

From Online to *Hybrid Learning*

SEE THE FULL REPORT

A Roadmap to Transforming Higher Education for Today's Students — an executive brief summarizing the full report's vision, findings, and priorities for action.

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COMMISSIONED BY

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THE CHALLENGE

A bachelor's degree remains the clearest path to economic mobility

Yet working adults, first-gen, and low-income students face impossible barriers to attainment

THE GAP

Traditional campuses can't flex. Online programs can't connect.

Neither model is built for today's students — who work, parent, and move between systems

THE OPPORTUNITY

Hybrid learning, done right, can do both

California's scale makes it uniquely positioned to show the nation what works

THE MOMENT WE'RE IN

Higher education must change — and California can lead

In today's economy, a bachelor's degree is one of the clearest paths to higher-paying work, better health, and a better quality of life. Yet too many students in California — especially working adults, first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds — struggle to find an affordable, feasible path to one.

Public skepticism about the value of a degree is rising. Costs continue to climb. Employers demand that higher education better prepare students for today's jobs. And the students themselves have changed: they are more likely to work while enrolled, to be raising children, and to move across institutions — navigating different rules, expectations, and complex credit transfer pathways.

Traditional campus-bound programs don't give today's students the flexibility they need to balance learning, work, and life. And fully online offerings fail to provide the connection, engagement, and career relevance students want and need. **The current system, in short, was not built for the students who need it most.**

This brief summarizes the findings and priorities of the full report, *From Online to Hybrid Learning: A Roadmap to Transforming Higher Education for Today's Students*, commissioned by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and authored by Kimberly Merritt, Ed.D. The report makes the case for California to move beyond incremental adjustments and embrace a system-wide redesign centered on student success.

20+

Institutions and partners contributed to the research

4

Signature practices defining transformative hybrid learning

6

System-level barriers to broader adoption

4

Catalyst areas for coordinated action

“ If you meet students in their communities, surround them with real human support, and use data to intervene before they fall behind, they don't just persist — they flourish.”

SUKHWANT JHAJ — DEAN OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY · ASU LOCAL INITIATIVE

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

National scan. California focus.

Interviews with leaders across public, nonprofit, and mission-driven colleges and organizations. A convening of 20+ institutions working on equity-centered hybrid design.

This report draws on a national landscape scan of research, institutional practices, and emerging hybrid learning models, alongside interviews with leaders across public, nonprofit, and mission-driven colleges and organizations. It includes insights from a convening of more than 20 institutions and partners working to design hybrid learning for stronger persistence and equity outcomes.

While examples from across the country inform the analysis, **the primary focus of recommendations is California** – given the scale and complexity of its higher education system, the incredible diversity of the students it serves, and the state's urgent focus on improving completion and mobility outcomes for historically underserved students.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS GUIDING THE RESEARCH

- What differentiates hybrid learning models that improve persistence and completion from those that merely add flexibility?
- What institutional design choices enable success at scale?
- What prevents promising pilots from becoming durable system-wide practice?
- What must California higher education leaders do now to embed hybrid learning into core operations?

Not all hybrid learning is the same

WORKING DEFINITION

Transformative Hybrid Learning

A model that integrates flexible online learning with structured human connection, applied career partnerships, and intentional belonging – creating a coherent pathway where coursework, advising, career exploration, and community reinforce one another.

Hybrid learning is not a passing trend. It is a response to structural shifts in who higher education serves and what students need. But **not all hybrid learning is the same**.

Some institutions have added "flex" courses that blend modalities but leave core structures unchanged. Others have expanded online options without integrating coaching, community-building, or applied learning. These efforts increase convenience – but stop short of reshaping the student experience.

The report focuses on models that incorporate four signature practices:

1 Flexible Online Learning as a Scalable Foundation

Asynchronous coursework that meets students where they are – removing geographic and scheduling barriers without sacrificing rigor or connection.

2 Structured Human Connection

Proactive coaching, mentoring, and peer cohorts built into program design – not optional add-ons. Coaches with real-time data on student progress.

3 Applied Partnerships and Career-Aligned Pathways

Employer and community partnerships embedded from early in a student's journey – not bolted on at the end as a capstone or internship requirement.

4 Intentional Belonging and Accountability

Moments of community and shared purpose designed into program structure – keeping students visible, connected, and accountable to one another.

“Opening the door to college without building systems that help students persist and complete their degrees is not equity. When done right, hybrid learning treats the student experience and student supports as core design elements – not add-ons.”

KIMBERLY MERRITT, ED.D. — AUTHOR · FROM ONLINE TO HYBRID LEARNING

SYSTEM-LEVEL BARRIERS

Making It Stick: What Limits Broader Adoption

Even as campuses innovate, several system-level barriers limit the broader adoption of transformative hybrid education in California. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action across campuses, systems, policymakers, and partners.

Barrier 01

Limited Implementation Infrastructure

Insufficient campus-level capacity to design, launch, and scale hybrid models – especially at under-resourced institutions serving the highest proportions of underserved students.

Barrier 02

Faculty Workload and Promotion Misalignment

Tenure and promotion structures reward traditional research and classroom instruction, not the relationship-intensive, iterative work of designing and facilitating hybrid learning.

Barrier 03

Fragmented Data Systems

Disconnected data environments prevent institutions from seeing the full picture of student progress and intervening proactively before students fall behind or disengage.

Barrier 04

Inconsistent Coaching and Advising

Insufficient infrastructure for training, credentialing, and professionalizing the student success workforce – leaving coaching capacity highly variable across and within institutions.

Barrier 05

Short-Term Funding Models

Grant-funded pilots create pockets of innovation but rarely survive beyond initial funding periods. Hybrid learning requires sustainable investment in coaching, technology, and partnerships.

Barrier 06

Lack of Shared Quality Standards

Without common benchmarks for transformative hybrid design, institutions lack a shared language or accountability framework for distinguishing high-quality models from surface-level adaptations.

CATALYSTS FOR SUCCESS

Redesigning Systems and Incentives for Hybrid Learning

The report surfaces four recommended areas of change that systems, institutions, and programs can adopt to create the enabling conditions for hybrid learning to take root and scale.

Financial Model Innovation

Directing dollars to high-impact supports – personalized coaching and mentoring, strategic community and employer partnerships, and structured connection – with proven persistence and completion outcomes.

Robust Digital Infrastructure

Integrated systems that bring together asynchronous content, synchronous engagement, and predictive analytics – enabling faculty and staff to track student progress and intervene proactively.

Organizational Design and Staffing

Redefining staff and faculty roles around student outcomes — with "success coaches" playing a central role. Rethinking workload structures, promotion criteria, and professional development to support hybrid practice.

Community and Infrastructure

Investing in campuses, community sites, and synchronous online engagement as core focal points for face-to-face connection — recognizing place as an essential ingredient in student belonging and persistence.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

California is uniquely positioned to lead

The time is now to decide whether hybrid learning will remain a disconnected patchwork of flexible options — or whether it becomes a system-wide redesign centered on student success and equitable mobility.

01 The Students Are Here — and They Can't Wait

Working adults, parents, first-generation students, and students of color are already enrolled in California's public colleges and universities. The system's current design is not working for them. Every semester without action is a semester of preventable stopouts.

02 California's Scale Creates Unmatched Leverage

With millions of students across the UC, CSU, and community college systems, California has both the responsibility and the opportunity to demonstrate what system-wide hybrid reform can accomplish — and to show the nation a replicable model.

03 Piecemeal Pilots Are Not Enough

Promising innovations exist across California. But isolated pilots, without shared standards, aligned incentives, and coordinated investment, will not reach the students who need them most. System-wide change requires system-wide will.

04 The Economy Demands It

California's economic leadership depends on a workforce that can adapt, learn, and grow. Employers increasingly demand that higher education prepare students for today's jobs. Hybrid learning, built with career alignment at its core, is the answer.

A CALL TO ACTION

The next step is decisive, coordinated action

Hybrid learning is about more than transforming the student experience. It is about transforming higher education to meet the needs of today's students and today's economy.

The question is no longer whether hybrid learning is here to stay. The question is whether California's public systems will shape it intentionally — so that it expands opportunity, narrows attainment gaps, and supports students to earn a bachelor's degree and move onto a successful and rewarding life.

By working together, California's higher education leaders — together with policymakers, funders, business, and other partners — can shape a new future where all students can find a path to thrive. **The full report offers a roadmap. The time for action is now.**

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- ▶ Embrace and scale holistic, student-centered hybrid learning models that integrate flexible online learning with structured human connection
- ▶ Build career-aligned pathways from the start, not as capstone additions
- ▶ Embed proactive supports — mentoring, coaching, and peer cohorts — as core design elements, not optional services
- ▶ Redesign institutional systems — funding, faculty roles, data infrastructure — so high-quality hybrid becomes the rule, not the exception

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Kimberly Merritt, Ed.D. is an executive leader and education entrepreneur at the forefront of reimagining how higher education works for today's students. She founded the Learning Enterprise at Arizona State University, building ASU Local and Universal Pathways into nationally recognized models for hybrid, career-connected learning. Her career spans K-14 innovation at Da Vinci Schools to large-scale systems redesign at Western Governors University, where she now leads efforts to make student-centered education both equitable and scalable. Her work sits at the intersection of access, persistence, and economic mobility.

From Online to Hybrid Learning — Executive Brief

A Companion Document to the Full Report ·

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