

Global Benchmarking and Best Practices Analysis of Online Student Supports

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In the following report, Hanover Research examines best practices in encouraging online student engagement and maintaining online student support services at higher education institutions in Australia, Canada, and the United States. The report also assesses common practices offered by other institutions.



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Recommendations

Based on a review of best practices and scholarly literature, and a review of institutions' support structures, Hanover Research recommends that higher education institutions:

- 1 Focus on optimizing class materials and learning resources for use on mobile devices.** A 2018 survey of online students in the United States found that almost all online students own mobile devices (smartphone or tablet) and a majority of online students use their mobile devices to access class lectures and readings and complete assignments. As mobile use continues to grow, it will be increasingly important to accommodate online students' technological needs.
- 2 Consider offering a variety of modest scholarships to online students.** Online students are most influenced to enroll in a particular university by scholarships and tuition discounting. In fact, 39 percent of students said that a scholarship of US\$500 would convince them to enroll in one university over another. Some benchmarked institutions offer a number of small scholarships targeting students in particular degree fields or demographics, such as scholarships for aspiring teachers or children/spouses of current students. These trends suggest that moderate scholarships could have a significant impact on encouraging enrolment and retention of online students.
- 3 Provide increased individualized assistance for online students.** One effective way to keep online students engaged throughout their program is to provide personalized assistance. Many institutions connect students with peer advisors, student success coaches, or student success centers that provide new online students with a direct point of contact for any questions or concerns. Some institutions pair new students with a specific individual advisor or coach while others direct new students to an office of advisors. Both strategies help new online students transition into the degree program more smoothly and help students feel connected to the institution and to other students.

Key Findings

- ✓ **Benchmarked institutions offer a similar suite of online student support services.** Almost all institutions provide online-dedicated resources related to career services, library access, academic tutoring, success coaching, and technology assistance. A smaller number of benchmarked institutions offer orientation activities and social media sites for online students. Overall, few benchmarked institutions offered innovative or unique support services.
- ✓ **Online students are interested in innovative degree formats that can decrease the cost and length of online degree programs.** While few benchmarked institutions offer innovative degree formats, trends suggest that online students are interested in exploring alternative options, such as competency-based education, stackable certificates, and textbook-free classes. Western Governors University is the notable exception by offering all degrees through competency-based education. Online students are particularly cost-conscious and may more quickly embrace alternative options than traditional students.
- ✓ **Online students want to be able to use their mobile device to complete their degrees.** Survey results of online students in the United States in 2018 found that almost all students own a mobile device and over three-quarters of students use or are interested in using their mobile device to access class materials or complete assignments. In addition, survey respondents noted that lectures, readings, and written assignments were the most helpful factors in their online learning, all of which can be easily optimized for mobile viewing and interaction.
- ✓ **Peer-to-peer interaction is an important aspect in online student success.** Over half of online students in one survey responded that interacting with peers was important or very important to the success of their degree. In response, institutions offer online social platforms to help students connect and often facilitate online student clubs to provide opportunities for interaction in both social and academic forums.

Methodology

To assist higher education institutions in identifying best practices in online student engagement and support, Hanover Research (Hanover) conducted a benchmarking and literature analysis of common online student support services. Hanover examined secondary literature from relevant organizations to assess best practices in online student support services, and benchmarked common practices and offerings at institutions in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Hanover identified relevant large non-profit institutions that had a high number of enrolled students in online degree programs. Hanover chose these institutions based on lists available for related institutions in [Australia](#), the [United States](#), and Canada.

Comparison Institutions

Benchmarked Institutions	Country	Online Division	Enrolment*
Arizona State University - Tempe	USA	ASU Online	51,869
Athabasca University	CAN	Fully online university	--
Brigham Young University – Idaho	USA	Online Learning	44,821
Charles Sturt University	AUS	Online Study	22,066
Deakin University	AUS	Cloud Campus	13,897
Liberty University	USA	Liberty University Online Programs	75,756
Southern New Hampshire University	USA	Online Degrees	73,177
Swinburne University of Technology	AUS	Swinburne Online	16,035
University of British Columbia	CAN	Distance Learning at UBC	--
University of Central Florida	USA	UCF Online	64,088
University of Maryland – University College	USA	Primarily online university	57,529
University of Southern Queensland	AUS	Study Online	16,399
Western Governor’s University	USA	Fully online university	84,289

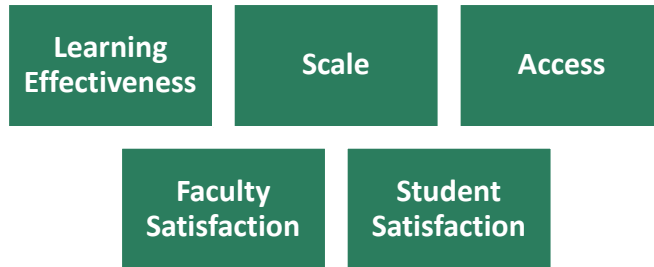
*USA enrolment numbers from 2016; Australia enrolment numbers from 2018

Research Questions



Best Practices in Online Student Engagement









The [Online Learning Consortium](#), an organization that provides learning resources for online programs, outlines Five Pillars of Quality Online Education. These five pillars are the “building blocks which provide the support for successful online learning” and include:



The Student Satisfaction pillar “reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience.” These aspects constitute some of the best practices in engaging online students, and typically fall into three categories: “satisfaction with **course rigor and fairness, with professor and peer interaction**, and with **support services**.” Some of these components include (quoted directly):

- Using current information and communications technologies to support active, individualized, engaged, and constructive learning;
- Responsive, timely, and personalized student services, including learning resources, academic and administrative services, and technology and infrastructure support; and
- Data-driven best practices based on measurements of perceived satisfaction such as student and alumni surveys, referrals, or testimonials.

A 2018 Online College Students (OCS) survey from [Learning House](#) and Aslanian Market Research examined the demands and preferences of online college and university students in the United States. The survey identifies eight key findings that highlight online student interests and engagement trends in coming years.

	MOBILE-FRIENDLY CONTENT IS CRITICAL The overwhelming majority of online students prefer to access course information on a phone or tablet.
	ONLINE STUDENTS NEED CAREER SERVICES Almost three-quarters of online students are pursuing a degree for career-focused reasons, and career services are key.
	ONLINE LEARNING IS A POSITIVE RETURN ON INVESTMENT A majority of online students feel an online course is just as good as or better than an on-campus course.
	ONLINE DEGREES ARE BECOMING MORE DIVERSIFIED Business and education degrees have long been the most common, but interest in ICT, health, and STEM degrees is growing.
	VALUE IS MORE THAN TUITION COST While online students are cost conscious, other “affordability” factors such as quality, reputation, and convenience are influential.
	ONLINE STUDENTS SEEK QUICKER, CHEAPER DEGREES Online students support innovations and alternative degree formats that decrease the cost and time to complete the degree.
	INTERACTIONS WITH ONLINE PEERS ARE KEY A majority of online students report that “interactions with classmates are very important to their academic success.”
	MULTI-CHANNEL MARKETING IS MOST EFFECTIVE Both digital and non-digital channels were effective at generating interest from online students.

Student Support Services

Benchmarked institutions **offer a similar suite of support services designed for online students**. All institutions recognize and acknowledge the unique needs of online students and explicitly outline online student services on the institutional website. Almost all institutions offer one-on-one help (such as peer mentors, success coaches, or academic tutors), career services, technology assistance, and library access. Some institutions also offer dedicated orientation events and student clubs for online students. These services are typically designed to assist students to successfully complete online degrees.



Organization

Institutions organize online student services in a number of different ways. Some institutions, such as **Deakin University**, integrate online students into the larger university and provide student support services that can be tailored to online students. Other institutions, such as the **University of Central Florida**, have dedicated online student support services. Online-only institutions typically provide the most comprehensive support offerings.



Personalized Support

One of the most common online student support strategies is to provide one-on-one or personalized support for online students. Many institutions designate a role, typically a success coach or peer mentor, as a first contact for online students' questions or needs. Sometimes online students are assigned a specific individual as a mentor or coach and maintain this relationship throughout their program. In other institutions, online students are directed to a mentor or advisor office that serves as a central hub and where they can speak with an individual who can direct students to the right person or office to answer their questions.

Online Student Support Models

Athabasca College, Canada's first fully online institution, outlines the two different academic student support models they use to promote online student engagement. In addition to online-focused counselling services, academic advisors, and financial support, students participate in either a Student Support Centre model or an Individualised model, based on their area of study.

STUDENT SUPPORT CENTRE

Students completing degrees in the online Faculties of Business or Science have access to a Student Support Centre. Students direct all their queries to the Student Support Centre, where they first consult with an undergraduate student advisor. This advisor can answer questions, assess the students' needs, and ultimately refer students to an expert who can answer their questions more completely.

INDIVIDUALIZED

Students in online individualized study courses, such as Introduction to Archaeology, participate in the individualized support model. Upon matriculation, students are paired with one single tutor. Students receive the tutor's contact information via the student portal one to two weeks before the start of the course. This tutor provides the student with "direct academic and administrative support." The tutor is available to answer any questions about the course, marks assignments and exams, offers feedback, and holds office hours each week. Students and their individual tutors regularly interact throughout the duration of the course, and tutors can be reached toll-free from anywhere in Canada or the United States with a guaranteed response time of two business days.

Comprehensive Services

The **University of Central Florida** houses online programs ([UCF Online](#)) in a unit separate from the main university. UCF Online offers a comprehensive suite of support services for online students, including:

- Career Services
- Office of Financial Assistance
- Office of Student Involvement
- Academic Resources
- Student Accessibility Services
- Therapy Assisted Online (TAO) Self Help
- UCF Bookstore and Computer Store
- Advising
- UCF Library
- University Writing Center
- Victim Services

Case Study: Deakin University Cloud Campus

Deakin University (Deakin) organizes its online degrees and services through the [Deakin Cloud Campus](#). At Deakin, **online students are fully integrated into the university**. Online courses are often the same as on-campus courses, with online students able to access lectures, assignments, and discussion groups either synchronously or asynchronously. Online students complete the same coursework and typically have online access to the same professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants. Cloud Campus students do have a number of support services designed specifically for online learners, but they may also take advantage of online services open to the whole student body. **This structure can help integrate online students into the larger university community and optimizes the flexibility of each course**, as online students are also welcome to utilize on-campus resources if they are located nearby.

Some of the student support services designed specifically for online students at [Deakin](#) include the following:

OWeek Online students have a tailored five-week orientation program that includes online events, web chats, workshops, competitions, and a Faculty Welcome web chat.

Coaches/ Mentors Commencing online undergraduate students have access to student success coaches and peer and study mentors (writing and maths). Students may connect with coaches via email and Skype.

UniStart UniStart is a “self-service resource hub” that provides comprehensive access to all Deakin’s online tools, offers free workshops, and helps students connect with peers and other support services. Postgraduate students can also take an “introduction to postgraduate study” online course.

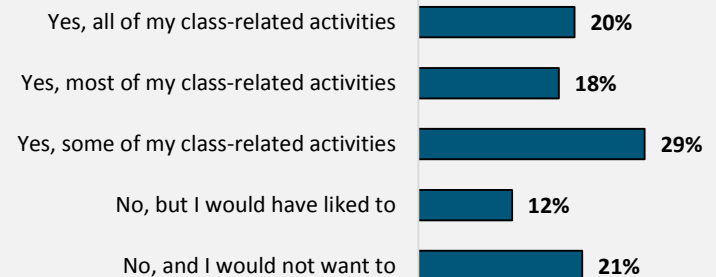
PASS Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) provides group study sessions to online students that are led by former students from each unit.

Personal support Online students have access to personal support services in legal advice, finances, disability support, mental and physical health services through chat, email, and IT support.

Mobile Engagement

Online students want use their mobile device to complete the online degree, according to the [OCS survey](#). Over 99 percent of surveyed online students own a mobile device (either a smartphone or tablet), and over 40 percent of students used a mobile device to complete assignments, conduct research, communicate with peers, access the learning platform, communicate with professors, and read class assignments. These data suggest that one of the best ways to keep online students engaged may be to optimize class materials and learning resources for mobile device use.

Did you complete any of your actual online course-related activities using your mobile device (phone/tablet)?



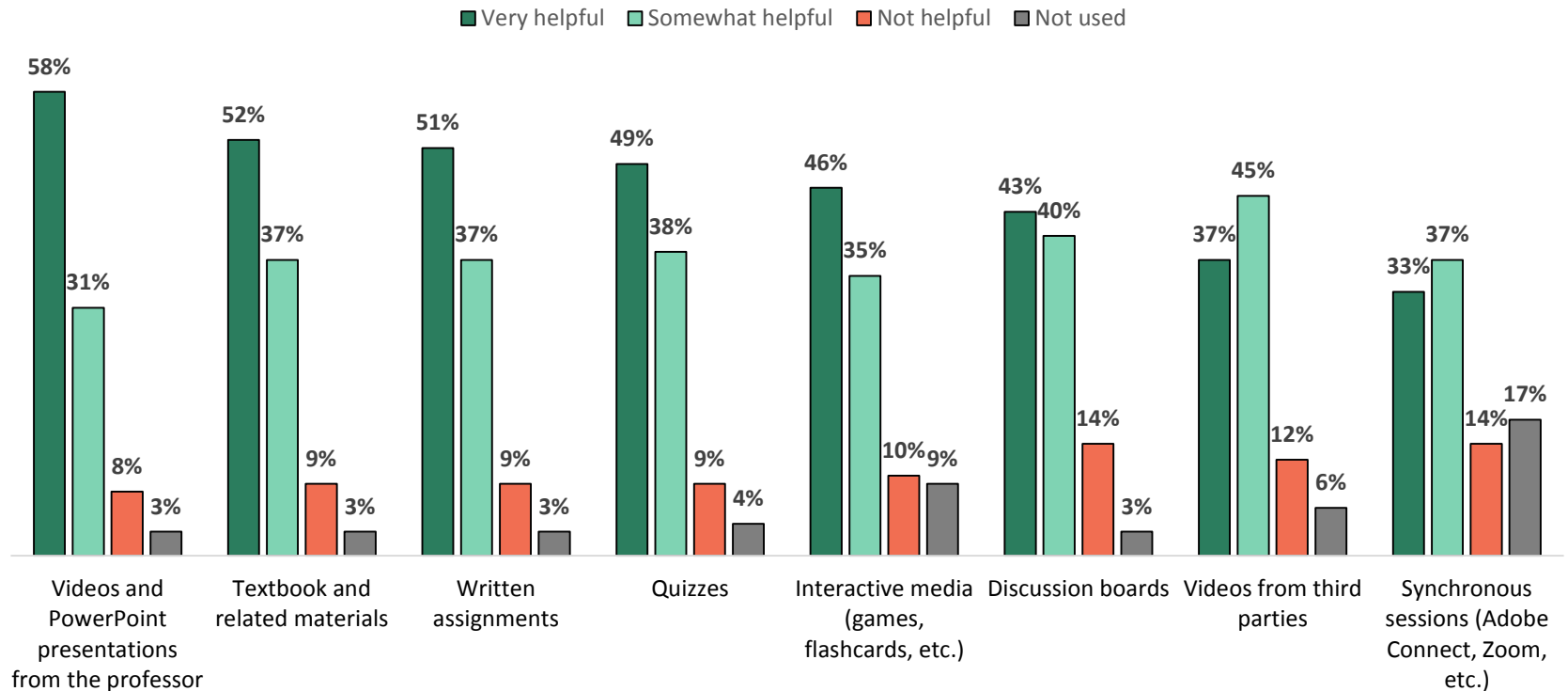
Library Resources

Many institutions offer online library resources, including the ability to contact librarians via chat or email and order textbooks online. For example, Deakin’s [Cloud Campus](#) students can access e-books and online readings, and librarians are available via chat, Skype, or email. In addition, students may request physical books to be posted to them for free, including a reply-paid envelope for the return.

Academic Engagement

According to the 2018 [OCS survey](#), online students noted that the class activities that were most helpful to learning and success included lectures, readings, and written assignments. This suggests that online students are very interested in interacting directly with professors. In addition, because today's online learners are particularly interested in accessing information on a mobile device, institutions may want to first focus on optimizing class materials and lectures for mobile access.

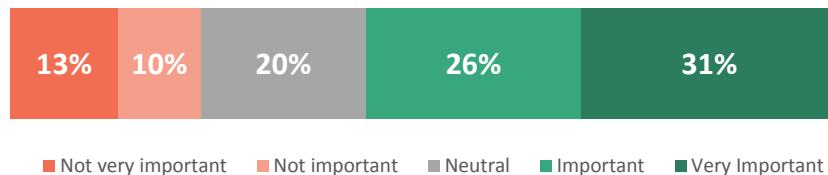
Please rate the following class activities and items in terms of how helpful they were to your learning and success.



Peer-to-Peer Interaction and Engagement

One of the most important services institutions can offer online students is the opportunity to interact and build relationships with other online peers. The 2018 [OCS survey](#) found that over half of online students rated peer engagement to be important or very important to their success in online classes.

How important is it to your success as a student that you regularly engage with classmates in your online classes?



■ Not very important ■ Not important ■ Neutral ■ Important ■ Very Important

Deakin University

Online students at [Deakin](#) have opportunities to interact with peers both in and out of class. During group work in seminars, professors “set up virtual break-out rooms” and online students can work together during class. The break-out rooms are recorded and posted online so students who are not able to attend seminars synchronously also have access to the group material. In addition, lecturers run online sessions each week that “replicate on-campus tutorials.” Online students are encouraged to ask questions via chat, and the lecturer responds verbally.

Swinburne University of Technology

Online students at [Swinburne](#) participate in online study groups of 25-30 students. The groups are facilitated by an online tutor and “provide an ideal forum to network with other students and utilize the knowledge of the group.” Students are also encouraged to identify others in their area and create offline groups.

Online Student Clubs

Opportunities for social interaction among online students can also help students feel connected, both to the larger university and to each other. Some institutions emphasize a strong alumni network, for example, while others maintain clubs and student organizations designed for online students.

Southern New Hampshire University

Southern New Hampshire University ([SNHU](#)) runs a “private online community exclusively for students in our online programs” called SNHUconnect. Approximately 18,000 students are active on the site each month, and students can “share interests, join clubs and learning communities, receive academic support, [and] gain career guidance.” Some selected activities offered in October 2018 include:

- Club Mixer Open House
- Student Advisory Board Open House
- Cold Case Mystery Week (Help the Law and Disorder Club solve a cold case)
- Student Leadership Webinar “Your Life Needs More Compassion”
- Fall Photo Contest
- Christian Fellowship Club
- Student Showcase – Nerds Unite and Positive Connection Club

Swinburne University of Technology

[Swinburne](#) offers a similar custom social network to connect students called CONNECT. CONNECT helps students “create face-to-face study groups” and find other students with similar interests. Students can also connect with peer advisors and privately message other students.

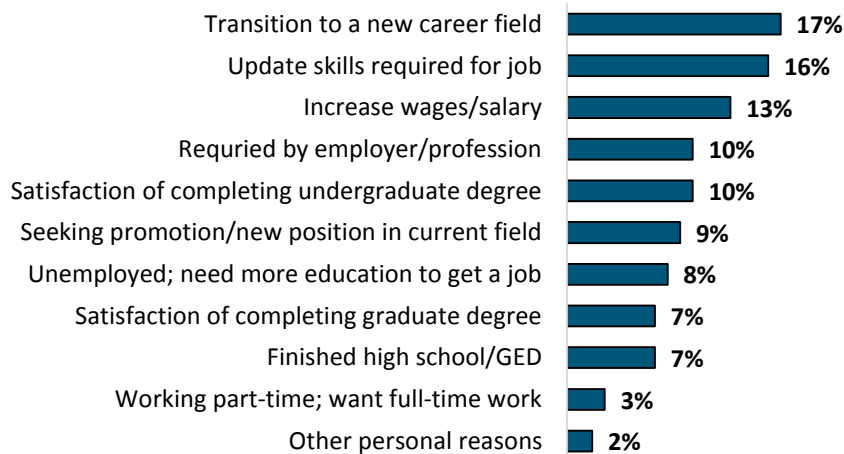
University of Central Florida

[UCF Online](#) runs an Office of Student Involvement that helps administrate Registered Student Organizations. The office helps “track member involvement, schedule meetings and create announcements.” Some clubs require students to meet in person, but many have accommodations for online students.

Career Services

According to the [OCS survey](#), almost three-quarters of **students pursue an online degree for career-related reasons**, including transitioning to a new career, seeking a promotion, or fulfilling employer requirements. Career resources are essential for online students, and most benchmarked institutions offer the same type of services, including **alumni networks, interview and resume writing assistance, job boards, and career assessments.**

What was your primary motivation for enrolling in further education?



Orientation

Some institutions offer a dedicated orientation designed to help commencing online students gain familiarity with the online format, as well as introductory information about their academic degree programs. For example, at [Swinburne University of Technology](#), orientation focuses on learning the details of studying online. Orientation activities include:

- Step-by-step, easy to navigate modules that track progress through orientation
- Virtual tours of online classrooms and the Student Portal
- Refining and learning technical skills for online study
- Introducing programs and opportunities to meet future classmates and join interest groups

Innovative Degree Formats

Online students are interested in opportunities that reduce the cost and time of online degrees, such as competency-based education, stackable certificates, and textbook-free classes ([OCS](#)), highlighting the underlying motivation that many student cite for pursuing these courses. Online students are typically open to innovative options that are responsive to student needs and desires. However, few benchmarked institutions advertise these type of innovative formats or offerings.



Case Study: Western Governors University

Western Governors University (WGU) is a fully online institution in the United States that offers primarily [competency-based education](#). Competency-based education “measures learning rather than time.” Instead of completing a series of classes in sequence over a set period of time, students move on to the next class when they can demonstrate that they have mastered the specific material. Students demonstrate mastery by taking assessments, and can take these assessments at any time.

Students receive 24/7 access to class materials and learning resources, so students can truly proceed through the degree at their own pace. Competency-based education particularly benefits students who “can learn faster, spend more time on schoolwork, or lean on knowledge they already have from previous work or school experience.”

Students also have the opportunity to design their own degree plan. While there are set degree pathways, students can individualize their class load based on previous competencies, transfer credits, and area of focus. Students also pay flat-rate tuition per term and can take as many classes as they would like each period. The combination of **competency-based education, flat-rate tuition, and individualized degree pathways** creates a notably innovative online educational experience.

Financial Aid and Incentives for Online Students

While degree cost is the number one factor online students consider when choosing an online degree, students are also concerned with the availability of their degree of choice and the flexibility and autonomy of the degree, including the availability of year-round, self-paced classes. In fact, 72 percent of online students would “ultimately choose a program that costs more if they felt they were benefiting in terms of convenience, fit, or reputation,” according to the [OCS survey](#). Consequently, academic formats and offerings can be essential factors in attracting and retaining online students.

That being said, scholarships are one of the most attractive financial benefits to online students. In fact, 39 percent of students said that a scholarship of at least US\$500 would have convinced them to enroll at one institution over another. Twenty-seven percent of students would be convinced by a scholarship of at least US\$1,000.

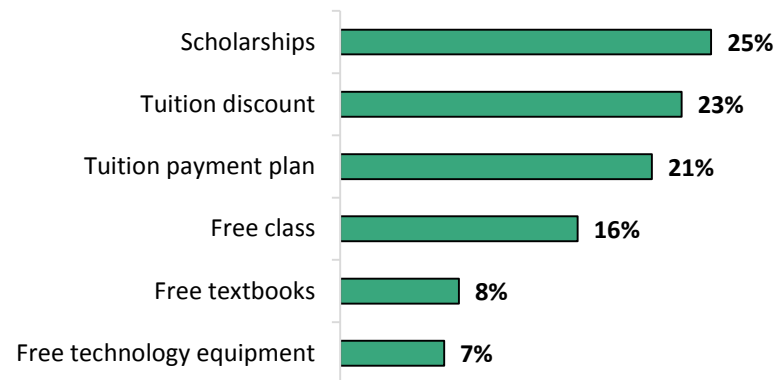
University of Maryland University College Scholarships

The University of Maryland University College (UMUC) offers over 100 [scholarships](#) and awarded more than US\$8 million to students in the past year.

Some of the scholarships that UMUC offers include:

- ✓ **Foundational Scholarships** – Students are contacted if they are eligible for a number of different scholarships
- ✓ **2018 Fall Term Scholarship** – Awarded to students commencing in Fall Term 2018 and US\$1,000 is distributed in three installments after students complete a set number of credits
- ✓ **Maryland Completion Scholarship** – Maryland two-year community college graduates have the opportunity to complete a four-year bachelor’s degree for US\$12,000 or less (much less than the typical tuition cost)
- ✓ **Northeast Tri-State Scholarship** – Residents of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, or Delaware (nearby areas to UMUC) who have already earned at least 30 credits are eligible for US\$9,000

Which would be the most attractive way a school could influence you to select it over another school?



Western Governors University College Scholarships

Western Governors University (WGU) awarded over US\$10 million in [scholarships](#) in the past year. WGU offers institutional scholarships, as well as scholarships offered by corporate partners, foundations, and government organizations.

Some of the general competitive scholarships offered by WGU for new students include:

- ✓ **Back to School Scholarship** – For students returning in fall 2018; US\$2,000.
- ✓ **Become a Teacher Scholarship** – For paraprofessionals, classroom aides, and other aspiring teachers looking to switch careers; US\$2,000
- ✓ **Alumni Master’s Scholarship** – Alumni interested in continuing with a master’s degree; US\$2,000
- ✓ **Excellence in Health Information Management** – For experienced IT and healthcare professionals interested in transitioning to a health information management career; US\$2,000
- ✓ **Future Night Owl Scholarship** – For the children or spouses of current WGU students who are interested in starting their own degree; US\$2,000

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