

Online Program Design & Delivery

Synthesized from 10 sources 24 findings · April 18, 2026

Why This Matters

Small and mid-sized institutions are designing online programs for a student population that has fundamentally changed its expectations around AI, synchronous connection, and credential pathways — and most programs haven't caught up. Only **33% of online learners report that Gen AI is integrated into their curriculum** (Risepoint 2026), even as **71% now believe AI understanding is essential for workplace success** (Risepoint 2026). For institutions without the scale of a Purdue Global or SNHU, misalignment between program design and student expectations isn't a quality problem — it's an enrollment problem.

1. The Online Learner Your Curriculum Was Not Built For

The online learner driving enrollment growth today is not the isolated, screen-fatigued student of 2015. **71% of current online learners say they prefer online education over traditional classroom study** — compared to only 32% who said the same a decade ago (EducationDynamics 2025). This is a population that has chosen online deliberately, not reluctantly. They are working adults who enrolled because online fit their lives, and once coursework starts, flexibility remains non-negotiable: prospective students express stronger interest in synchronous sessions (**78%**) than enrolled students (**68%**), a gap that signals how quickly life obligations reassert themselves after enrollment (Risepoint 2026).

These learners are career-driven and practically focused. Nearly half of undergraduate and graduate online students — **48% and 44%**, respectively — value employer networking opportunities embedded in their programs (RNL 2024). They're enrolling in Health, Nursing, and Medicine programs at rates that have now surpassed Business for the first time at the undergraduate level (EducationDynamics 2025), and they're increasingly interested in non-degree credentials: **56% expressed interest in certificates, bootcamps, or microcredentials** in 2026, up from 48% the year prior (Risepoint 2026).

The operational implication is direct: your program design unit — whether that's an instructional design team, a curriculum committee, or a single online director — must build for a learner who wants career alignment, selective human connection, and AI preparation baked in. Designing for the 2015 online learner will produce 2015 results.

2. AI Integration Is Not Optional Curriculum Enhancement — It's a Core Competency Gap

The data on AI integration in online curricula should be read as a warning signal, not a benchmark to improve incrementally. The share of learners who believe AI understanding is essential for workplace success has

climbed from **59% in 2024 to 67% in 2025 to 71% in 2026** – a consistent, accelerating trend (Risepoint 2026). Institutions have moved, but not nearly fast enough: the proportion of learners whose instructors discuss proper AI use rose from **33% in 2025 to 46% in 2026** (Risepoint 2026). That's progress, but it still means the majority of online students are sitting in courses where AI isn't discussed while their industry is being restructured around it.

What students are asking for is specific. **42% want guidance on responsible and ethical AI use in coursework, 41% want to understand how AI will impact their future jobs and required skills, and 38% want to use AI to improve their own productivity** (Risepoint 2026). These aren't requests for an AI elective. They are requests for embedded, practical, ethics-grounded AI instruction woven into every program – not a standalone module, not a policy statement in the syllabus.

Emerging program areas identified through market research reinforce this: AI technology, AI literacy, and machine learning are among the highest-growth areas of learner and employer interest (RNL 2024). Institutions that treat AI integration as a future initiative rather than a present design requirement are building programs that will feel outdated at launch.

Recommendation: By the start of the next course development cycle – no later than 90 days from now – establish a minimum AI integration standard for all online courses. At minimum: one module on ethical AI use, one applied exercise using AI tools relevant to the discipline, and explicit instructor-led discussion of AI's career implications. Make this a course approval requirement, not a faculty suggestion.

3. Synchronous Design: The Right Amount of Human Connection at the Right Moment

The push toward fully asynchronous delivery was a reasonable response to pandemic-era flexibility demands, but the data now argues for a more nuanced architecture. **71% of online learners want at least one synchronous session per course** (Risepoint 2026), yet only **24% want that to happen weekly** (Risepoint 2025). The sweet spot – one intentional, well-designed synchronous touchpoint per course – is achievable for almost any institution and doesn't compromise the schedule flexibility that brought students to online learning in the first place.

The reasons students cite for wanting synchronous engagement are instructive: getting questions answered by instructors and building community with classmates rank at the top (Risepoint 2026). These are not passive participation preferences – they are active learning and belonging needs. Separately, **81% of online learners now say they'd like to visit campus at some point**, up from 58% in 2024 (Risepoint 2026). That number isn't a logistical burden – it's an opportunity to build retention-supporting connection through well-placed in-person touchpoints like graduation (**46%** cite this as a top reason), professor meetings (**24%**), and classmate connection (**19%**) (Risepoint 2025).

Approximately **one-third of enrolled students still prefer fully asynchronous formats** (Risepoint 2025), so the answer is not mandatory synchronous sessions – it's optional-but-designed synchronous engagement that delivers genuine value when students choose to attend.

Recommendation: Audit your current course shells this semester. For any course currently offering zero synchronous options, add one optional live session per course unit – structured as an instructor-led Q&A

with a 30-minute hard stop – and track attendance and satisfaction separately. Use that data to make the case to faculty governance for a synchronous design standard within 12 months.

4. Program Portfolio and Credential Architecture Need a Structural Review

The credential landscape has shifted structurally, not just at the margins. From 2014 to 2023, undergraduate enrollment in exclusively online programs grew **97%**, graduate enrollment grew **86%**, and more than **800 institutions that had not previously reported certificate programs began doing so by 2023** (EducationDynamics 2025). The portfolio question for small and mid-sized institutions is no longer whether to offer alternative credentials – it's whether your current credential architecture is coherent enough for students to navigate and trust.

Here's where the trust gap lives: **52% of learners are concerned that non-degree credentials are not highly valued by employers**, and **48% don't understand how stackable credentials can lead to a full degree** (Risepoint 2026). Yet **71% agree that non-degree programs can help gain job-specific skills quickly**, and **69% see them as viable reskilling pathways** (Risepoint 2026). Students are interested but unconvinced – and that gap is a communication and design failure, not a demand problem.

Metric	Benchmark	Source
Institutions offering graduate degrees online	89%	UPCEA 2025
Institutions offering graduate certificates online	81%	UPCEA 2025
Institutions offering undergraduate degrees online	78% (up from 68%)	UPCEA 2025
Institutions supporting microcredentials/alt credentials	68%	UPCEA 2025
Master's completions with distance component	56%	RNL 2024
Bachelor's completions with distance component	26%	RNL 2024
Learner interest in non-degree programs (2026)	56% (up from 48%)	Risepoint 2026
Learners concerned non-degree credentials undervalued	52%	Risepoint 2026

Business (**23%**), Health/Nursing/Medicine (**19%**), and Computers & IT/Technology (**14%**) together represent **56% of the online student market** (EducationDynamics 2024). Graduate students are **5% more likely** than undergraduates to enroll in Computer and IT/Technology programs (EducationDynamics 2024) – a meaningful signal for differentiated program development by level.

Recommendation: Conduct a credential architecture review within the next 60 days. Map every non-degree offering to at least one degree pathway and publish that map explicitly on program pages. If your stackable credential story isn't legible in two sentences on a landing page, students won't believe it – and neither will employers.

5. Online Program Design Audit: A Six-Stage Readiness Review

Stage 1 – Days 1–15: AI Integration Inventory Assign a curriculum coordinator or instructional design lead to audit every active online course shell. Flag courses with no AI discussion, no AI policy statement, and no applied AI exercise. Report findings to the dean's office as a gap map, not a compliance report. Ownership: Director of Instructional Design or online program director.

Stage 2 – Days 15–30: Synchronous Architecture Assessment Pull LMS data on optional synchronous session attendance rates across the last two terms. Identify courses with zero synchronous touchpoints. Flag programs in high-demand fields (Health, Business, IT) where community-building is a known retention driver. Ownership: Online program directors in coordination with registrar.

Stage 3 – Days 30–45: Credential Pathway Mapping Convene a one-day working session with academic affairs and marketing to map every certificate and microcredential to its degree pathway. Produce a single visual artifact – a pathway map – that can live on program pages and in advisor talking points. Ownership: Academic affairs with marketing support.

Stage 4 – Days 45–60: Program Page Structural Audit Review all program pages against structured content standards: Quick Facts block (duration, modality, tuition range, start dates) near the top; bullet-pointed learning outcomes with discipline-specific semantic keywords; career outcomes section with job titles, industries, employer names, and links to BLS projections (Kanahoma 2026). Flag pages missing two or more elements for immediate revision. Ownership: Marketing director and web team.

Stage 5 – Days 60–75: Industry Advisory Activation Identify three to five employer contacts per high-enrollment program. Convene brief advisory calls (45 minutes maximum) focused on two questions: What AI skills do you expect graduates to have? What credential formats would you support for tuition reimbursement? Use findings to brief curriculum committees. Ownership: Dean's office or program directors.

Stage 6 – Days 75–90: Design Standard Ratification Bring findings from Stages 1–5 to the relevant faculty governance body with a proposed minimum design standard: one AI ethics module, one applied AI exercise, one optional synchronous session, and one explicit credential pathway statement per course or program. Request a ratification vote or a 90-day pilot approval. Ownership: Chief Online Learning Officer or academic dean.

The single most important shift administrators need to make is this: stop treating online program design as a delivery format decision and start treating it as a curriculum quality decision. The learners enrolling in your programs in 2026 are choosing online because it fits their lives – not because they expect less. They want AI preparation, they want human connection on their terms, they want credentials that employers recognize, and they want to understand exactly what they're buying before they apply. Institutions that close the gap between what students expect and what programs deliver will compete. Those that continue to treat AI integration as a future priority, synchronous design as optional, and credential architecture as a catalog problem will find themselves explaining flat or declining enrollment numbers to boards that expected growth.

References

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