consideration, we now recognize that, especially in the case of the “definitions vary” and “actively working on this definition,” both responses could be true, and institutions may have chosen the response that felt more appropriate in the moment.

2. Only two modalities have institution-wide definitions for more than half the institutions.

Even with the lack of definitions varying by college or departments and the growing maturity of digital learning, many institutions are lacking comprehensive definitions. Only “distance learning” and “hybrid or blended learning” report more than 50% of respondents with an institution-wide definition. However, many institutions reported using “distance” or “online” interchangeably and thus they may not see the need to define both terms. Nearly 60% of institutions report having an institution-wide definition of “hybrid or blended learning” shows strength and growth for that modality, whereas nearly half of the institutions reporting having no definition of “hyflex” suggests the need for additional time and consideration for that modality to develop.

See Table 2 below for the overview of responses to whether or not institutions define these digital learning terms.

**Table 2 Do institutions define these digital learning terms?**



3. Regardless of institution type, distance learning most commonly had an institution-wide definition.

Across all types of institutions, the most common response was that the institution had a definition of distance learning. With the exception of institutions that classified themselves as “private for-profit” or “other,” the most common response was that the institutions had an institution-wide definition of the terms online learning and fully online learning. However, it is important to note that private for-profit represented only 3% of the responses while “other” institutions represented only 4% of the responses, so the data set is limited for institutions that are classified as such.

4. For all institution sizes, distance and online learning most commonly had institutions-wide definitions.

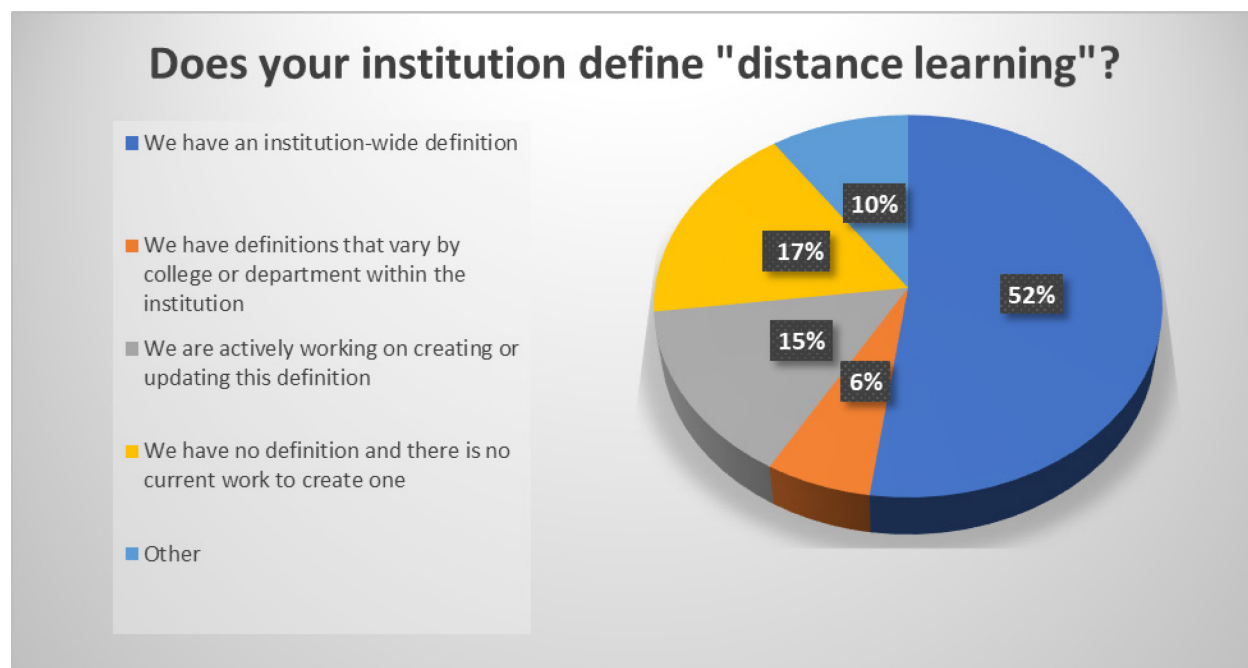
Across all sizes of institutions, the most common response was that the institution had institution-wide definitions of the terms distance learning and online learning. Except for institutions that classified themselves as having “fewer than 1,000” students, the most common response for institutions of other sizes was that they did have an institution-wide definition of the term fully online learning. For institutions that responded having “fewer than 1,000” students, the most common response was that there was “no definition and no work to create one” at 25.7%. However, only 9.6% of respondents reported that they had fewer than 1,000 students so the data may be limited.

## REVIEW OF DISTANCE LEARNING, ONLINE LEARNING, FULLY ONLINE LEARNING DEFINITION THEMES

The term “distance education” is a modality commonly defined in policy at federal, state, and accrediting agencies, among others. For example, [Section 103 of the Higher Education Act](#) (HEA) defines distance education as instruction that occurs between students and instructors who are separated and that provides regular and substantive interaction between them via methods such as the internet, other electronic transmissions, audio conferencing, and videos.

In the WCET report, “[Defining “Distance Education” in Policy: Differences Among Federal, State, and Accreditation Agencies](#)” we reviewed common themes and distinctions between definitions of distance education among federal, state, and accreditation agencies. Common practices among those agencies included defining distance education based on federal HEA and Title IV definitions and for definitions to have an explicit emphasis on the physical separation of student and instructor. We also saw a wide variety of percentages of instruction influencing the categorization of the modality in that policy research.

**Table 3 Distance Learning Definitions.**



We observed many of the same themes in conducting our research on institutional definitions of these terms. Especially when it comes to institutional definitions of distance learning or online learning, it was common to see a citation to, or incorporation of, a federal, state, or accreditor definition. What is especially interesting to discuss are the various nuances that we observed in reading through institutional definitions. As we saw in the WCET report on defining distance education in policy, there are variations in the specificity of the percentage of coursework or instruction that would constitute categorizing a course or program into a given modality. Sometimes these variations were quite significant in scope.

We saw this variation across all of the modalities that were surveyed. We also observed differences in how institutions chose to label and categorize courses depending on the synchronicity, or the timing for learning activities and other interactions, in the course. The breakdown of responses to whether institutions defined distance learning is in Table 3.

Some examples include an institution that adopted the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) distance education definitions (which itself is a variation on the Department of Education's definition) and defined a distance course as one in which:

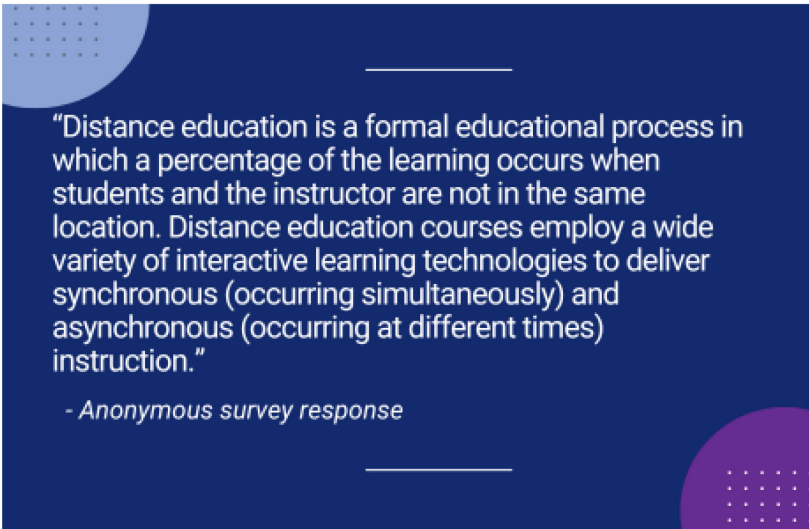
"75% or more of formalized instruction, synchronous or asynchronous, uses one or more of the following technologies: the internet; one-way and two-way transmission through open broadcast, closed-circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communication devices; audio conferencing; or videocassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs used in conjunction with any of the other technologies."

This institution defined distance education courses by two instruction modes:

- "Distance Learning (DL): 100% of instruction is offered by distance."
- "Distance Enhanced (DH): 75%-99% of instruction is offered by distance."

In another example, an institution defined a distance education course as one in which "75 percent or more of the instruction and interaction occurs via electronic communication or equivalent mechanisms, with the faculty and students physically separated from each other." The institution went on to define a distance education program as one in which "a student could earn the degree or certificate by taking 50 percent or more of the work" in distance education courses.

Yet another institution referred to its state's definition that defined distance education as "the formal education process that occurs when students and instructors are not in the same physical setting for the majority (more than 50 percent) of instruction." Another institution referred to a state statute that mandates that "at least 80% of the direct instruction of online courses must be delivered via distance technologies" in order to qualify for a distance learning course fee. And in another example, another state requires that "all courses with 50% or more of instruction delivered where faculty and students are designated as online courses," and these courses must be approved for distance delivery and "adhere to distance education quality standards."



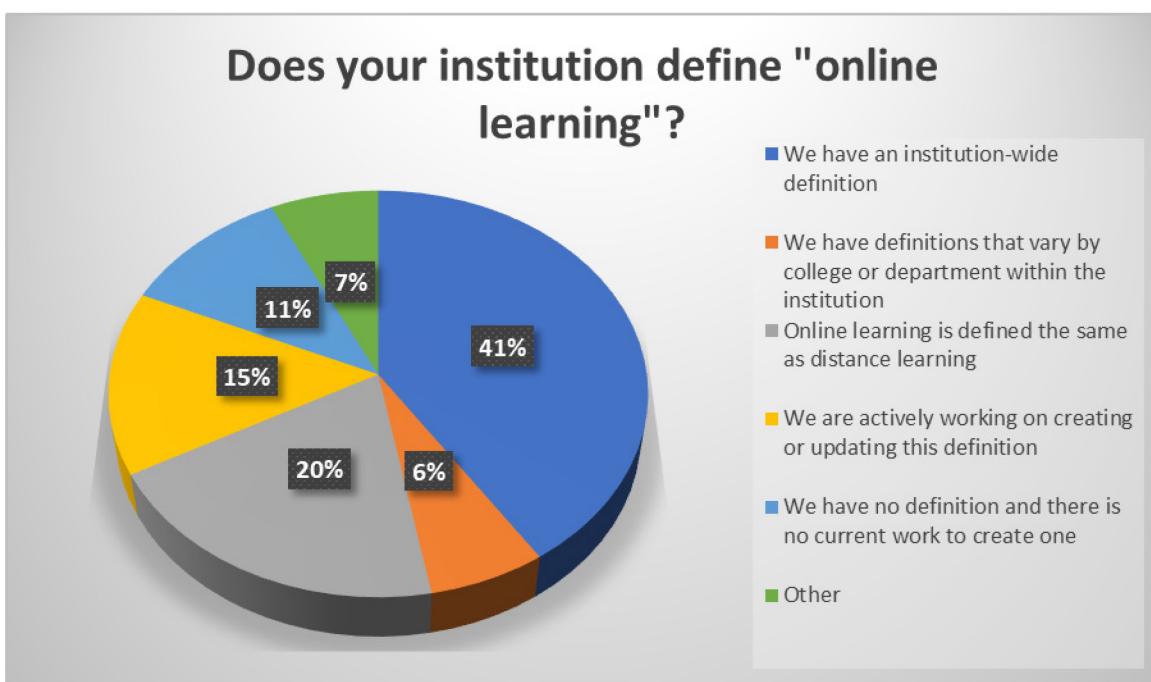
"Distance education is a formal educational process in which a percentage of the learning occurs when students and the instructor are not in the same location. Distance education courses employ a wide variety of interactive learning technologies to deliver synchronous (occurring simultaneously) and asynchronous (occurring at different times) instruction."

- Anonymous survey response

As this report was being finalized, the Department of Education’s 2024 negotiated rulemaking process introduced proposals for two more takes on what constitutes a distance education program:

- For accreditation purposes, the initial review of an institution new to distance education begins when “for the first time, offers at least 50 percent of a program through distance education.”
- For financial aid purposes in determining a “virtual location,” it is “100 percent of an educational program through distance education or correspondence courses, notwithstanding requirements for students to complete on-campus or residential periods of 90 days or less.”

**Table 4 Online Learning Definitions**



## *Online – Synchronous, Asynchronous, or Both?*

A point of difference that emerged in definitions of distance learning, online learning, and fully online learning came to the “when” of course delivery, or whether these terms referred to synchronous instruction, asynchronous instruction, or both. In some cases, especially where the definition was based on the federal U.S. Department of Education definition at 34 CFR 600.2, these terms could encompass either synchronous or asynchronous instruction, such as the following:

### Example 1:

“A Distance Education class is a class in which 76% - 100% of the instruction is offered by distance education. Distance education is defined as education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor, and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor. The interaction may be synchronous (student and instructor are in communication at the same time) or asynchronous.”

### Example 2:

“We use the HLC definition. **Distance Education** (HLC definition) - Education that uses one or more of the technologies listed below to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously.”

Other institutions decided that it was important to differentiate between modalities based on whether the course could be offered synchronously or asynchronously. In some cases, such as the example below from a four-year public institution, institutions decided to use a different term to make that distinction:

### Example 1:

“**Synchronous Remote**- Students meet via videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom) or other appropriate instructional technology at regularly scheduled times (synchronous learning) (will have classroom and day/times).”

“**Online**- Students do not meet with the instructor at predefined times (asynchronous learning). Online courses do not require students to be physically present at any point during the term (will have no day/times).”

In other situations, institutions would create definitions between “Online Synchronous,” “Online Asynchronous” and “Partially Synchronous” or “Online Mix.” For example, a four-year public institution utilized the following definitions:

“**Asynchronous Distance Education**: Courses meet exclusively via distance ed through the learning management system and require no in-person or synchronous virtual meetings.”

**“Fully Synchronous Distance Education:** Courses meet exclusively through distance education technologies according to the pre-scheduled meeting days and times as indicated in Banner.”

**“Partially Synchronous Distance Education:** Courses are facilitated through the learning management system and require no in-person sessions, but instructors can incorporate periodic synchronous virtual sessions when the subject matter requires real-time demonstration, collaboration or interaction. The dates and times for required synchronous sessions will be made clear to students on syllabi so they can coordinate their academic, personal and work schedules.”

In another example from a participant at a two-year public institution that primarily offers associate degrees:

**“Online learning** is a form of distance education in which a course or program is intentionally designed, in advance, to be delivered fully online and asynchronously. Faculty use pedagogical strategies for instruction, student engagement, and assessment that are specific to learning in a virtual environment.

- “Online Asynchronous - Online Asynchronous classes require all contact hours be held online asynchronously. Instruction takes place online asynchronously. The modality allows students to access materials and assignments on a flexible schedule in accordance with deadlines set by the professor. All required instructional hours are online. Contact includes instruction, learning activities, and interactions (both student-student and/or student-instructor). All the class work, examinations, quizzes, writing assignments, lab work etc. are fully online.”
- “Online Synchronous - Online Synchronous courses resemble on-campus In-Person ones in that students must be (virtually) present at the same time. All required instructional hours are online. Contact includes instruction, learning activities, and interactions (both student-student and/or student/instructor). All the class work, examinations, quizzes, writing assignments, lab work, etc. are fully online. All Synchronous class meeting days/times must be listed in the schedule of classes for students at the time of enrollment.”
- “Online Mix - Online Mix classes offer a combination of online synchronous meetings and asynchronous online work. It is recommended that at least 25% and at most 75% of classes in Online Mix courses are scheduled to meet at a set time online. Students attend some classes on designated online synchronous days, with the remainder of the course being delivered via asynchronous, deadline-based instruction and assignments. All required instructional hours are online.”

In the survey responses and follow-up interviews, institutions were clear that there was both a practical element to making the distinction and a philosophical one as well. Institutions expressed the need for distinction to ensure clarity on the course expectations for both students and faculty.



For example, one institution noted that “emergency remote teaching/learning muddled our faculty and students’ definitions of online, blended, etc.” Several institutions note that both students and faculty were confused by the term online especially post-pandemic. As one institution noted, “many believe that the word online is synonymous with synchronous online instruction,” but it was clarified that online instruction has always referred to asynchronous online instruction at their institution. Another noted that they have noticed confusion over asynchronous and synchronous online courses. Specifically, this individual observed that “students may enroll in a synchronous online course and mistakenly be under the impression that they have the option of attending classes asynchronously if life circumstances occur and they are in need of greater flexibility.”

In addition to the need for clarity, institutions also noted philosophical reasons for distinguishing. For example, one participant from a two-year public institution with less than 3,000 students, explained how they view the similarities between “remote/virtual courses” and face-to-face courses versus courses taught 100% online asynchronously. This individual argued that a remote/virtual course that is synchronous “has more common attributes to a face-to-face course than an asynchronous online course,” yet remote/virtual courses are categorized in the “same category as an online course.” To further their argument, the individual noted that in remote/virtual courses, “you can interact and engage with your instructors and peers synchronously” and that the “technology brings you in the same room and you can engage with your instructor as if you were in a real classroom.”

Others noticed a philosophical difference in the sense of the planning, resources, support, and time needed to develop a quality online learning experience. For example, in one survey response, the participants from a four-year public institution with less than 10,000 students noted that:

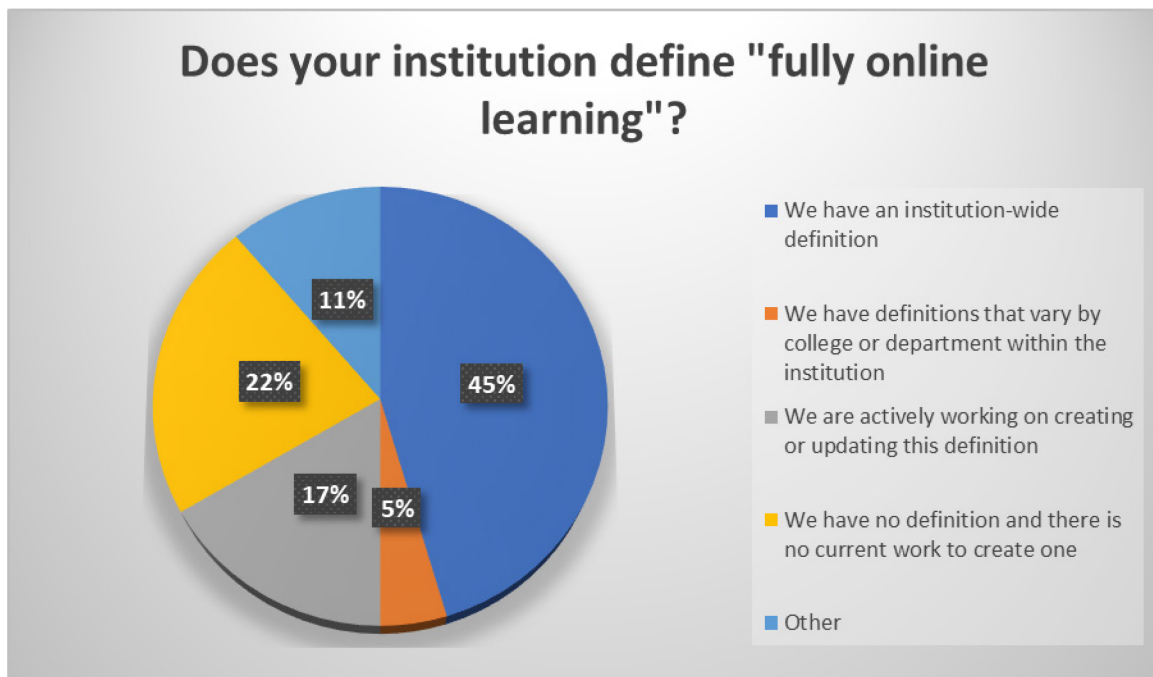
“Online/Distance Learning courses are fully-planned, resourced, and supported by online faculty development and course design initiatives, often taking six to nine months before the online instructor is prepared, and the online course is delivered. Both faculty and students have deliberately chosen to teach and learn online.”

By contrast, the same institution noted that:

“Remote Teaching and Learning occurs when a sudden emergency requires a transition to an online/technology-enhanced teaching and learning environment. Examples beyond the COVID-19 pandemic include ice or snowstorms, flooding, or other natural disasters that necessitate restrictions on travel and sheltering in place. We must remember that students in face-to-face courses didn’t “sign on” to online learning. In fact, they may have made a deliberate choice to learn in a face-to-face environment. Many students make this decision because they know they do not have the discipline necessary to work in an asynchronous environment. Knowing that, we must try to simulate the classroom experience as much as practically possible. Based on our campus supports, tools and recommendations, our student circumstances, discipline-specific needs and requirements, and our personal adaptability and skills, it makes sense to plan ahead for these potential scenarios, and to make appropriate choices and decisions about our course design and delivery.”



**Table 5. Fully Online Learning Definitions.**



Though we agree with the survey respondent below that the term “*fully* online learning” spoke for itself, our survey results indicate that defining “fully online” is not as self-explanatory as it may seem. We sense that the word “fully” was added for a reason, presumably to indicate that the student would not have to go to a physical location, or such requirements would be extremely minimal. In reality, some programs deemed “fully” online programs have significant in-person requirements.



## *Online and Fully Online: Synonymous?*

In some cases, online and fully online are considered synonymous and are not distinguished from one another. According to one institution, “we do not differentiate between online and fully online learning. If any part of a course is delivered via in-person instruction, then it likely would fall into a hybrid classification.” Another institution respondent said that they use “fully online learning” and “online learning” interchangeably and still others specifically said that “online and fully online are synonymous” at their institution.

## *What makes a program fully online?*

Notably, there’s also a variety of definitions for “fully online” despite what seems like a self-explanatory term, which was surprising to us. In some cases, online and fully online are considered synonymous and are distinguished from one another. In other cases, a certain percentage of instructional time, or a limited number of in-person instructional time, is permitted within the institutional definition of fully online. In our review of the definition of distance education, we did not note definitions of fully online in policy (federal, state, or accreditor) but the survey responses clearly indicated that policy influences institutional variations of the term fully online, especially policies at the state level.

For example, several institutions cited state Coordinating Board rules<sup>2</sup> that recognize two categories of distance education courses: fully distance education courses and hybrid/blended courses. A fully distance education course is defined as “a course which may have mandatory face-to-face sessions totaling no more than 15% of the instructional time. Examples of face-to-face sessions include orientation, laboratory, exam review, or an in-person test.”

In addition, the percentage of activities that must take place online, another interesting point that arose in some of the responses and in follow-up interviews was the notion about whether a course classified as fully online can mandate any synchronous component. One institution noted that “fully online learning requires interaction with the instructor but does not require the student to interact **synchronously** with the instructor or fellow students [emphasis added].” Another institution noted that “per state regulation, undergraduate 100% online programs have to be asynchronous and cannot require a synchronous component.” Finally, an additional institution submitted a definition of “fully asynchronous online learning” defined as no course meeting days or times.

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<sup>2</sup> Since the time that the survey was administered, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [updated the definitions of distance education courses and programs](#), including a new definition of “100-Percent Online Course” as follows:

“(A) 100-Percent Online Course--A distance education course in which 100 percent of instructional activity takes place when the student(s) and instructor(s) are in separate physical locations. Requirements for on-campus or in-person orientation, testing, academic support services, internships/fieldwork, or other non-instructional activities do not exclude a course from this category.”

We were informed that the changes were made in response to institutional feedback on the evolving nature of the distance learning landscape. The change is a nice example of using data and feedback to be responsive to the needs of the community of stakeholders.

One other important note came in whether the terms “in-person,” “face-to-face” or “on-campus” were synonymous and how that impacts a course modality categorization. In one example, a definition of fully online was stated to be “a program where all courses need to earn the degree are delivered 100% online” and that in these programs, the students never need to come to the institution’s “campus.” However, it was noted that there still may be “synchronous class meeting, experiential learning components, or even some required in-person courses or meetings.” The description went on to note that for any part of a 100% online course that requires the student to be “in-person” an “online or ‘local to the student’ alternative will be made available.”

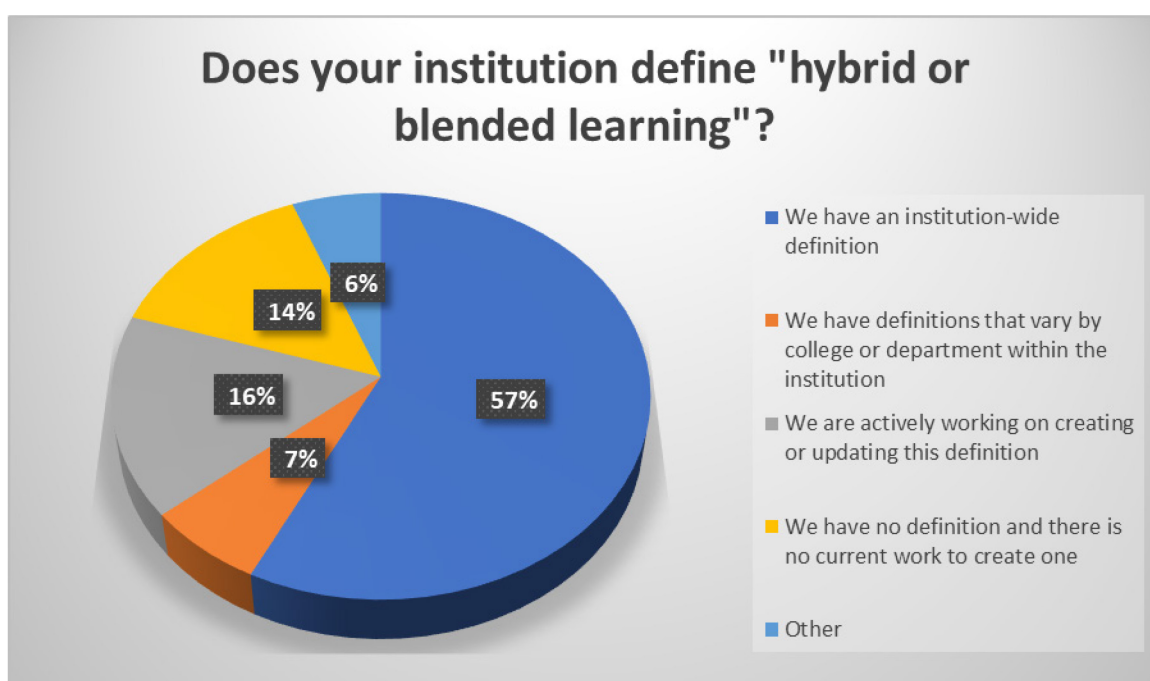
Another institution, which used the term “HyField” as a form of hybrid learning modality, defined those classes as a “combination of in-person instruction hours that occur off-campus doing field-based experiential learning” during scheduled times and online instruction that may be synchronous or instruction. As noted in the definition, HyField classes “do not require classroom access” and “all in-person instruction occurs off-campus.”

What makes a program fully online? Whatever the case, the institution should be clear in communicating their online vs. in-person/on-campus expectations with students.

## REVIEW OF HYBRID OR BLENDED LEARNING DEFINITION THEMES

As we observed earlier, with over 57% of the survey respondents indicating that they had an official institution-wide definition of the terms “hybrid or blended learning,” these were the most well-defined terms of the modalities about which we inquired in the survey. This shows the strength of the modality and the commitment of most institutions to offer the modality in various permutations. An interesting number of permutations were shown through the responses, especially relating to the differences or similarities between hybrid and blended learning, the range of online and in-person instructional time that the institutions use to categorize hybrid and blended learning, and the distinctions that several institutions chose to make between “in-person” and “online” hybrid options.

**Table 6. Hybrid or Blended Learning Definitions.**



### *What are the differences between hybrid and blended learning?*

In the definitions provided for hybrid and blended learning courses, many responses indicated that the terms are viewed as synonymous. For example, the following combined definition was provided and is illustrative of how the terms were used interchangeably in some responses:

***“Hybrid/Blended – These classes have both in-person and online components. The dates/times of in-person meetings are scheduled.”***

Others helpfully explained how the two terms are distinguished at their institutions. As one institution explained, a hybrid course “replaces some portion of seat-time with distance experiences,” whereas a blended course “includes distant students with face-to-face students in a synchronous class.”

Another response noted that, for their institution, blended is the same as “blended synchronous” in the literature where “on-campus and off-campus students are combined in one learning environment at a scheduled class time.”

Yet other examples used “Split Attendance” and “Flipped Classroom” in conjunction with the blended learning modality. For example, in one instance, in a “blended learning/split attendance asynchronous” course, the learners will meet in groups, and “in addition to in-person class time, course material will be available in an asynchronous modality.” Even these explanations demonstrate wide disagreement on how to separate the hybrid and blended terms.

### *How much online and in-person instructional time constitutes a hybrid or blended learning course?*

When it comes to the percentage of instruction occurring online or via technology influencing the categorization of the modality, there was perhaps no greater range of responses than in the definitions for hybrid. The most common version of this was along the lines of the following example:

“Hybrid courses have a blend of in-person and online instruction, but the majority of instruction (more than 50%) occurs online. Online portions of the course may be synchronous or asynchronous.”

In this definition, a hybrid course would be one where the majority of instruction takes place online. However, we also saw definitions where “learning that requires 1-99% of the work to be completed in the online space” would be classified as hybrid. This was the case at institutions where online learning and fully online learning were synonymous, and anything less than 100% online instruction was considered a hybrid course. Another example was that hybrid was defined as a “range between 25% and 75% f2f (on campus) and remainder offered asynchronous online.” In one case, an institution cited a definition from their state oversight agency that defined hybrid/blended as one in which the majority, which was considered as “more than 50 percent but less than 85 percent” of the “planned instruction occurs when the students and instructions are not in the same place.”

While several definitions included some sort of range of percentages of time in online/classroom instruction, others considered a hybrid course to combine face-to-face classroom instruction with online instruction in an equal manner, as in this example:

“A hybrid course combines face-to-face classroom instruction with education technologies using the online learning management system. The course will be divided evenly, 50% face-to-face and 50% online. Neither component can be merely supplementary to the other. Interaction between students and faculty must be substantial and ongoing throughout the semester to provide students with a face-to-face and online moderated learning experience.”

What is the difference between in-person hybrid/blended and online hybrid/blended?

An interesting development that came through in several of the submitted definitions was the variety of hybrid options, especially as it relates to classifying combinations of synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods as a form of hybrid learning.

Some of the examples we saw include:

Institution 1 Example:

- Face-to-Face (F2F) and Online (Combination of Synchronous and Asynchronous) – a portion of the course takes place F2F on campus and the rest is asynchronous online.
- Remote and Online (Combination of Synchronous and Asynchronous) – a portion of the course takes place remotely (synchronously) and the rest is asynchronous online.

Institution 2 Example:

- In-Person Hybrid Classes – attend class in a traditional classroom (according to a set schedule) and complete independent online activities.
- Remote Hybrid Classes – attend class by logging into a Zoom web conference call (according to a set schedule) and complete online activities.

Institution 3 Example:

- Hybrid Online Instruction with Synchronous Classroom Instruction Component – online is the method of instruction but students may need to come to campus on a designated day and time or participate in a synchronous interaction during a designated day and time.
- Hybrid Classroom Instruction with Online Instruction Component – students are required to participate in an on-campus designated classroom on a specific day and time in addition to online instruction.

Institution 4 Example:

- Blended On-Campus Courses – a mix of online instruction with required, scheduled on-campus meetings.
- Blended Online Course – a mix of online instruction with required, scheduled virtual classroom meetings (Zoom).

It is important to note that these definitions also included parameters for how to schedule the courses and information on class requirements for students, such as a laptop or desktop computer, stable-high-speed internet, and an external webcam with a microphone. Many also explicitly noted in their definitions or guidelines that all in-person class meeting days and times must be listed in the institution's schedule of classes for students at the time of enrollment.

## *Review of Hyflex Learning Definition Themes*

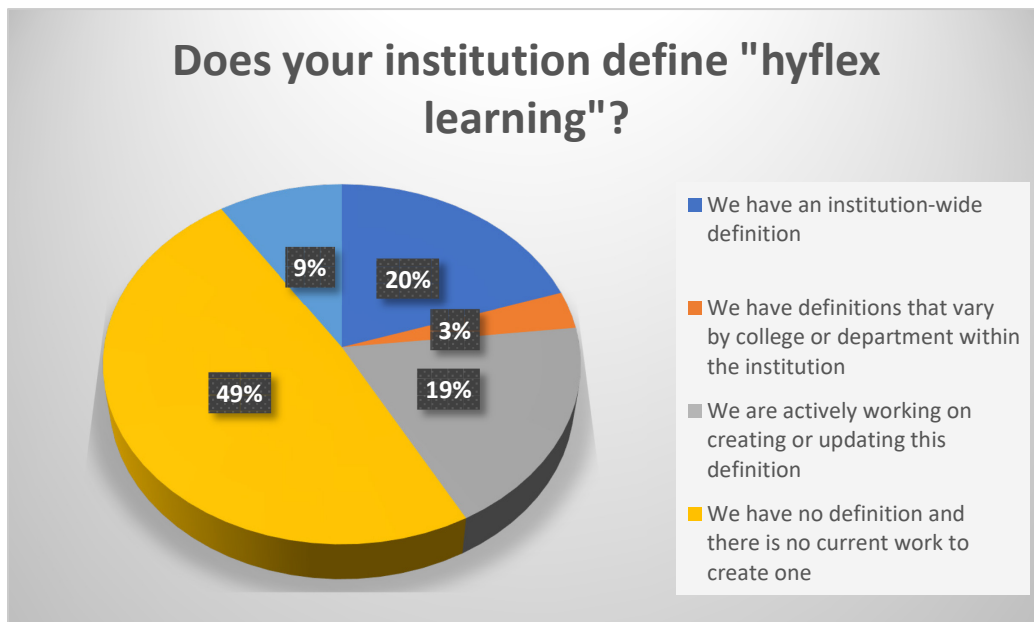
With 49% of respondents indicating that the institution had no official definition of Hyflex or any intention to define it officially, Hyflex learning was by far the modality defined the least by those who responded to the survey. Many noted the challenges in successfully administering Hyflex programs when students are allowed to choose the delivery modality. As one institutional colleague noted in an interview, administering such programs can be challenging in that it may not be a way to offer quality programs, especially since the successful administration of the program can utilize much more of the instructor's time since they are essentially developing "two courses for the price of one" (i.e., developing content for in-person instruction and or online instruction). This individual noted that though the institution does not have an official definition of the term, they will support instructors who want to try to deliver a Hyflex course.

Another challenge cited in responses and interviews was the sometimes negative impact that Hyflex learning options have on space utilization for classrooms on campus. Institutions noted in interviews that, based on their observations, most learners in such courses typically choose to attend the courses synchronously or asynchronously online, especially later in the academic term; however, the institution must reserve space on campus that could accommodate the class of learners should they all choose to receive their instruction on-campus. According to these institutions, this has resulted in many empty or near-empty classrooms on campus that are not able to be utilized for other purposes.

The last observation we made in terms of challenges institutions indicated having with Hyflex learning administration was related to the accurate tracking of whether students are enrolled online. In a few examples, institutions noted that, as part of their process for tracking student enrollments in online modalities, they required students to choose their preferred method of attendance. As one institution explained:

"We consider Hyflex to be a concept that might allow a student to choose how they wish to attend class, but in the end, since it is our responsibility to know if a student is enrolled online, the student must tell us their preferred method of attendance so that they can be properly scheduled into the correct modality. For veterans, international students, and athletes, we must know the student modality."

**Table 7. Hyflex Learning Definitions**



How many different learning environment options constitute Hyflex learning? Two or three? Aside from the different ways in which institutions administer Hyflex learning options described above, the most frequently cited point of difference relates to how many options for modalities students have to choose in a Hyflex course. In some cases, institutions choose to limit their Hyflex offerings to two options: in-person on campus or synchronous online. Some institutions choose to use alternative terms in lieu of Hyflex to describe such courses, such as “cosynchronous learning” or “biflex.” In these scenarios, institutions often indicated that Hyflex was determined to be too burdensome on instructors, and the third option of asynchronous participation was not an option.

In another example, an institution offered and defined two Hyflex modalities: The first option, called Flex, means “the instructor is in person,” and students can “engage in class in one of two ways, in person or online live (synchronously).” The description noted that students may “move in and out of the two modes based on learning preferences and/or on their life circumstances at any given moment.” The other modality, called Flex Plus, was described as one in which the “instructor is in person” and students “can engage in learning one of three ways, in person, online live (synchronously), or online anytime (asynchronously).” Students are similarly able to move in and out of the three modes at any given moment based on learning preferences and life circumstances. One might note the similarity of that definition to the standard Hyflex definition.

The latter of those two Hyflex modalities, which was elsewhere referred to as pure Hyflex learning, was described in other definitions such as the following:

[A Hyflex course is] “A course in which students can choose their preferred mode of engagement week-to-week and class-to-class: in-person on campus, online via live class sessions, or asynchronous. Courses are designed to support equitable interaction with course content, peers, and the instructor, regardless of the mode of engagement chosen by the student.”



While most definitions of Hyflex appear to be at the course level, we did receive a submission that defines both a “Fully Hyflex” and a “Partially Hyflex” program at the institution. At this institution, a Fully Hyflex program is one where “all courses needed to earn the degree are delivered in the Hyflex format.” A Partially Hyflex program is defined as one in which “some combination of online and on-campus coursework” and consists of “50-99% of the courses needed to earn the degree being offered Hyflex.” At this institution, it does appear that the Hyflex format consists of giving the students the choice between attending either in-person or synchronously online.

## REVIEW OF INSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

HEA and Title IV definitions of distance education alone provide at least four (as of the time of this writing and more are being proposed) different reference points and contain their own unique elements for institutions, organizations, and policymakers to understand, reconcile, and manage. We felt it important to survey institutions to not only find out exactly how modalities are defined, but also what factors influenced the decisions, the impact of the categorization of a course modality on students, how definitions are communicated to students, and other challenges related to defining modalities.

### *The Influences on Institutional Digital Learning Definitions were Largely Unsurprising*

We asked survey participants to indicate what factors influenced their institution’s definitions relating to digital learning modalities. The possible response options included:

- federal definitions,
- state definitions,
- accreditor definitions,
- organizations related to digital learning,
- faculty/instructors,
- students,
- “I Don’t Know,” and,
- “Other (please explain).”

Respondents could choose all factors that applied. Not surprisingly, the top three influences were accreditor (63%), federal (58%), and state (48%) definitions.

We saw this in several of the definitions that were submitted, especially as it relates to distance learning and online learning definitions. Examples included, but were not limited to, the IPEDS definition of education, the definition provided by the U.S. Department of Education (not specific to which one), definitions from state oversight agencies, and the definitions of distance education provided by the institutions’ accreditors, such as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), and the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) (which are based on the federal definition).

This echoes what we saw in our report, “[Defining “Distance Education” in Policy: Differences Among Federal, State, and Accreditation Agencies](#),” where we noted common practices among those agencies in defining distance education based on federal HEA and Title IV definitions. As we explained in that report, it was not surprising that institutional accreditors, who were U.S. Department of Education (USED)-recognized accreditors, would cite to definitions by the Department to maintain consistency with the federal and regulatory structure by which they abide to maintain status as a recognized accreditor.

Similarly, given the nature of the regulatory triad in which institutions are a part, it is not surprising that the factors mostly commonly referenced as having the most influence on institutional definitions were federal, state, and accreditor, all of which play crucial roles in the approval status and financial aid eligibility of institutions.

Aligning definitions with those who oversee institutional regulatory compliance was clearly important to many respondents, and many described how the defining characteristics were synthesized. In our follow-up interviews, the influence of the state was of particular importance to those institutions, which is important to note as accommodating or adjusting for the possibility of fifty or more varying definitions makes developing common definitions more of a challenge. As one institution explained:

“As we must remain accredited, it makes most sense to follow both federal and accreditor definitions of distance learning. Part of our state funding is based on the number and type of courses offered: face-to-face and a handful of those defined as distance. When definitions by federal, state, and accreditors do not fully align, we examine the definitions offered by related organizations and then craft what makes sense to us.”

Many others echoed similar sentiments as above, with others describing how they wanted to make sure they abided by state and federal regulations but also wanted to have a balance so that the phrasing would be clear and usable for faculty and students. Another institution described how federal regulations “provided guardrails to the discussion” in the definition process, but how faculty perspectives were crucial and how distance learning organizations provided helpful examples from which to work.

It is certainly a balancing act to meet the needs of the various institutional stakeholders, and institutions described many ways that they seek to inform the definitions process at their respective institutions. Many described looking to resources from distance learning organizations and other schools in their region for examples that they can take forth and customize based on their specific mission and culture, needs, and requirements. Others described consulting with faculty to consider how faculty wanted to deliver instruction and how students perceived the different types of instruction to inform their definitions. One institution specifically referenced consulting with their institutional advising office to get an understanding of how students understand and interpret the terms and definitions.

It was surprising to see the number of additional factors and influences on institutional definitions beyond what we asked about in the survey. Institutions referenced the importance of focusing their definitions of digital learning and considering those who use mobile devices to learn, as they know that many of their students use such devices to learn:

- One institution described how it was challenging to address the influence that other states and institution definitions could have on the preconceived notions that their institution's employees and students have on how to define these terms. In that case, the institution referenced how, being right on the border of another state, that many of their students and faculty have direct connections (either dual-enrollment or dual-employment) with other state definitions and how that influences how they interpret their institution's definitions.
- Another example that arose from the other responses was the influence of professional accreditation and state professional licensing boards. One institution referenced having twenty-six (26) different professional accreditations and how they have to have definitions that meet "several levels of requirements." Another institution referenced how their professional accrediting agency and state licensing boards have rules and requirements that dictate what can and cannot be done online and in simulation.

Additional considerations that were brought up in the "Other" response included:

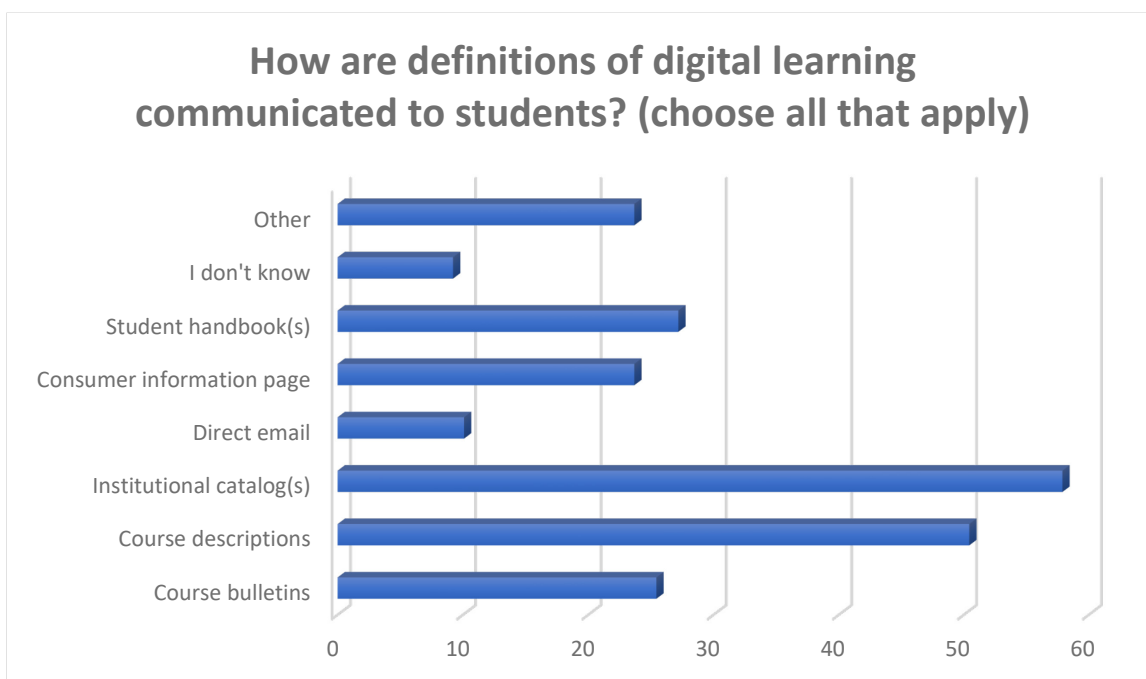
- literature,
- community and industry,
- contractual arrangements and/or collective bargaining agreements,
- the pandemic,
- administration,
- state consortium policy,
- SARA, and,
- registration and retention.

To further elaborate, we were surprised to see the number of institutions that referenced contractual arrangements or collective bargaining agreements as an influence and potential source of definitions. This is especially important as those arrangements could bind institutions to certain definitions and interpretations as they relate to union contracts with institutional faculty and instructors. Notably, the influence of faculty and instructors on institutional definitions was the fourth highest choice at 47%. It is not clear whether that influence is due to binding contracts with faculty and instructors, faculty/instructor expertise on course content and delivery, or a mix of both.

### *Communication with Students*

Beyond learning how institutions define various digital learning modalities, an important piece of information to learn more about is how this information is communicated to students. Understanding information on when, how, and where a course is delivered is critical information for students to choose the course that best suits their needs and schedules. We asked survey participants if definitions of digital learning terms are communicated to students and 62% responded "yes" and another 21% of participants responded, "in some cases." This results in 83% of participating institutions communicating definitions of digital learning terms to students at least some of the time. that definitions of digital learning terms are communicated to students.

**Table 8. Methods of Communicating Definitions to Students**



We observed a wide variety of means that institutions employ to describe course modalities to students with over 20% of respondents submitting other ways that they communicate with students beyond that which we had inquired about in the survey. Definitions of digital learning terms were most commonly communicated to students via institutional catalogs (57.9%), course descriptions (50.4%), student handbooks (27.2%), and course bulletins (25.4%). Other responses included:

- websites (such as an online learning website, Provost's website, registrar's website, or policy library),
- registration materials,
- the learning management system,
- a student orientation,
- a course syllabus,
- the student information system,
- campus posters, and
- academic advisors

The responses indicated that institutions by and large utilize more than one means to communicate digital learning definitions with students. As a community, we can advance this work and the [student focus group conducted by WCET and the Ohio State University's Office of Technology and Digital Innovation](#), by delving more into how students best receive information in addition to the information they find most critical.

The wide variations in definitions and practices depicted in the survey results heighten the importance for institutions to communicate clearly and early with students. Before enrolling they want to know how the class will be offered (modality), when they are expected to be somewhere (either physically or virtually), and what the technical requirements of the course will be (software, hardware, high-speed internet).

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Reconciling the various sources of information on digital learning modality definitions is an obvious challenge for institutions but one that has important institution and student implications depending on how these definitions are implemented and monitored. As part of the survey, we wanted to hear from the institutions themselves on the challenges they have experienced in implementing policies and procedures relating to digital learning definitions. We hope that in sharing challenges expressed by institutions we can advance the discussion on how to best move forward in terms of suggesting reforms at the policy level. We also hope to support institutions in finding workable solutions to the challenges faced.

In reviewing the responses, the challenges that showed up most often related to the lack of consistency and clarity in definitions, adherence to institutional definitions in course delivery, and the consistent proper coding of course sections.

### *Lack of Consistency and Clarity*

Perhaps the most common challenge raised was the lack of consistency and clarity. Responses raised concerns in a lack of consistency in policy definitions, institutional implementation, industry standards (or lack thereof), and others among some of the more challenging aspects. One institution described how, from policy to the student information system, different terms are used, in part due to changes to the SIS to include definitions in the course delivery mode have not yet been made.

Others described inconsistencies across departments at the institution with one institution mentioning that their institution started with definitions of online learning coming from individual programs and that it has taken time “to change the way of thinking to a common language.” Further, others note finding consistent definitions that are clear for students, clear for faculty, and consistently used in the enterprise resource planning system is a challenge, while others still pointed out finding a common definition that will be acceptable to all the institution’s oversight agencies (such as the U.S. Department of Education, accreditation agencies, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)). Others noted the lack of consistent definitions and the arbitrary nature of percentages as a challenge to categorizing courses.

The endless permutations were also noted as a challenge and those who make decisions may not understand online learning and the various nuances. Similarly, others noted that getting buy-in for the importance of having definitions has proved to be difficult. Further, it was noted that “overcoming some historical practices” or faculty and administrators holding onto older interpretations of definitions have been similarly taxing to making sure that instructors understand the expectation and guidelines for distance learning.

On the other end, one institution noted that at their institution, “online has often been understood to only refer to the experience of students enrolled in fully online programs” even though a number of “campus students take one or more online courses each term” which has presented a challenge in creating officially recognized definitions of course modalities other than in-person or distance education. Finally, we have noted a “not invented here” notion for some definitions. Some institutional personnel think they have “discovered” practices that have long been in place elsewhere and develop their own nomenclature.

As mentioned earlier in this report, many noted that emergency remote teaching and learning “muddled” faculty and student definitions of digital learning modalities. In one example, an institution noted that post-pandemic, faculty, and students are confused by the term “online” and many believe it is synonymous with synchronous online instruction, although online has always referred to asynchronous online instruction at their institution. To settle the confusion, one institution noted that it needed to stop using the term “hybrid” as it was confusing for many.

Despite this challenge, those working in this space are considering how to better define these terms in ways that meet institutional, instructor, and student needs. One institution noted that they have observed that students are confused by the naming conventions the institution uses for instruction modes and that they are actively working with both faculty and instructors to “better define and market course options for our students.” In some cases, as noted above, institutions are removing or reconsidering the definitions of modalities that have caused excess confusion at their institution. In many others, institutions are striving to keep definitions “simple enough that students understand what is expected of them” and the “level of type of technology they will need to be successful” so that they understand the modality prior to the first day of class.

### *Instructor Adherence to the Assigned Course Modality*

Lastly, in one of our open-ended questions, we asked institutions to describe some of the obstacles or challenges that they have experienced relevant to digital learning definitions. A commonly listed challenge related to faculty adherence to the modality assigned to the course, or as one response described the situation, “We’ve had some challenges with faculty drifting from their course’s defined modes over the semester.” One response indicated that “not all faculty abide by the definitions” and in some cases “faculty will list a course as one modality but deliver it in a different way.” Another response noted that while their institution has definitions, “faculty have a great deal of flexibility in how they are implemented.” Yet another response gave an example where a faculty is supposed to be teaching a hybrid class but instead teaches it all online or when an instructor decides to “do something synchronously when the course is supposed to be asynchronous.”

Institutional interviews brought to light some of the potential reasons for this challenge, in addition to the means institutions employ to manage adherence to course definitions and modalities among course instructors. As one institution described, they have a process for monitoring hybrid courses wherein they set a location for the in-person instruction to take place, and they check the location every now and then to make sure it is being utilized on the days and times it is scheduled to be used for the hybrid course. Many institutions described the remedial actions they take when a student voices a concern or complaint about a change in modality from what was described during the course registration process.

Though the nuances vary, typically many responding institutions would request the course instructor and their department find a resolution. Many others described how they encourage instructors to be clear about any potential changes to the schedule and when students need to be in-person or online.

Another institution, with a detailed audit process, described how they can use the data from the course schedule and class notes to see if there are any courses coded as online asynchronous but have listed meeting times. Similarly, with hybrid courses, they can check to see if there is a listed meeting place. These anomalies would raise flags in the data and would be investigated further. The same institution noted that they can do the same audit of course syllabi but that in the case of syllabi, the audits are more limited, and sometimes they do a random sampling as a form of auditing compliance. The institution also noted how its online team trains the registrars at the institution's various campuses to ensure that the registrars understand the nuances of the different modalities. This enables the registrar's office to double-check for some of these issues and to ask the right follow-up questions to instructors to confirm that the course was reported and coded correctly.

Interviewees expressed how they would like to see examples of how institutions are ensuring that definitions are met and view it as a quality assurance measure. We see how this information would be important to institutions and the information can help emphasize the importance of adhering to course modality. A lack of adherence can greatly impact the institution (i.e., financial aid, accreditation, etc.) as federal, state, and accreditation rules can differ by modality. For example, the need for regular and substantive interaction, adherence to accessibility requirements, and intellectual property rules all change when a course transitions into the digital realm. And, most importantly, the student is not getting the course experience they expected at registration. This could greatly impact learning outcomes and exacerbate inequities in serving students.

In discussing this challenge in interviews, we realized that many of these challenges relate to a lack of context or understanding of why certain course information is important for students to know and for the modality to remain consistent throughout the academic term. For example, many voiced how colleagues at their institution were surprised or confused by why changing a modality from asynchronous to synchronous or mandating an on-campus proctored examination in an otherwise online course, may present difficulties for students. Furthermore, another noted how a colleague did not understand how deciding to change the delivery of a hybrid course to one that is fully online (synchronous or asynchronous) may not work for all students.

It was clear, based on how the interviewees described the situations, that instructor schedule and location changes were not done for any sort of malicious reason but resulted from a lack of context into the differences in the online student population from the traditional on-campus student population. We discussed how sharing this information with different departments across the institution, perhaps by partnering with organizations that typically work with other departments, such as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), may be an important step toward bridging the gap of understanding between those working in online education administration, students, and other institutional administrators.

We hope to support institutions in finding workable solutions to the challenges faced in digital learning definitions policy and practice.



## IDEAS FOR INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

Though the various aspects of navigating the definition and administration of digital learning modalities are challenging, we want to highlight some of the ways in which institutions shared successes that they have at their respective institutions. Hopefully, some of these ideas and insights can serve others well.

One institution observed that students seem to be confused by definitions of modality and are “more responsive to specific course details” such as meeting details like location, dates, and times. Many institutions noted the benefits of offering trainings that qualify faculty to be online learning teachers (whether the training is optional or required by policy) or having an online teaching handbook that helps faculty understand what it takes to teach one of the institution’s digital modalities (online, hybrid, or Hyflex). Other institutions advised offering courses or orientations on how to be a successful online student and one noted that such courses have been successful according to their research, including in closing equity gaps. Operational procedures have also proven successful, especially when materials are shared with appropriate student-facing offices to “ensure collective awareness and information sharing with students.”

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

We enjoyed exploring the strategies that institutions use to address the multitude of digital learning definitions challenges through this survey and in the follow-up institutional interviews. We greatly appreciate the contributions institutions made to this research by completing the survey and offering their time for interviews.

In reviewing all this information, we clearly see how institutions have a variety of innovative means of not only defining terms but seeking to ensure compliance with definitions in policy. Institutions are broadly considering how definitions can best serve students based on the characteristics of different students and how different students learn best. One institution noted that they “hope to be better able to define or at least recommend different modalities based on the best way a student learns,” including neurodivergent learners. As more focus is given to the student experience and understanding of modalities, the more these considerations will have an impact and will, in turn, help inform best practices.

For the institutions seeking to reflect on creating or updating the definitions utilized at their institution, here are some suggestions on actions you can take to gather important data to influence your decision-making:

- **Take stock of the definitions used internally at the institution.** If multiple definitions are used, consider whether the differences are necessary and where consolidation and reconciliation of terms may make sense.
- **Consider the definitions used by other local institutions and oversight agencies.** This would help with perspective and understanding where some misunderstandings may originate. As we saw in the survey, institutions noted how the definitions used at those institutions might influence their idea of digital learning when students and employees were enrolled or employed at other institutions or agencies. Misunderstandings may arise when those other institutions use definitions that differ.



- **Engage Faculty.** Educate them on the definitions used at the institution and the issues that arise when changing the modality after registration. Explain the regulatory and compliance issues that may arise and their consequences. If possible, emphasize the impact on students with examples. This may be able to be incorporated into faculty training or professional development programs.
- **Engage Students.** Provide opportunities to collect student feedback on definitions and the important information students need to succeed in a given course modality. Survey students on the most effective means to communicate information on course modality to them. Encourage students to collaborate with instructors to understand the expectations for the course.
- **Engage Administrators.** Educate them on the modalities and definitions utilized at the institution. Provide a high-level overview of the importance of clear definitions and consistent adherence to modalities from a student perspective and the impact on institutional finances and compliance.
- **Establish processes for reviewing the efficacy of definitions and how they are communicated.** Distance learning policies and practices are continuously evolving. It would be prudent to review the relevance of institutional definitions at an established, regular cadence. Similarly, student needs can evolve over time. Regularly, engage students to assess their understanding of the definitions of the modalities and how to best share information on the modalities with students.

As we noted in places throughout this report, delving more into the student experience and understanding of modalities, and how to best communicate the information with them, is an avenue for future research. Furthermore, based on institutional interviews, bridging the gap of understanding between those working in online education administration, students, and other institutional administrators may be served well by partnering with organizations that typically work with other institutional departments. Institutions also expressed a desire to learn more about how institutions manage adherence to course modality definitions and assignments, and on the data that institutions use to determine course offerings. Data is of much importance to institutions and is an important driver of institutional decision-making, and we hope to be able to explore ways in which we can serve institutions when it comes to definitions of course modalities.

Lastly, but importantly, we expect significant changes for postsecondary distance education courses and programs from the Department of Education’s recently concluded Program Integrity and Institutional Quality negotiated rulemaking sessions. The proposals discussed during rulemaking sessions could impact institutions, states, and students. WCET and SAN have covered rulemaking updates on [WCET Frontiers](#). Among the issues covered were state authorization, reciprocity, distance education, and accreditation. Related to our definitions work, the proposals would include the creation of a “virtual location” as a means for the Department to collect more data on distance education students. They would also create more “functional” definitions or standards of distance education that institutions would need to keep track of to determine what distance education definition or standard applies in a given situation. Look for more summaries from us in the coming months of this information and suggestions on actions to take relating to these Department proposals.

## CONTACT

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### **About WCET**

WCET – the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, is the leader in the practice, policy, & advocacy of digital learning in higher education. WCET is a member-driven nonprofit which brings together colleges, universities, higher education organizations, and companies to collectively improve the quality and reach of digital learning programs. Learn more at <https://wcet.wiche.edu/>.

### **About the State Authorization Network (SAN)**

The State Authorization Network (SAN) is the leader for guidance and support for navigating state and federal regulatory compliance for out-of-state activities of postsecondary institutions. SAN empowers members to successfully resolve educational technology regulatory challenges to improve student protections in digital learning across state lines. Learn more at <https://wcetsan.wiche.edu/>.

[Please See Data from Institutional Definitions Survey for downloadable data.](#)