

A REPORT ON HYBRID HIGHER EDUCATION FOR CALIFORNIA

From Online to Hybrid Learning: A Roadmap to Transforming Higher Education for Today's Students

How intentional hybrid models can expand access, improve persistence, and build student-centered pathways at scale across California's public higher education system.

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A roadmap for moving California's public higher education system toward hybrid models that are affordable, navigable, and relevant for today's learners.

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01 — EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public Higher Education at a Turning Point

Public higher education in California faces a moment of urgent opportunity.

Today's learners increasingly require flexibility that traditional campus models cannot reliably provide, particularly as work, family, and financial responsibilities intensify. Fully online programs can expand access but often lack the structure, connection, and career relevance that students need to persist and translate learning into opportunity.

Rising costs, uneven completion outcomes, and declining public trust highlight a difficult truth: many of the systems and assumptions shaping higher education were not designed for today's learners or the modern workforce.

These gaps are most acute for students facing systemic barriers—working adults, first-generation learners, and those from historically underserved communities—and closing them requires more than changes in modality.

65%

of students nationally want at least part of their degree online

90%+

retention and pass rates at well-designed hybrid programs like ASU Local

34%

of part-time students complete a degree in six years, vs. 67% of full-time



CONTINUED

An integrated, student-centered reimagining — not a retrofit

Intentional hybrid learning is a full reimagining of how students experience higher education: structured from the ground up around student needs rather than retrofitted onto legacy systems, integrating learning, advising, financial navigation, and community engagement into a single, coherent experience.

For these students, flexibility without support can undermine persistence, while support without flexibility can make participation impossible. Hybrid models resolve this tension by combining flexible online learning with structured mentoring, coaching, peer collaboration, and career-aligned pathways.

Success depends on deliberate institutional design—staffing, funding, data systems, and digital infrastructure. Meaningful outcomes emerge only when learning, support, and financing function together as an integrated system.

Drawing on interviews, institutional data, and a national convening of more than 20 public, nonprofit, and mission-driven colleges and support organizations, this report highlights the design patterns, institutional arrangements, and enabling conditions that distinguish effective, student-centered hybrid learning.

A central challenge remains: how to scale these approaches from isolated pilots to standard practices embedded across postsecondary education. This report is offered as a practical resource for California higher education leaders seeking to do exactly that.

By acting decisively, California's public higher education system can expand access, improve persistence, and build scalable, student-centered hybrid learning systems that meet the demands of today's learners and the workforce of tomorrow.

TO SUCCEED, LEADERS MUST TAKE DELIBERATE ACTION

- **Redesign the financial model** so dollars are redirected to high-impact supports and hybrid programs with a clear impact on student access, persistence, and completion.
- **Build robust data infrastructure** that enables hybrid learning delivery and proactive, targeted outreach and connection.
- **Redefine staff and faculty roles** to center on student outcomes and the delivery of consistent guidance and support from people students know and trust.
- **Invest in online and community spaces** where students can find in-person support, peer connection, and access to career opportunities.

02 — INTRODUCTION

A Turning Point for Higher Education

Higher education is at a crossroads. Rising tuition, growing debt, and stagnant completion rates collide with shifting student demographics, fragmented institutional structures, and rapid technological change. Many learners—working adults, first-generation students, and parents—must navigate systems that are rigid and misaligned with modern life and work.

Traditional campus programs emphasize fixed schedules and residential experiences, while fully online programs prioritize flexibility, often at the expense of structure, mentorship, and applied skill development. Too often, online offerings simply digitize existing courses without rethinking students' full needs.

This creates a fundamental tension: flexibility without support can undermine persistence, while support without flexibility can make participation impossible. Millions of students are underserved by systems that fail to integrate access, connection, and career relevance holistically.

When done well, hybrid education is more than a shift in modality; it represents a full reimagining of how students experience higher education. Insights from interviews, a landscape scan, and a convening of leaders reveal that institutions succeeding in this space redesign both the student experience and the systems that support it.

"Hybrid models work when learning is treated as an experience—one that includes structure, relationships, and real-world application."

Jeff Manassero — CEO, Rivet School



03 — THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Why Hybrid Learning? Why Now?

The question is no longer whether higher education should be online or in-person—it is how to design a system where flexibility, connection, relevance, and support are inseparable.

Research and interviews for this report surfaced four main reasons why hybrid learning's time is now.

01 Shifting Student Demographics

The majority of undergraduates work while enrolled, and online programs originally designed for older, experienced learners are now seeing rapid growth in first-time freshmen. Over 65% of students nationally want at least part of their degree online. Today's students increasingly need both flexibility and connection. Without integrated mentorship, applied learning, and intentional support, many struggle in systems not designed for them. Institutions that treat hybrid learning as peripheral risk falling out of alignment with how students now access and succeed in higher education.

02 Fragmented Institutional Design

Most students experience college as a series of disconnected interactions. Different instructors, advisors, offices, and systems operate independently, creating limited continuity. Meaningful connection with any single adult is rare—not by intent, but by design. Hybrid education is not simply a change in modality; it is an opportunity to redesign support around how students actually move through college. When coaches, advisors, and support systems are embedded into the experience, students receive more consistent guidance, accountability, and connection.

03 Declining Trust in College-to-Career Outcomes

Students and families increasingly question whether college is worth the cost. Rising tuition, growing debt, and uneven career outcomes lead many to delay enrollment or seek alternatives. Rebuilding trust means connecting learning to work from the start. Hybrid models free up time traditionally spent in classrooms for applied projects, internships, and employer partnerships. When designed intentionally, students see how coursework builds real skills, professional identity, and momentum toward future roles.

04 Rapid Technological Change

AI, adaptive learning, and digital collaboration tools are transforming what is possible. Personalization at scale, real-time progress tracking, and timely intervention are now achievable. Technology alone does not produce better outcomes; its value depends on how it integrates with human systems. In transformative hybrid programs, technology frees up time for applied learning, mentoring, and career-connected experiences, while data informs coaches, advisors, and faculty—a force multiplier for equitable, relationship-rich learning at scale.

04

FRAMEWORK

Hybrid Learning in Higher Education: Three Models

A lack of consensus about what hybrid learning looks like has made it difficult to distinguish between models that add flexibility to existing structures and those that fundamentally rethink how college works. For the purposes of this report, hybrid learning is organized into three broad categories — arranged on a spectrum from modality shift to full redesign.

04 — FRAMEWORK

Three Models of Hybrid Learning

MODALITY SHIFT

FULL REDESIGN

MODEL 01

Traditional Institutions Adding Hybrid Options for Individual Courses

University campuses offering "flex" courses that combine in-person or synchronous and online components.

STRENGTH

Expands scheduling flexibility, helping students balance school with work and personal obligations.

LIMITATION

Core structures remain largely unchanged. Coaching, peer cohorts, and applied learning are typically absent or optional.

MODEL 02

Fully Online Providers Adding Optional In-Person Touchpoints

Institutions pair online programs with learning centers or optional in-person sites, giving students access to support, guidance, and resources.

STRENGTH

Improves access for working adults, caregivers, and geographically distant learners who value some in-person connection.

LIMITATION

Without integrated coaching, cohort structures, and intentional community design, the experience can remain transactional.

MODEL 03 · RECOMMENDED

Integrated Hybrid Learning Models

Institutions integrating flexible online learning with structured human interaction—coaching, cohorts, applied partnerships, and career-aligned pathways—supported by aligned staffing, technology, and data.

STRENGTH

A coherent, student-centered journey from enrollment through completion into meaningful careers. Learning, support, and outcomes are fully integrated.

LIMITATION

Requires intentional redesign of institutional systems and sustained investment in staffing, technology, and infrastructure.

EXAMPLE STUDENT JOURNEY

Where Students Get Stuck

The case for Model 03 begins with the students it's designed to serve. The following traces where today's students face the greatest risk of stopping out — and what the integrated hybrid model changes at each stage.

ENROLLMENT
NO SUPPORT

38%

of undergrads arrive as first-generation students.

Most systems were built for students whose families already knew how this works.

Source: NCES, 2020

EARLY WEEKS
NO SUPPORT

1 in 7

students are gone before spring semester.

Isolation sets in fast. Without early relationships and belonging, students disappear quietly.

Source: NSC Persistence & Retention Report, 2025

WORK & LIFE
LITTLE SUPPORT

60%

of today's college students are working while enrolled.

Without flexibility, college and work become impossible to hold together. Something has to give.

Source: Lumina-Gallup State of Higher Education Report, 2024

MID-PROGRAM
NO SUPPORT

43M

Americans started college and left without a credential.

Stopping out often means stopping permanently. Most never return.

Source: NSC, Some College, No Credential Report, 2024

CAREER ENTRY
LITTLE SUPPORT

41%

of recent graduates are underemployed.

A degree without career connections and applied experience rarely leads where students hoped.

Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2024

EXAMPLE INTEGRATED HYBRID LEARNING MODELS — SIGNATURE PRACTICES IN ACTION

WHAT HYBRID MODEL DESIGN CHANGES

Five Signature Practices in Action

◆ Day-One Coaching

Relationship-based guidance begins at enrollment, before struggles start.

◆ Flexible Modality

Learning is designed around work and family life, not the reverse.

◆ Applied Pathways

Employer partnerships and career-aligned curriculum begin in year one, so the degree leads somewhere.

◆ Cohort + Belonging

Peer community and milestone rituals are built into the program, not left to chance.

◆ Proactive Outreach

Data alerts and targeted check-ins reach students before they reach the breaking point.



Photo: Allison Shelley / Complete College Photo Library — CC BY-NC 4.0

05 — DESIGN ELEMENTS

What It Takes to Make Hybrid Learning Effective

What students see and feel every day—their relationships, flexibility, sense of belonging, and career-connected learning—is only possible because of deep structural redesign happening behind the scenes. This report identifies two dimensions of hybrid design: **Signature Practices** that shape the student experience, and **Catalysts for Success** that make them possible at scale.

Signature Practices

Student-facing elements that drive persistence and success.

Dedicated Coaching and Mentoring

Proactive, low-ratio coaching that is relationship-based and centered on the whole student. Coaches act as a consistent, trusted point of contact, supported by a network of staff rather than isolated interactions with individual instructors. Access to real-time data allows coaches to connect proactively and provide guidance throughout the student's entire journey.

Memorable Moments of Connection and Belonging

Program structures intentionally create opportunities for belonging, accountability, and motivation. Cohort rituals, peer communities, mentoring, micro-internships, and milestone celebrations are embedded in the design, not treated as optional. Shared wins and structured interactions prevent students from fading during challenges.

Applied Partnerships and Career-Aligned Pathways

Students participate in career-connected projects, internships, and employer partnerships aligned to their academic pathways starting early in their college journey. Intentional employer engagement structures—mentorship, project review, networking, and mock interviews—are built into the model, supporting students in connecting their degree to economic mobility.

Flexible Modalities and Pathways

Students experience a seamless integration of online, in-person, and synchronous learning that meets them where they are. Online content provides a scalable, high-quality foundation, while synchronous sessions deliver interaction, coaching, and applied practice.

"Pilots succeed because they're intentionally resourced and closely supported. When institutions try to scale without changing staffing models, incentives, or infrastructure, the program reverts to business as usual—and outcomes follow."

Maria Anguiano — Entrepreneur in Residence, College Futures Foundation

Catalysts for Success

The institutional systems and capacities that make signature practices possible at scale.

Financial Model Innovation

Redesign of the financial model intentionally directs dollars toward high-impact supports: personalized coaching and mentoring, strategic partnerships, and community interaction. A key to success is systematically reducing legacy practices and cost structures that do not have a measurable connection to access, persistence, completion, or long-term impact.

Robust Digital Infrastructure

A robust digital infrastructure integrates asynchronous content, synchronous engagement, and predictive analytics. Core content is online and accessible anytime. Learning and student-success platforms track progress, issue early alerts, and enable proactive interventions by humans.

Organizational Design and Staffing

Roles are redefined to center on student outcomes, with success coaches playing a central role. Deep, ongoing relationships—not one-off interactions—become the foundation of support. Students work consistently with adults who know them, understand their goals, and root for their success.

Community and Infrastructure

Investing in campuses, community sites, and synchronous online engagement ensures connection and career-aligned learning are built in, not optional. Place-based and applied learning is valued alongside online coursework, creating spaces—physical and virtual—for mentorship, peer collaboration, and applied experiences.

Transformative student experiences depend on intentionally designed back-end systems. When scalable online learning design, proactive staffing, integrated physical and virtual environments, and real-time data align, institutions can deliver consistent, personal, and responsive experiences for every student.

06 — CHALLENGES

Barriers to Creating Hybrid Higher Education Models

California's landscape includes a growing number of innovative hybrid programs and pilots, yet system-level supports to scale these models remain limited. These gaps reflect not a lack of innovation, but a lack of coordinated system-level infrastructure to support durable change.

BARRIER 01

Implementation and Scaling Infrastructure

Many campuses lack dedicated teams, authority structures, and project management capacity to embed successful pilots into core operations. Without clear ownership and sustained support, promising models fail to reach scale.

BARRIER 03

Integrated Student Success Data Systems

Fragmented learning management, advising, and student information systems impede proactive, coordinated support. Limited interoperability reduces the ability to identify risk early and intervene in real time.

BARRIER 05

Sustainable Funding Models for Hybrid Supports

Many programs rely on short-term grants or temporary funding to support coaching, technology, and partnerships. Long-term financial models that embed these supports into base budgets remain underdeveloped.

BARRIER 02

Faculty and Staff Role Alignment

Existing workload policies, promotion structures, and role definitions often do not reflect the demands of hybrid education. Coaching, mentoring, and applied learning responsibilities frequently fall outside formal expectations.

BARRIER 04

Coaching and Advising Workforce Development

High-touch coaching is central to transformative hybrid models, yet there is little shared infrastructure for training, credentialing, and professionalizing this workforce. Quality and capacity vary widely.

BARRIER 06

Shared Quality Standards and Evidence Frameworks

The field lacks widely adopted benchmarks for transformative hybrid design, student experience, and outcomes. Without common metrics, institutions struggle to learn systematically from one another.

"Institutions often focus on what students and staff see, but the real constraints are behind the scenes. Financial models, data visibility, and role clarity determine what's possible on the ground."

Roblin Webb — CEO, Trio New College Network

07 — ACTION

Recommendations for California Public Higher Education Leaders

California campuses have made notable strides: CSU is expanding online learning through degree programs and cross-campus course exchanges, enabling students at any of its 22 campuses to enroll in courses offered by another at no additional tuition. At ASU Local, operating on multiple California community college campuses, students are supported by consistent coaches with embedded cohort experiences.

"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. We're seeing retention and course pass rates above 90 percent."

Sukhwant Jhaj — Dean of University College, Arizona State University

01 Redesign the Financial Model

Redirect dollars to high-impact supports and hybrid programs with clear impact on student access, persistence, and completion. Systematically reduce legacy practices and cost structures that do not have a measurable connection to long-term impact.

02 Develop Robust Data Infrastructure

Build the digital infrastructure that enables hybrid learning delivery and proactive, targeted outreach. Integrated platforms must track student progress, issue early alerts, and give coaches, advisors, and instructors the data they need to act proactively.

03 Redefine Staff and Faculty Roles

Center roles on student outcomes and consistent guidance from people students know and trust. Update workload policies, promotion structures, and role definitions to reflect the demands of hybrid education.

04 Invest in Online and Community Spaces

Create physical and virtual spaces where students find in-person support, peer connection, and career opportunities. Place-based and applied learning must be valued as a core program element, not an optional add-on.

08 — CONCLUSION

A System-Wide Imperative for California Higher Education

California's public higher education system is among the most expansive in the nation, yet too many students—first-generation learners, working adults, parents, and historically underserved populations—struggle to persist in rigid campus models or fully online programs that lack structure, support, and career relevance.

Rising costs, fragmented pathways, and uneven outcomes are not abstract problems; they are barriers to real opportunity.

Hybrid models are no longer optional; they are a system-wide imperative. By combining flexible online learning with structured mentoring, coaching, and career-aligned pathways, hybrid programs make college feasible, navigable, and relevant for the students who need it most.

The path forward is not more pilots or isolated fixes; it is sustained, system-level redesign that aligns learning, advising, technology, finance, and career preparation into one coherent, student-centered experience.

Scaling is not replication. It is a redesign of higher education's underlying architecture, requiring shifts in resources, roles, and priorities that are complex but essential for student persistence, completion, and long-term mobility.

The decisions leaders make today will determine whether California's higher education system finally delivers on its promise to every student, not just those who fit the existing mold.

California has the talent, resources, and moral imperative to act boldly. By scaling transformative hybrid models, institutionalizing what works, and investing in implementation at scale, the state can turn fragmented innovation into a durable engine of access, persistence, and economic mobility.

"Learning shouldn't force lives to bend to systems. The future is systems that bend to lives."

Paul LeBlanc — Harvard University Graduate School of Education

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