Adrift in a Pandemic

3,000+ Higher Ed Students on Remote Learning and Their Plans for Fall 2020

May 2020
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This winter, colleges and universities faced an unexpected test when COVID-19 forced them to close campuses and deliver courses online. So far, students have given their efforts a failing grade, according to 3,089 college and university students who responded to Top Hat’s COVID-19 State of Flux survey.

The global pandemic represents the single biggest shock to the educational system in living memory. And we will likely experience the reverberations for years to come. Top Hat conducted this survey of U.S. and Canadian higher ed students to more clearly understand how COVID-19 has affected their experiences, as well as their plans to return to school.

While the sudden, unplanned need to transition courses online left colleges and universities in an impossible predicament, students have been grateful for the effort on the part of their institutions. Countless educators moved quickly to learn new technologies, adjusting lesson plans and assignments on the fly. They created new learning communities to share resources and mentor and assist each other. Most importantly, in the midst of the turmoil, they continued to support anxious students to ensure a successful conclusion to the semester.

Nevertheless, for many, the rapid shift online has been characterized by disjointed learning experiences delivered using hastily assembled solutions. It’s been a challenging journey but, given the circumstances, it would be premature to pass judgment on the value of thoughtfully constructed online courses—or the capacity of higher ed institutions and faculty to deliver an effective, engaging and motivating experience to students.

So called ‘emergency remote teaching’ is a different animal when compared to the experience of students enrolled in well-designed digital courses. Much evidence suggests that with the right tools and practices, educators can deliver online and hybrid learning experiences that are as valuable as those delivered in a physical classroom. What is not so easy to replicate...
are the other aspects of college life that students value—sports, social activities and access to campus resources—of which classroom learning is only a part.

Absent opportunities to connect with peers on campus, the virtual classroom has become the only place for students to find that human connection. Unfortunately, the return to the “sage-on-stage” model of lecturing—this time through a video stream—has left students feeling unmotivated. Students have become disconnected from their classes and are spending less time on coursework.

Inequities around the student learning experience are also being more deeply felt; issues such as access to the Internet, computers and quiet study spaces as well as personal priorities that might include childcare and essential work have come to the forefront as challenges students are facing today.

It’s also brought into sharp relief concerns about the value students receive for their tuition dollars. The version of online learning delivered in the aftermath of COVID-19 is not what students signed up for. As a result, more than 25 percent are questioning whether to return to their current college or university in the fall term.

The pandemic is not responsible for the shift to online learning, nor the desire among students to see a greater return on their investment in higher education. It has simply accelerated a shift already well underway—bringing a greater sense of urgency to institutions to demonstrate the ROI of a college education.

The good news is that whether online, in-person or a combination of the two, valuable learning has always shared more traits in common than not. It is collaborative and exploratory. It is active and experiential. Above all, it involves instructors leveraging insights, empathy and the power of their experience to enable every student to realize their potential.

Historically, technology represented a smaller part of this equation. In these uncertain times, it has become essential to deliver an engaging and effective educational experience at scale. While technology alone will not solve the challenges before us, it is vital that the solutions we choose serve to humanize the learning experience. To reach and engage students, technology must support proven pedagogies like active learning and contribute to community building inside and outside the ‘classroom.’ It has become clear that online and hybrid learning will become the new normal for the coming academic year. For institutional leaders, these next few months will be crucial in preparing for a variety of different teaching scenarios, communicating plans to students and ensuring faculty are equipped to teach effectively in this new environment.

There is a great deal of uncertainty and much to figure out. But as with any significant disruption, there also lies opportunity to take stock and reimagine the future. By understanding what learners think and what they value, we can not only adapt to the new reality, we can create new gateways for learning and preparing students for what lies ahead.

Nick Stein
Chief Marketing Officer
Top Hat

Forty (40) percent of respondents were first-year students, 27 percent were in their second year, 19 percent were in their third year, and 14 percent were in their fourth year. The survey asked students to consider their experiences with emergency remote instruction in the winter 2020 term, as well as their expectations for the fall 2020 semester. The survey examined:

The quality of student education: We asked students about the biggest impediments to their learning, how their study habits have been impacted by the shift to remote teaching and the effectiveness of both self-paced and real-time online learning environments.

The resources and assets students need: We wanted to find out what the loss of campus resources and access to peers and faculty meant to students—and how this disruption has affected their sense of well-being.

The student perspective on institutions: We aimed to uncover how students felt their places of higher learning had responded to the pandemic—and how that’s affecting their decisions for school in the coming fall.

Student learning preferences: We were interested in understanding student receptivity to future online learning and how professors and institutions can best prepare for a variety of teaching scenarios going forward.

By sharing these findings with the community, Top Hat hopes to improve the general understanding of how the pandemic is impacting technology adoption, usage and effectiveness in higher ed.
The move to emergency online learning has sparked concerns around the quality of instruction students have received. Adding to the challenge, many had to give up access to study spaces they relied on to complete assignments, while others have contended with a lack of computer and reliable Internet access with which to leverage digital learning materials. These difficulties have had a sizable impact on motivation: the time spent on homework and preparing for assessments has widely decreased.
The abrupt switch from in-person to online instruction posed a number of challenges, including the loss of campus resources that are critical to the success of many students. As a whole, remote learning has proved far less engaging than what students are accustomed to in the physical classrooms, with the lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty being a major consideration.

Success in Online Classes Is More Than Just Keeping Up With Coursework

Have you experienced any difficulties adjusting to online learning? Select all that apply.

- Lack of an engaging in-class experience: 78%
- Lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and students during class: 75%
- Lack of regular and reliable access to quiet study space: 62%
- Difficulty navigating/using online learning tools: 27%
- Lack of regular and reliable access to Internet: 23%
- Difficulty accessing online learning materials: 22%
- I have not experienced any difficulties in adjusting to online learning: 10%
- Lack of regular and reliable access to a computer: 6%

As institutions solidify plans for the fall, student equity and access issues are an obvious concern. For many, learning at home is far from ideal due to connectivity issues and the inability to access spaces conducive to quiet study. Over the past few months, many professors implemented technologies that students had to learn how to navigate, adding additional stresses and frustrations. On the social-emotional side, students clearly miss in-person connections with faculty and classmates.

Success in Online Classes Is More Than Just Keeping Up With Coursework

Quality of Education
Institutions Need to Go Beyond the Status Quo to Improve Student Learning

Students give low marks to the abrupt transition to emergency online learning. Almost seven out of 10 students believe emergency online instruction was worse than the in-person learning experience they are used to. This points to the difference between courses hastily transitioned to support emergency remote teaching as opposed to those carefully designed with online teaching in mind.

How does online instruction compare to the in-person instruction you received at your school?

- Better: 5%
- A lot better: 1%
- About the same: 26%
- Worse: 51%
- A lot worse: 16%

Quality of Education

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“It’s been really hard trying to keep myself motivated. Finding time for school has been harder.”

“The value of in-person learning is better than online. The value of facial expressions and connecting is more important than the content. It changes how students learn and ultimately develop as a whole.”

“When in class, the lecture does not feel limited as I can ask questions and see everyone’s reaction or responses. Online lecture hinders that experience. Also, during class, when you sit next to someone, making friends and study groups is a lot easier as well.”

“My grades have significantly dropped in my language class and management class, as I do not have the face-to-face interaction specifically needed for those classes.”
Students’ Study Habits Are Suffering

Student engagement with course content has been particularly hard hit. The disruption of moving back home and immersing in new remote learning environments has had a significant effect on motivation. With students having to adapt how, when and where they can study, it’s no wonder half of respondents reported spending less time completing coursework.

How has the COVID-19 situation impacted the amount of time you’re spending on your coursework?

- I’m spending more time on coursework, exam preparation, etc. 31%
- I’m spending the same amount of time as before on coursework, exam preparation, etc. 19%
- I’m spending less time on coursework, exam preparation, etc. 50%

**TAKEAWAY**
For some students, the increased time spent on coursework may reflect efforts on the part of faculty to place greater emphasis on asynchronous assignments in place of remote exams. On the other hand, recognizing the level of stress students faced, some faculty lowered their expectations, reducing workload and providing greater accommodation for deadlines and deliverables. As institutions move forward, student engagement and motivation will be important barometers in gauging the effectiveness of online teaching.
Anxiety and Concern Characterize Student Sentiment Towards Their Education

It’s no understatement to say that the winter 2020 semester did not go as planned. The disruption caused by the pandemic has been significant. Unsurprisingly, with the shift to remote learning, one of the biggest areas of loss for students had to do with campus resources and the in-person interactions they’re used to having with professors and peers.
Which of these words best characterize how you feel right now? Select all that apply.

- 38% Calm
- 38% Worried
- 37% Nervous
- 52% Anxious
- 30% Annoyed
- 24% Happy
- 23% Confused
- 8% Angry
- 6% Surprised

**Takeaway**

While more than one in three students feel calm and almost one in four report feeling happy, more than a third remain nervous. This dichotomy could be caused by any number of factors, ranging from concerns for their own health and safety (and that of their families) to individual preferences for teaching format. Overall, more than half of students reported feeling anxious. For most students, the pandemic has taken a heavy emotional toll and many were deeply apprehensive about their ability to finish the semester without the benefits of on-campus resources.
Food, lodging, interactions with peers—there were many benefits that came with life on campus. Professors and institutions have done their best to ensure some degree of continuity in these unprecedented times. However, access to student services and the human connections with classmates and faculty were sorely missed and not easily replicated.

Students Miss the Resources and Human Elements of On-Campus Learning: Part 1

What impact has the closure of your school had on your education and quality of life? Select all that apply.

- **68%** I no longer have regular access to classmates
- **52%** I no longer have regular access to faculty
- **40%** I no longer have access to student services (e.g. counseling, tutoring)
- **29%** The school closure has had minimal impact on my quality of life
- **23%** The school closure has had minimal impact on my education
- **9%** I no longer have access to the technology required to complete my studies successfully
- **6%** I no longer have predictable access to food
- **2%** I no longer have access to safe housing

Anxiety and Concern
Students Miss the Resources and Human Elements of On-Campus Learning: Part 2

What do you miss most about the on-campus experience? Select all that apply.

- **The social experience with other students**: 86%
- **Face-to-face interactions with faculty**: 84%
- **Access to study spaces**: 76%
- **Access to fitness and sports facilities**: 58%
- **Access to food services**: 28%
- **Access to technology**: 27%
- **Access to student counseling**: 27%
- **Access to student housing**: 27%

**TAKEAWAY**
Interactions with fellow students and access to professors top the list of campus experiences respondents missed the most. The relationships students build—and the loss of amenities associated with college life such as events, sporting activities and support resources—significantly impacted how students felt about the end of the semester.

Anxiety and Concern
Learning on campus provides valuable structures and supports that keep students on track. The loss of these resources due to campus closures sapped student confidence, not only in their ability to pass the semester, but finish it altogether. The results underscore the value students associate with the resources and relationships that are part of the normal campus experience.

**With Resources Gone, Student Concerns Over Finishing the Winter Semester Mount**

**IN THEIR OWN WORDS**

- "I am really struggling to get all of my assignments done. My teachers are not able to teach as well as they can in person and are assigning projects and expecting us to know how to do them without being taught."
- "I no longer have the ability to completely focus in a classroom compared to the disruptions at home."
- "I had technology in my apartment but came to care for my parents in their home which is Internet limited."

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**Are you concerned about your ability to finish the current school semester?**

- 9% I am highly concerned
- 31% I am somewhat concerned
- 60% I am not concerned

**Are you concerned about your ability to pass the current school semester?**

- 16% I am highly concerned
- 48% I am somewhat concerned
- 36% I am not concerned

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**Anxiety and Concern**
Real-Time and Self-Paced Learning Both Have a Place in the Virtual Classroom

There’s no one-size-fits-all solution for online teaching. Institutions, along with their educators, have been wise to realize that a mixture of synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (self-paced) teaching was essential in the move to remote environments. Just as important: providing valuable engagement and structure to student learning and creating a community in the virtual classroom.
Students Still Prefer Real-Time Learning and Human Interactions

In the best on-campus learning environments, students experienced engaging in-class activities supplemented with structured assessments and direction to keep the learning process going outside of the classroom. In the virtual classroom, they still crave real-time learning, and the ability to connect with peers and professors.

Overall, which of the following statements is true?

- I enjoy and see value in real-time online learning: 41%
- I do not enjoy or see value in real-time online learning: 36%
- Does not apply: 15%
- Other: 9%

How much do you like each of the following real-time online learning activities?
Rate on a scale of 1-4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>1 - Dislike this</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 - I like this a lot!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Real-time lectures and discussions using video conferencing</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online chatting with classmates</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online chatting with faculty</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking scheduled online tests and exams</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
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TAKEAWAYS

Four in 10 respondents see value in real-time online learning—and the ability to communicate and host discussions using video conferencing. For many students, this is not their first exposure to the virtual classroom. Online learning is common in high schools and colleges where well-constructed courses allow learners to thrive remotely. Unfortunately, given the haste with which faculty moved to remote teaching, it proved difficult to deliver effective online learning experiences many students found valuable. Students also noted their concerns with scheduled online tests and exams, suggesting that taking time to orient and acclimate students to remote assessments—or offering a wider swath of formative assessment options—should be an important priority moving forward.

Synchronous and Asynchronous
Students See Value in Self-Paced Learning—With Some Caveats

Many students believe asynchronous teaching, including the use of homework assignments, essays and pre-class assessments, are an important and valued part of online learning. Leveraging this format of teaching with thoughtful course design and ongoing communication channels allows for flexibility and ensures students learn effectively outside of real-time classes.

TAKEAWAY
Nearly half of all students reported seeing value in independent online learning and appreciate the ability to access lecture recordings to keep up with their coursework. That said, more than 35 percent were far less favorable, suggesting the need for institutions, and faculty, to create frameworks, processes and courseware to increase the value and engagement of asynchronous learning. Nearly 50 percent of respondents viewed digital course materials negatively, indicating an opportunity to improve by incorporating purpose-built digital textbooks as opposed to more static formats such as PDFs and other electronic documents. The ambivalence surrounding the tools students used to connect with each other may hint at the need for online learning technologies to support student connections and engagement in and out of the classroom.

How much do you like each of the following self-led and independent online learning activities? Rate on a scale of 1-4.

<table>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4 - I like this a lot!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewing lecture recordings</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with digital course materials</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using email and other online tools to communicate with classmates</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using email and other online tools to communicate with my professor</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Synchronous and Asynchronous
The pandemic and subsequent campus closures presented institutions with extraordinary continuity challenges. Students and their families were willing to accept a less-than-perfect experience given the sheer scope of issues faced. However, this sense of empathy and understanding will likely not extend indefinitely. There is an expectation that institutions and professors must do better in the coming fall semester for students to continue to derive value from their educational investment.
Effective communication is the most important element in handling a crisis. Students felt the response they received from their institutions and professors was generally well done, although a third of respondents were somewhat negative in their assessment of both instructors and college. In looking ahead, robust, thoughtful communications will be vital to ensuring students understand how their learning challenges will be addressed along with what the learning experience will look and feel like for the fall semester.
More than half of students surveyed thought the emergency transition to online learning was adequate and that their institutions did a good job, given the circumstances. However, one in four students felt that their opinion of their school worsened during the crisis. This difference in student opinion reveals a clear distinction between how various institutions handled campus closures.

How has your opinion of your school changed during this crisis?

- Significantly worse: 4%
- Slightly worse: 21%
- Same as before: 51%
- Slightly better: 16%
- Significantly better: 6%
- Other: 2%

**TAKEAWAY**
Institutions and faculty that responded effectively, communicated well and took steps to accommodate students improved their standing in students’ eyes. This may bode well in terms of increasing student confidence in their college or university's ability to ensure meaningful learning experiences for the fall semester. These findings also underscore the importance of communicating changes along with how students will be accommodated and supported in the months ahead.
Uncertainty and Hope Characterize Student Thoughts on Returning to Campus

Campus closures affected everything from the emotional health and well-being of students to the way learners feel about their institutions. As many as a quarter of all students surveyed may not return to their colleges and universities. Yet despite the tumult, others are hopeful about attending their current institutions—and many are open to maintaining some of their courses online in a blended capacity.
COVID-19 Hugely Impacted Student Lives—But Many Are Planning to Return to Their Institutions

Heightened concerns surrounding college affordability, the health and safety of loved ones and the ability to work online—the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of students have been as wide-ranging as they have been significant. For many, the hope of returning to campus in the fall—even with modifications to learning and course delivery—may represent a bright spot in these challenging times.

How has the current crisis impacted your plans to attend school in fall 2020? Select all that apply.

- I have not changed my plans to attend school in fall 2020: 67%
- I am undecided and will base my decision on what the fall semester will look like: 26%
- My education may no longer be affordable for my family: 12%
- I do not like learning online so I may not return to school: 7%
- A family member or I have health concerns that require me to change my plans: 5%
- I did not like how my school handled COVID-19 so I may not return to school: 3%

How likely are you to return to your current school for the fall term?

- Highly likely: 52%
- Likely: 23%
- Unlikely: 3%
- Too soon to say: 5%
- Highly unlikely: 7%
- Not sure: 3%

TAKEAWAY
For nearly 70 percent of students, their plans to attend college in the fall have not changed, with three quarters of respondents confirming they are likely or highly likely to return to their current institution. However, with a quarter of students undecided about their plans to attend school, and 15 percent unsure about whether they will return to their current school due to concerns around affordability and personal and familial health and safety, there is great urgency for institutions to finalize and communicate plans to students about their vision for the coming semester.
Returning to Campus

**Students Still Crave In-Person Learning, Though a Blended Model Proves Intriguing**

A pure online-only learning environment for the fall semester is not a popular choice. Ultimately, students seek connections with their professors and peers and access to campus amenities and resources. The good news is that many students would be receptive to a blended learning approach, dividing time between online and in-person instruction.

**Schools are currently planning for a number of scenarios for the fall 2020 semester, including completely in-class, completely online, and blended models of teaching. Assuming the current COVID-19 crisis has passed by then, which of these three models do you prefer?**

- **100% in-class on-campus learning model**: 57%
- **100% online learning model**: 7%
- **Blended learning comprising in-class and online instruction**: 36%

**TAKEAWAY**

Like everyone else, students seek a return to normal—more than 56 percent want in-class on-campus learning to resume. The ancillary benefits of being on campus (access to amenities and resources, social and sporting activities, among others) remain an integral and valuable component of the higher education experience. For 36 percent of respondents, however, a blended model (where a portion of time is spent online and another portion in class) is appealing. The openness to this approach may be an acknowledgment of a new normal—and perhaps even a new level of expectation—that needs to be considered by faculty and administrators as they plan for the upcoming semester.
What will the higher education landscape look like this fall—and how will students react? With more time to prepare for what is likely to be an online teaching environment, will institutions and faculty be able to deliver on students’ increased expectations? And if those expectations aren’t met, will we see even more dramatic declines in enrollment next winter and beyond if more students decide a degree is not worth the price of admission?

These are the critical questions raised by the results of this survey. In this moment of change, the way institutions and faculty address these questions will have profound implications for the future of higher education.

One of the most pressing issues facing higher ed is the ability to demonstrate a return to students on their considerable tuition investment. While some students appreciate the utility of online instruction, many more are skeptical of the value of online courses relative to the cost. How will institutions reconcile the skepticism students have over the value of online education with the reality that online and hybrid learning will be the new normal for the coming academic year?

Research suggests that the quality of instruction and how well it is delivered will weigh heavily on the student decision-making process. Improved online course delivery, face-to-face interaction with faculty, and opportunities to connect socially with peers top the list of student wishes.

In addition to filling the logistical and technological gaps exposed during the sudden and dramatic transition to online learning this winter, institutions must move quickly to communicate their plans for the fall semester. This includes providing a clear and compelling vision of what students can expect from their learning experience. The next few months will be critical to addressing student concerns in order to mitigate the impact of a decline in enrollments on institutional finances. Colleges and universities that most clearly understand what’s important to students will be in the best position to respond effectively.
Given the challenges many students have experienced navigating and accessing remote learning environments, providing proper support to set them up for success will be vital. Here are some key considerations as institutions begin to solidify their plans, whether for a partial or fully remote teaching semester.

**Leveling the Playing Field**

For many North Americans the digital divide is still alive and well. A significant portion of low income students do not have access to the necessary technology, reliable Internet or home environments conducive to effective learning. Understanding the gaps that exist across the student body and offering financial support to those in need are important first steps. Schools should also ensure they provide multiple channels to access information, resources and communicate with peers and instructors to set all students up for success. Incorporating asynchronous or ‘offline’ learning options is also important in giving students the flexibility they need to participate and complete coursework, whatever their personal circumstance.

Applying the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to course design will also ensure that institutions maximize opportunities for learning on behalf of students with disabilities. This includes providing multimodal ways of learning such as reading text, watching videos and listening to audio. Now may be an opportune time for institutions to embrace digital media and textbooks. Not only are they less expensive than traditional print materials, the better ones incorporate multimedia and interactive elements to engage students with different learning needs.

**Prioritizing Flexibility**

Designing courses for online delivery is likely the most prudent approach. It will be much easier for faculty to plan for online delivery and then bring portions of the online experience to in-person classes as the need and opportunity arises. So-called “HyFlex” courses, or those delivered in person and online, are an attractive option. Flexibility and choice will be important for students who may need to learn remotely due to financial, familial or health-related concerns.

The foundation for all of this is well-integrated, purpose-built technology. Schools cannot afford to rely on solutions that were not designed with online teaching in mind. A return to the “sage-on-stage” experience, delivered via Zoom, is not going to provide students the educational ROI they’re seeking. Nor will relying on learning management systems designed to support course administration. Schools need to prioritize platforms that support engaging live, synchronous content delivery, self-paced, or asynchronous learning as well as ongoing communications between instructors, students and classmates.

**Creating Belonging and Human Connection**

We all know that learning is only one of the benefits of a college education. Creating social connections with faculty and peers is central to the campus experience. Finding ways to replace that human connection and encourage interaction between students and faculty will be critical to successful online teaching—especially when it comes to creating learning communities that extend beyond the ‘classroom.’
Active learning pedagogies that emphasize discussion and collaboration can make the virtual classroom a more inviting place while discussion boards and video conferencing can provide avenues for students to engage and build connections with one another.

These efforts will require something of a mind shift where in addition to the role of ‘instructor,’ faculty also adopt the mantle of ‘community manager.’ This will involve regularly polling students about course content and materials, participating in online discussions and using data and insights to identify and reach out to at-risk students.

Institutions and faculty need to demonstrate to students that they are central to the campus community. The more engaging and human they can make the experience, the more students will see value in continuing their path toward a higher ed degree. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the health and well-being of students and with it, the preparedness of many to attend higher ed institutions. As higher education continues with this grand experiment, the importance of helping students acclimate to new technologies, structures, resources and expectations cannot be overstated.

Top Hat’s all-in-one teaching platform enables professors to connect with students inside and outside the classroom with engaging content, tools, and activities. Millions of students at 750 leading North American colleges and universities use the Top Hat teaching platform for in-class, online, and blended learning.

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