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The State of Online Engagement in Higher Education

Insights from Higher Ed Leaders on What's Working, What's Not, and What Comes Next for Student Engagement

2026

THE ENGAGEMENT **IMPERATIVE**

Engagement has long been the heartbeat of higher education. On campus, it happens naturally through shared space, routine interaction, and informal conversations that build trust and belonging. These organic moments are powerful drivers of persistence and success.

Online, those touchpoints rarely exist. There are no hallways to bump into peers, no faculty offices to visit, no spontaneous gatherings after class. Everything that fosters connection in a traditional setting must be intentionally designed in a digital one. At InScribe, that belief sits at the core of everything we do.

In 2025, we published *Bridging the Engagement Gap in Online Education* to explore this challenge in depth. That guide defined the engagement gap as the difference between what students need to feel connected and what most online environments actually provide, and it offered institutions practical steps to begin closing it.

This report builds on that foundation. Drawing on a national survey of higher education leaders spanning public and private four-year institutions, community colleges, and technical schools, with online enrollments ranging from under 5,000 to more than 25,000 students, we examine how colleges define, support, and measure engagement across modalities. One theme emerged clearly: engagement means different things to different institutions. Some define it through participation and grades; others emphasize belonging and motivation. But leaders across the board agree on one reality. Creating meaningful engagement online is harder, and it requires more than the LMS alone.

"We know that connection (to content, faculty, advisors, the university itself) is hugely important and influences persistence."

— AVP of Learning Experience, Private 4-year University

Want to learn more about the survey and respondents, visit inscribeapp.com/survey-methodology.

THE ENGAGEMENT GAP: **ONLINE VS. IN-PERSON**

The survey revealed a clear gap between online and in-person engagement. Nearly 75% of higher education leaders said online students engage less than their on-campus peers, while only 6% said they engage more.

That perception extends to strategy effectiveness. When asked to rate their engagement efforts on a five-point scale, leaders gave in-person approaches an average score of 3.8 out of 5, compared with 2.9 for online. Strategies designed for physical campuses, it seems, do not translate easily to digital environments.

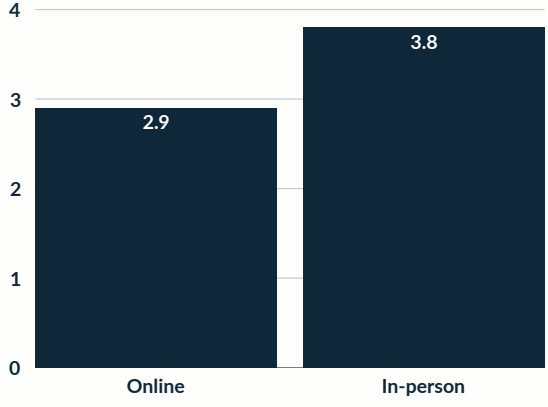
75% say online students engage less

Only 6% say online students engage more

The gap is widest at large public universities and community colleges, where students often balance work and family responsibilities. Smaller private institutions reported higher satisfaction, likely due to lower student-to-faculty ratios and more opportunity for personalized relationships.

These findings reinforce what many educators already know. Engagement is not automatically transferable from physical to digital environments. What happens naturally on campus must be intentionally created online.

Engagement Strategy Effectiveness by Learning Modality



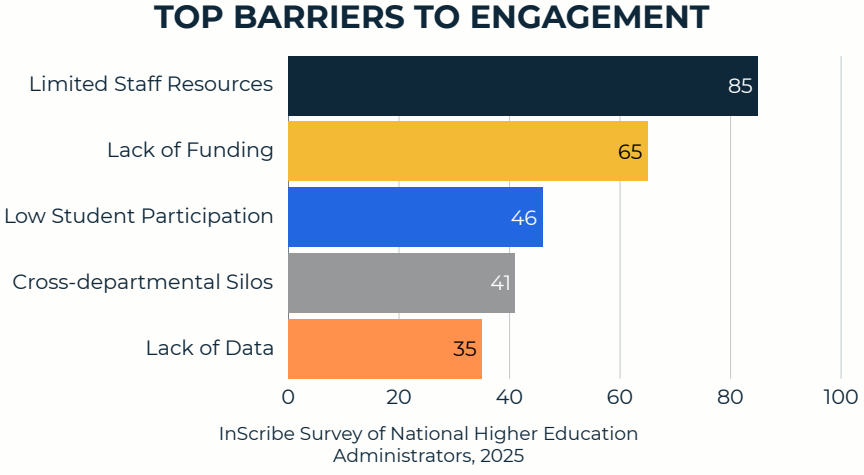
BARRIERS
TO ENGAGEMENT

Although 91% of institutions ranked engagement as a top priority, most struggle to put it into consistent practice.

- 85% cited limited staff resources
- 65% cited lack of funding
- 46% pointed to low student participation
- 41% reported cross-departmental silos
- 35% said they lack data to measure impact

Many leaders noted that disengagement often stems from deeper challenges: competing work and family obligations, limited digital literacy, and platforms that multiply rather than simplify expectations. Others described engagement fatigue, where the same staff carry the burden of sustaining programs without additional support, while students navigate an increasing number of tools and touchpoints.

Addressing these challenges requires more than new initiatives. It demands alignment across people, departments, and data systems—united by a shared vision of belonging, social capital, and measurable impact.



InScribe Survey of National Higher Education Administrators, 2025

THE HUMAN SIDE
OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

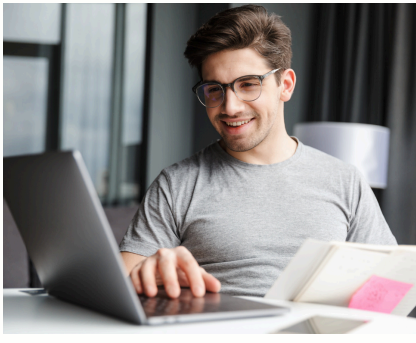
Moving from campus to online changes more than location. It changes how connection forms, and in many ways, who the learner must become.

In a physical classroom, engagement is reinforced by routine, the presence of peers, and the energy of shared experience. Online, those natural cues disappear. Students must build structure, motivation, and connection largely on their own, and every interaction requires intentional effort rather than instinctive participation.

This shift creates real cognitive weight. Without the visual and social signals that guide in-person learning, online students must self-regulate in ways their on-campus peers rarely have to. Logging in, posting, replying: none of it happens by accident.

The social dimension compounds this. In a classroom, belonging forms through eye contact, shared laughter, and the informal moments between formal ones. Online, students may see names on a screen but rarely feel the community behind them. Trust takes longer to build and is easier to lose.

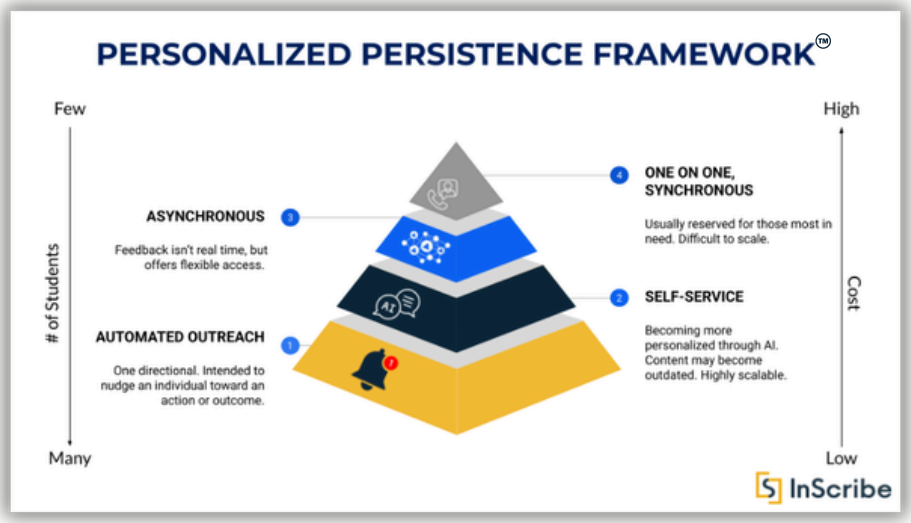
And many online learners are navigating far more than coursework. They are parents, professionals, and caregivers balancing competing obligations. When they disengage, it is often not due to lack of interest. It is fatigue, isolation, or quiet uncertainty about whether they belong. Effective engagement design must account for this human reality. Technology alone is not the answer. It must be paired with intentional connection.



WHAT ACTUALLY **WORKS**

Survey responses reveal three common traits among successful engagement strategies: they are intentional, human-centered, and scalable. These themes align closely with InScribe's Personalized Persistence Framework™, a model designed to help institutions layer support in ways that build connection, reinforce belonging, and strengthen persistence over time.

The framework outlines four interconnected layers:



AUTOMATED OUTREACH

At the base are one-directional nudges designed to prompt action. Alerts, reminders, and automated communications reach the most students at the lowest cost. These tools are not meant to replace human connection, but to keep students involved and surface early signs of disengagement before they escalate.

SELF-SERVICE

The next layer gives students access to resources and support on their own terms. AI is increasingly making this layer more personalized and responsive, though institutions must be intentional about keeping content current and relevant. When done well, self-service scales support without scaling staff.

ASYNCHRONOUS CONNECTION

Peer communities and shared digital spaces sit at the center of the framework. These environments replicate the informal interactions of campus life, giving students a place to ask questions, share experiences, and support one another across time zones and schedules. Feedback is not real-time, but the flexibility makes connection accessible to learners balancing work and family obligations.

ONE-ON-ONE, SYNCHRONOUS SUPPORT

At the top are the highest-touch interactions: proactive outreach, advising, and mentoring in real time. These moments carry the most impact but are also the most resource-intensive and difficult to scale. The lower layers of the framework exist, in part, to direct this capacity toward the students who need it most.

Together, these layers form a coordinated system of support. The goal is not to replace human connection at the top but to make it sustainable, by ensuring that automated outreach, self-service tools, and peer community carry the load for the many, so that high-touch support can be reserved for those who need it most.



BEYOND THE LEARNING **MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

Only 22% of leaders said their LMS effectively supports engagement. That finding reflects a design reality. Learning management systems were built to organize courses and manage assessment. They were not built to foster community, build trust, or create the informal networks that help students persist.

The LMS provides structure. Engagement requires connection.



The most effective institutions expand the engagement ecosystem around the LMS, layering academic infrastructure with spaces that promote interaction, collaboration, and belonging, making learning feel personal rather than transactional.

Digital communities are one way institutions are building that ecosystem. They extend learning beyond individual courses and create continuity across the student journey by enabling:

- Peer-to-peer knowledge exchange
- Ongoing engagement across terms
- Belonging that supports retention
- Social capital that extends beyond graduation

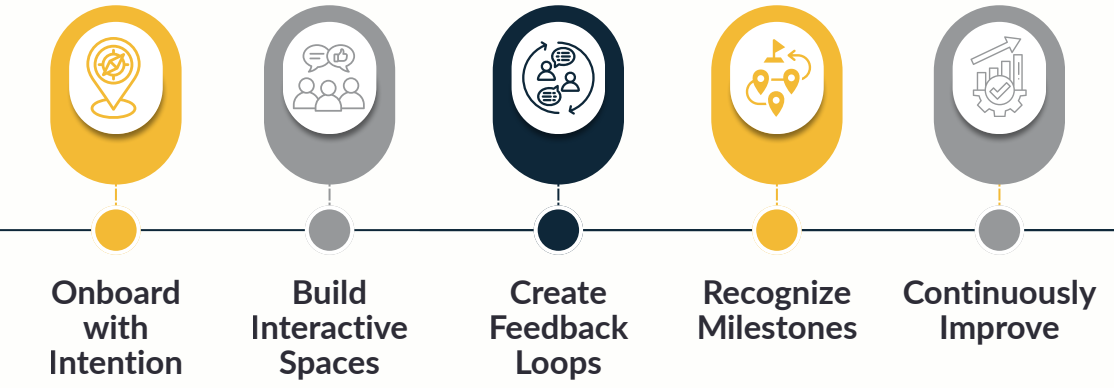
This reflects a broader shift in how institutions think about engagement. Rather than designing for transactional participation, where students log in to complete tasks, the most effective institutions are building relational environments where students connect, contribute, and grow together. This is how institutions build social capital at scale: the networks, trust, and relationships that help students succeed not just in school, but beyond it.

THE ENGAGEMENT **ROADMAP**

Engagement is a process, not a program. It is not a single orientation session or a one-time initiative. It is a continuous experience that shapes how students enter, participate in, and persist through their education.

Grounded in survey insights, the Engagement Roadmap offers a practical roadmap for designing engagement that is intentional, sustained, and measurable across the student lifecycle.

ENGAGEMENT ROADMAP



- **Onboard with Intention:** Nearly 70% of leaders identified orientation as one of their most effective strategies. The institutions seeing the strongest outcomes begin even earlier, creating connection before classes start. Early exposure to peers, mentors, and support systems builds confidence and reduces uncertainty from day one.

- **Build Interactive Spaces:** Engagement deepens when students have structured opportunities to interact. Peer communities and collaborative digital spaces transform learning from an individual task into a shared experience, with institutions reporting stronger satisfaction and faster problem resolution.
- **Create Feedback Loops:** Engagement cannot be assumed. It must be monitored and reinforced. Regular check-ins, timely outreach, and AI-assisted insights help institutions identify disengagement early and respond before small challenges become withdrawal decisions.
- **Recognize Milestones:** Online learners often lack visible markers of progress. Celebrating achievements, both academic and personal, reinforces belonging and momentum. Recognition signals that effort matters and that progress is seen.
- **Continuously Improve:** Only 35% of institutions feel they have sufficient engagement data. Sustainable engagement requires ongoing evaluation. Analytics and AI can surface patterns, identify friction points, and guide refinement so strategies evolve alongside student needs.



ENGAGEMENT **IN ACTION**

The survey results revealed what many institutions already know: engagement is both a top priority and one of the most persistent challenges in online learning. Leaders identified early connection, peer-to-peer interaction, scalable support, and sustained motivation as critical gaps. At the same time, fewer than 22% said their LMS effectively supports engagement.

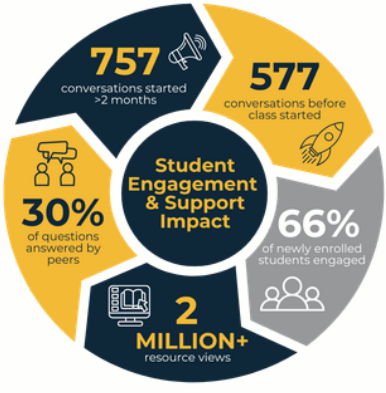
Across higher education, institutions are addressing these challenges by designing intentional, community-centered engagement ecosystems. The following examples illustrate how connection, when structured and sustained, drives measurable academic and operational outcomes.

CREATING CONNECTION BEFORE DAY ONE

NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Survey respondents consistently pointed to onboarding as a pivotal moment for engagement. Northern Arizona University redesigned its onboarding experience around belonging, launching a Virtual Advising Hub that connects students with peers, mentors, and advisors before classes begin.

Within the first two months, students initiated 757 conversations and accessed more than 2 million resources. During the fall term, 66% of new residential students engaged with the Hub, with nearly one-third of questions answered by peers. Early connection translated into early momentum.



BUILDING DIGITAL "THIRD SPACES"

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY
Forward thinking. World ready.

Leaders noted that online students often lack informal social environments that foster belonging. Fort Hays State University responded by launching Tiger-2-Tiger, a student-led digital community designed to recreate those informal campus spaces.

Within months, more than 1,000 students were active participants, generating 287 conversations and over 44,000 views. Students used the space to form study groups, seek advice, and support one another. The result was not just participation, but visible peer-to-peer engagement at scale.

STRENGTHENING PERSISTENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY

UNT UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

Survey findings highlighted the perceived link between belonging and persistence, even when institutions struggled to measure it directly. The University of North Texas implemented virtual communities connecting learners with faculty, advisors, and peers across programs.

Since launch, UNT has reported a 13% increase in student persistence among community participants. The data confirms what leaders intuitively understand: structured connection directly supports retention and academic success.

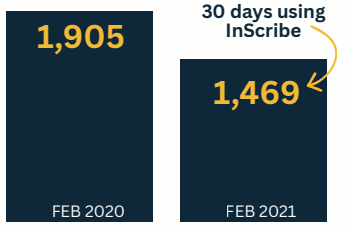


13% increase in student persistence

WGU Academy

Staff capacity emerged as one of the most significant engagement barriers in the survey. WGU Academy embedded community directly into its foundational course through the PACA Lobby, creating a peer-driven support environment.

Within 30 days, support conversations dropped by 23%. In three months, more than 1,600 students participated, generating over 36,000 views. The model expanded access to help while reducing repetitive staff workload, demonstrating that community can improve outcomes and operational efficiency at the same time.



Year-Over-Year Support Conversations

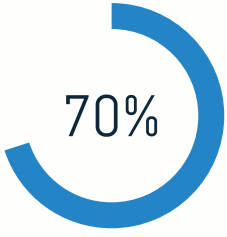
LOOKING **AHEAD**

AI, CONNECTION, AND THE ROI OF COMMUNITY

Nearly 70% of institutions plan to increase their investment in engagement over the next three years. That momentum comes at a time when budgets are constrained and teams are already stretched thin. Leaders are under pressure to invest in solutions that improve student outcomes while also operating efficiently.

AI is beginning to play an important role in this evolution. It can surface early warning signs of disengagement, personalize communication, and provide real-time insights that help faculty and advisors act sooner. But technology alone does not create, or maintain belonging. Human connection, peer networks, and community spaces provide the encouragement, visibility, and shared experience that sustain persistence.

Institutions Planning to Invest in Engagement



The strongest engagement models combine both. AI helps institutions identify who needs support and when. Digital communities and faculty presence provide that support in ways that feel immediate, relational, and human.

This is where the return on investment becomes clear. Institutions invest heavily in recruitment and enrollment. When students do not feel connected once they arrive, that investment is at risk. Attrition reduces tuition revenue, increases operational strain, and undermines the institutional mission.

Well-designed digital communities help close the gap between enrollment and completion. They scale peer support, reduce repetitive staff workload, and strengthen persistence across diverse student populations. They create a structured space for questions, shared problem-solving, visible progress, and celebration. In doing so, they build the social capital that turns a collection of online learners into a connected, motivated community.

Community is not an add-on. It is a strategic layer of infrastructure that protects enrollment, improves completion outcomes, and delivers measurable value in both human and financial terms. When paired with intelligent technology, it becomes one of the most cost-effective ways institutions can build engagement that lasts.



CONCLUSION

The survey makes one thing clear: engagement is universally valued but often under-resourced. What institutions need now is not more technology, but technology with purpose—tools that foster connection, collaboration, and belonging.

Transforming engagement means moving:

- From content delivery to connection
- From LMS forums to digital communities
- From transactional touchpoints to authentic belonging

InScribe offers a low-cost, scalable way to make this possible. Our digital community platform helps institutions design for connection at every stage of the student journey, from enrollment to graduation.

Every learner deserves access to a community that helps them connect, collaborate, and persist, building the social capital that supports success in school and beyond. By combining human care with technology, colleges can close the engagement gap and create lasting success for every student.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT DIGITAL COMMUNITY PARTNER

Human-First Platform
Fosters belonging and scales to diverse student needs.

Know Your Gaps
Gather feedback from your team before evaluating solutions.

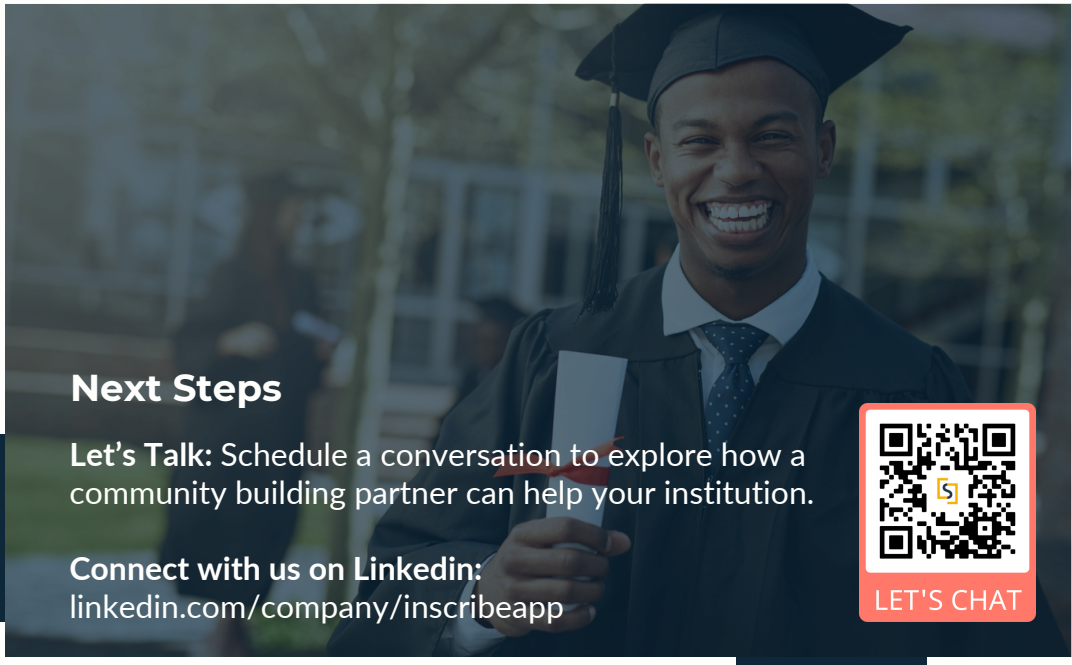
Reliable Partnership
24/7 support, guaranteed uptime, and adoption investment.

Built-In Analytics
Track and demonstrate engagement impact.

Seamless Integration
LMS compatibility and dedicated partner resources.

Proven Results
Case studies and outcomes that speak for themselves.

For a deeper checklist to guide your evaluation process, see *Bridging the Engagement Gap in Online Education*, available at inscribeapp.com.



Next Steps

Let's Talk: Schedule a conversation to explore how a community building partner can help your institution.

Connect with us on Linkedin:
linkedin.com/company/inscribeapp

LET'S CHAT

ABOUT **INSCRIBE**

InScribe is a digital community platform grounded in our Theory of Change principles: fostering belonging, building social capital, and promoting help-seeking behavior. By combining the power of community and AI, InScribe connects students with the answers, resources, and relationships they need to thrive.

InScribe breaks down traditional support silos by creating a single, accessible space for on-demand collaboration. Through meaningful interactions with peers, mentors, and experts, students feel a stronger sense of belonging, expand their social capital, and gain the confidence to seek help when needed. These connections enhance engagement, satisfaction, and retention—paving the way for long-term academic, professional, and personal success. Learn more at inscribeapp.com or contact us at hello@inscribeapp.com.

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