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# **Online Learner Expectations Survey: Fall 2021 Results**

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## Executive Summary

This report presents a summary of the results of the first full administration of the Online Learner Expectations Survey (OLES) in fall 2021, conducted by the Center for Evaluation, Policy, and Research for the Indiana University Office of Online Education. The primary purpose of OLES is to gather information about IU Online students' expectations and experiences in online programs. The key research questions guiding this study are (1) what are students' expectations of online education courses? and (2) how do students define value and quality in online courses?

After a pilot survey and subsequent revisions in fall 2020 and early 2021, the finalized OLES instrument was distributed to all students enrolled in IU Online undergraduate programs at the regional campuses in September 2021. This report contains an overview of the survey development, revisions, and methodology, survey results, discussion of findings with comparisons to pilot survey results, if applicable, and recommendations for moving forward with ongoing survey implementation.

Based on a review of the literature, interviews with a sample of students, and the results of the pilot survey, we identified indicators of program quality in online education to include on the OLES instrument to probe students' perceptions of quality in those areas based on their experiences learning online. Survey items were organized into the following areas:

- Employment status
- Level of experience with online learning (with IU Online and with other providers)
- Reasons for taking courses with IU Online
- Factors contributing to satisfaction and dissatisfaction
- Communication within IU Online courses (with instructors and with students)
- Overall satisfaction

Below are key findings from the OLES data related to the original research questions, with additional findings and detail presented throughout the associated sections of the report:

### Key Findings

1. What are students' expectations of online education courses?
  - Convenience and flexibility. Survey respondents identified convenience and flexibility as one of the important factors in their decision to take IU Online

courses and as a primary reason they would recommend their program to a colleague or peer.

- Opportunities for career advancement. Survey respondents identified career advancement as the most important factor in their decision to take IU Online courses.

2. How do students define value and quality in online courses?

- Relevant content and manageable workload. Survey respondents identified applicable or practical course content as the most important factor in their satisfaction with IU Online courses, and the course workload as the most important factor in their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses. Unclear course requirements were also a highly important factor in respondents' dissatisfaction with IU Online.
- Effective and communicative instructors. Survey respondents identified instructors as an important factor in both their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with IU Online courses, and most were satisfied with their communications with their instructors. Of the small percentage of respondents (5%) who indicated that they would not recommend their IU Online program, the most frequently cited reasons were related to instructor or instruction quality.

# Introduction

The Indiana University Office of Online Education (OOE) collaborates with all IU campuses to provide academic programs and services that give students a high-quality, interactive, and engaging experience. OOE is housed in University Academic Affairs. To the public, it is known as IU Online. OOE acts as a curricular clearinghouse and provides seamless, shared services for IU's online students (<https://teachingonline.iu.edu/about/staff/index.html>).

The Office of Online Education collaborated with the Center for Evaluation, Policy and Research (CEPR) to conduct the Online Learner Expectations Survey (OLES) to assess undergraduate students' expectations of and experiences with fully online degree programs at Indiana University. A brief description the survey's development and implementation follows.

## Objectives & research questions

This survey stems from lack of research in the field related to assessing the quality of online education programs from students' perspectives. This study does not address the quality of specific online courses; rather, it examines students' general expectations of and experiences with online education. The primary objective of the survey is to: (1) increase understandings of how undergraduate students enrolled in fully online programs perceive quality and value in their online courses. The overarching questions framing the study include the following:

- What are students' expectations of online education courses?
  - Do these expectations differ across time? By degree program? By other demographic and background characteristics?
  - To what extent, and in what ways, do students' expectations for online education programs align with their experiences with these programs? Does the alignment (or nonalignment) impact students' perceptions of quality and value?
- How do students define value and quality in online courses?
  - What key factors and variables do students use to assess value and quality?
  - Do the factors that determine value and quality change over time (e.g., is quality defined differently at the beginning of a course, as compared to the middle or end of a course)?
  - To what extent, and in what ways, do students' definitions of value and quality differ based on various factors (e.g., number of previous online courses completed, degree program, demographic characteristics, etc.)?

Prior to OLES administration, CEPR used multiple research methods to conduct a four-phase study addressing these questions. These phases included:

1. Development of detailed protocols and instruments,
2. Qualitative interviews for the purposes of addressing key questions, and informing the development of a subsequent survey for broader data collection,
3. Development of a student survey and plans for implementation, and
4. Piloting the survey, analyzing data, and creating a long-term, sustainable plan for ongoing survey implementation.

This report presents the results of fully implementing OLES as revised after the pilot survey administration. We provide an overview of the OLES development and revision, full survey findings with comparisons to pilot survey results, where applicable, and recommendations for next steps based on these findings.

# Methodology

## Literature review

To begin this study, researchers conducted a review of scholarship in online education at the postsecondary level, which will be briefly summarized here. Although there are few studies focusing on the perspectives of online students in examining quality in online education, scholars have identified several general aspects related to quality in online learning from the provider standpoint. These include the institution's reputation, curriculum and instruction, staff support, learning support, technology support, QA mechanism, and student outcomes (Jung, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2005). From the student perspective, it is also important to consider students' prior experiences and their self-efficacy with online learning (Arbaugh, 2004). Based on these studies, the researchers identified several indicators of online learning program quality to include in research instruments that would probe the perspectives of students enrolled in online courses.

## Survey development and revision

To inform development of the pilot survey and OLES, researchers interviewed 20 students currently enrolled in undergraduate IU Online programs, using a semi-structured interview protocol based on the review of the literature on quality in online education. Analysis of the interview data subsequently informed the creation of the pilot survey for a sample of IU Online students. Specifically, we identified factors contributing to students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their online courses/programs and crafted survey items asking respondents to how or to what extent these factors played a role in their online learning experiences. These factors included, for example, relevance of course content, instructor quality, and communication among both online students and instructors. The pilot survey also included basic demographic questions for respondents to indicate their age range, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and employment status, as well as questions with regard to their IU Online campus of enrollment, number of courses taken, and previous experience with online education. These questions allowed for cross-tabulation analysis of certain other survey responses, to determine if significant differences exist among responses based on these categories.

Pilot survey implementation and responses from a sample of 500 students enrolled in fully online undergraduate programs across the six regional campuses in Fall 2020 informed survey revision to create the OLES final instrument. To reduce survey length, demographic questions for data that could be gleaned from the OLES survey sample (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, sex, and

campus of enrollment) were removed, but questions about employment status, number of courses taken, and previous online learning experience were included. Additionally, several pilot survey questions that resulted in data redundancies in the findings were removed. Two open-ended questions were added to give OLES respondents the opportunity to list additional factors that would contribute to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their online programs, and questions about frequencies of utilizing various modes of communication with online instructors and students were included.

## Sampling and distribution

The IU Office of Online Education provided a full list of students enrolled in fully online undergraduate programs in Fall 2021 across the six regional campuses (IU East, IUPUI, IU Kokomo, IU South Bend, IU Northwest, and IU Southeast). Please note that IU Bloomington is not included, due to the small number of fully online programs housed there.

Using the Qualtrics survey platform, the survey invitation and link were distributed to the full sample of students (2,961 valid email addresses) on September 21, 2021. Over the next three weeks, four email reminders from CEPR and two from the IU Office of Online Education were sent, and the survey was closed on October 13. Out of the entire sample of 2,961, a total of 559 responded to the survey, for a response rate of 19%.

Incentives were offered to the first 200 respondents who completed the survey. Both the email survey invitation and the online survey included information about the incentives: \$10 electronic Amazon gift cards offered to the first 200 respondents who chose to enter their name and email address upon survey completion in order to receive the gift cards.

## Data analysis

After the survey closed, all partial responses were recorded and included with the survey data. Please note that all respondents did not answer all questions; frequencies and percentages for each survey item are based on the number of responses to that item only. All survey data were downloaded into Excel files for further analysis. Quantitative data included responses to questions on respondent demographics, as well as demographic information included in the respondent sample, rank-order questions related to reasons for taking courses with IU Online and factors related to satisfaction and dissatisfaction, modes, frequencies, and levels of satisfaction with communication with instructors and other students, and yes/no questions related to whether respondents would recommend their IU Online program. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the quantitative data, as well as cross-tabulations of responses

based on demographic indicators. Qualitative data included responses to the open-ended survey items, in which respondents were asked to elaborate on responses to several questions related to their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their online learning experiences. Text responses were analyzed using qualitative coding procedures, with researchers identifying themes within responses to each open-ended question, grouping responses according to these themes, and calculating frequencies and percentages for each theme based on the number of responses.

## Survey findings

### Respondent demographics

Demographic information provided in the survey sample included age, race/ethnicity, sex, campus of enrollment, and program of study. After survey responses were recorded, these data were merged into the data set for the respondents. To provide additional demographic data, respondents were asked to indicate their current employment status. These data not only illustrate the characteristics of survey respondents but also allow for further analysis based on the information provided. The tables and figures included in the following section outline the demographic breakdown of survey respondents.

As indicated in Figure 1, over half of all respondents fell within two age ranges: 26% were 18-24 and 30% were 25-24.

**Figure 1. Age of survey respondents**

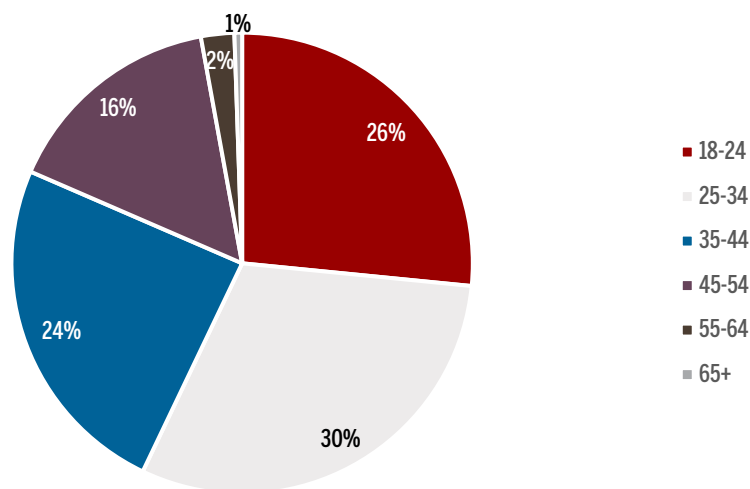


Figure 2 illustrates the racial/ethnic categories of survey respondents. A majority (73%) were White.

**Figure 2. Races/ethnicities of survey respondents**

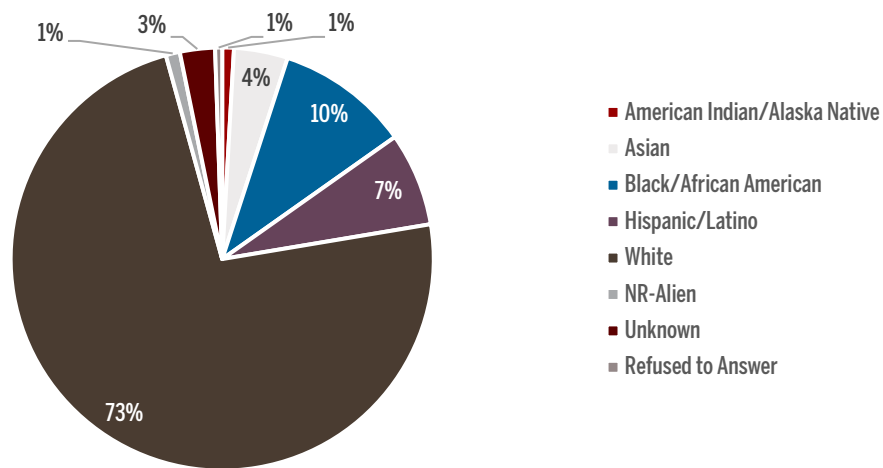
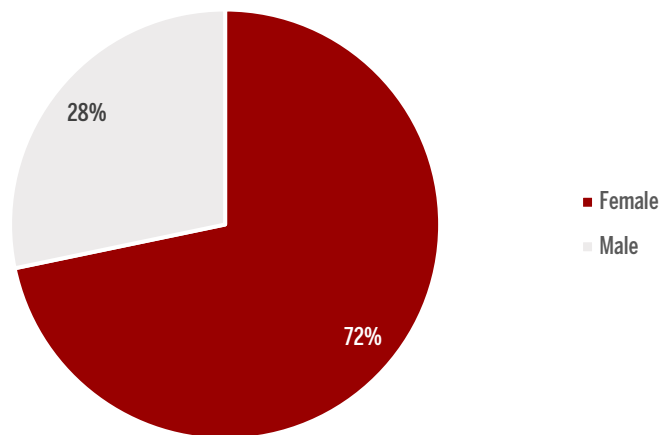


Figure 3 depicts the sexes of survey respondents. Of 559 respondents, 72% were female.

**Figure 3. Sex of survey respondents**



Respondents were asked to select their current employment status. Please note that respondents could select more than one option, thus percentages may exceed 100. Most respondents (63%) indicated that they were employed for pay, full-time (35+ hours/week). Table 1 illustrates full data on survey respondents' employment statuses.

**Table 1. Employment statuses of survey respondents**

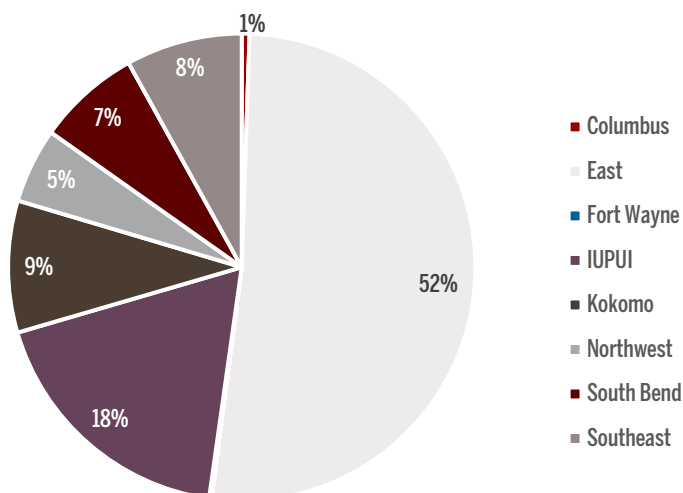
<b>What is your current employment status? Select all that apply.</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Employed for pay, full-time (35+ hours/week)</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>63%</b>
Employed for pay, part-time	97	17%
Full-time student, employed in academic work (e.g., research assistant)	14	3%
Full-time student, not employed	78	14%
Retired	4	1%
Stay-at-home parent	45	8%
Unemployed	31	6%
Unpaid internship	2	0%

N=559 (F=624)

Additional survey sample data and survey questions provide information about respondents' IU Online campus of enrollment, program of study, number of courses taken in Fall 2021, number of semesters taken with IU Online, and previous experience with online coursework through another college or university.

Figure 4 breaks down the campuses of enrollment for survey respondents. A majority (52%) indicated that they were enrolled at IU East.

**Figure 4. Campus of enrollment for survey respondents**



The survey sample included information about respondents' programs of study. These are listed with corresponding response frequencies in Table 2. The programs of study represented most frequently among survey respondents included Business Administration BS (17%), General Studies BGS (13%), and Psychology BS (12%). After the survey was administered, we received additional information from the IU Office of Online Education about the structure of these programs, i.e., whether they are collaborative, wherein students may enroll in courses across more than one campus, non-collaborative, wherein students take courses through only one campus, or certificate/non-degree programs. Breaking down the respondents by program type, 4% (24) were enrolled in certificate/non-degree programs, 38% (212) were enrolled in collaborative programs, and the remaining 58% (323) were enrolled in non-collaborative programs.

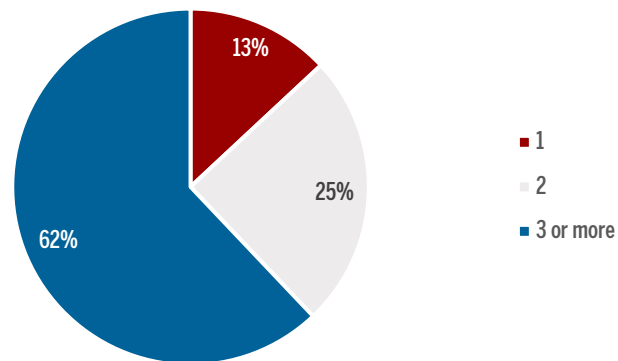
**Table 2. Programs of study of survey respondents**

<b>What is your program of study?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Non-Collaborative Degree Program</b>		
Communication Studies BA	10	2%
Communication Studies BS	11	2%
Criminal Justice BS	16	3%
English BA	20	4%
General Studies BS	74	13%
Health Information Administration BS	1	0%
Health Information Management BS	6	1%
Health Sciences BS	11	2%
Labor Studies AS	1	0%
Labor Studies BS	6	1%
Mathematics BS	59	11%
Natural Science & Math BA	5	1%
Nursing RN to BSN	24	4%
Political Science BS	10	2%
Psychology BS	66	12%
Sociology BS	2	0%
Technical Communication BS	1	0%
<b>Collaborative Degree Program</b>		
Applied Health Sciences BS	26	5%
Applied Science BAS	9	2%
<b>Business Administration BS</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>17%</b>
Data Science BS	18	3%
History BA	15	3%
Informatics BS	34	6%
Medical Imaging Tech BS	9	2%
Sustainability Studies BA	7	1%
<b>Certificate/Non-degree Program</b>		
Applied Computer Sci CERT	2	0%
Business Foundations CERT	1	0%
Histotechnology CERT	2	0%
Human Comm in Mediated World CERT	1	0%
Human Resource Mgmt CERT	3	1%
Medical Coding CERT	7	1%
Multi-Device Development CERT	1	0%
Non-Degree Undergraduate	2	0%
Pure Mathematics CERT	3	1%
Technical Communication CERT	2	0%

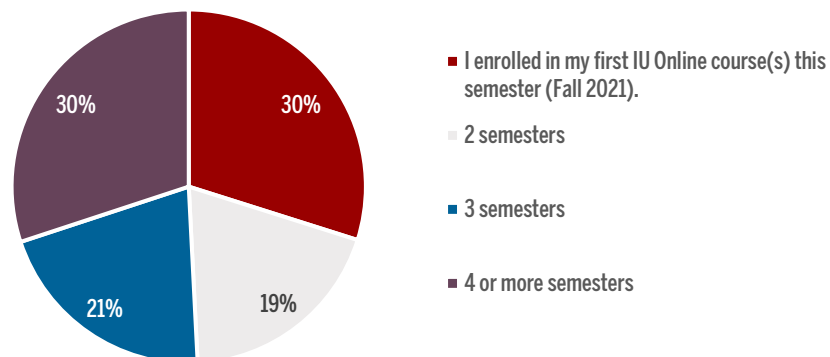
N=559

As illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, respectively, most survey respondents (62%) were taking three or more courses with IU Online in Fall 2021, and 30% had enrolled in their first IU Online course(s) in Fall 2021. Another 30% had taken four or more semesters/summer sessions with IU Online. Finally, respondents were asked whether they had previously taken online courses with any other college or university. Over half (56%) responded that they had.

**Figure 5. Number of IU Online courses in which respondents were enrolled for Fall 2021**



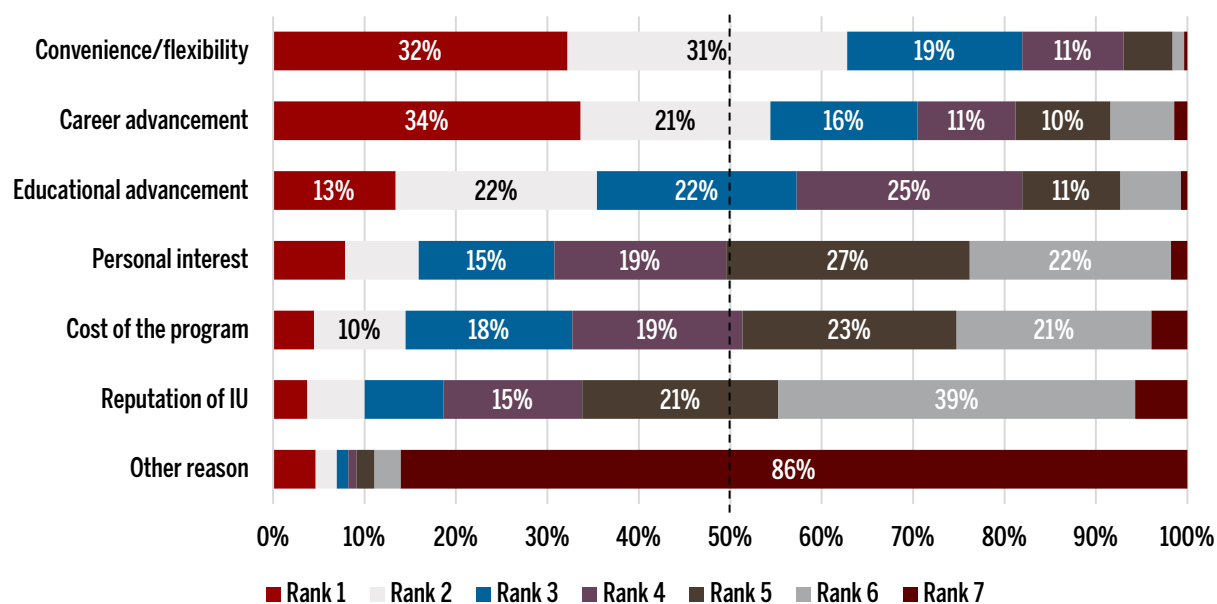
**Figure 6. Number of semesters in which respondents had enrolled overall**



## Reasons for taking IU Online courses and factors contributing to satisfaction and dissatisfaction

Survey respondents were asked to rank seven factors, from most to least important, in their decisions to take courses with IU Online. These factors included career advancement, convenience/flexibility, cost of the program, educational advancement, personal interest, reputation of IU, and other reason (text entry). Among 559 respondents, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) ranked convenience/flexibility as either the most or second-most important factor in their decision. Over half of respondents (55%) ranked career advancement as either the most or second-most important factor. Respondents overwhelmingly (86%) ranked “other reason” as the least important factor, so we consider the factors ranked as second or third-least important (six or five, on the seven-point scale) to illustrate which of the predetermined items were deemed less important. Among these, three-fifths (60%) ranked the reputation of IU as a less important factor, and nearly half (49%) ranked personal interest as a less important factor in their decision to take courses with IU Online. Figure 7 depicts the full results of this survey question.

**Figure 7. Rankings of reasons for taking IU Online course**



Note: For readability, data labels are only displayed for rankings with greater than 10% of respondents. Black dotted line indicates the median ranking where it passes through each bar (e.g., for “Career advancement” and “Personal Interest” the median responses were Rank 2 and Rank 5, respectively).

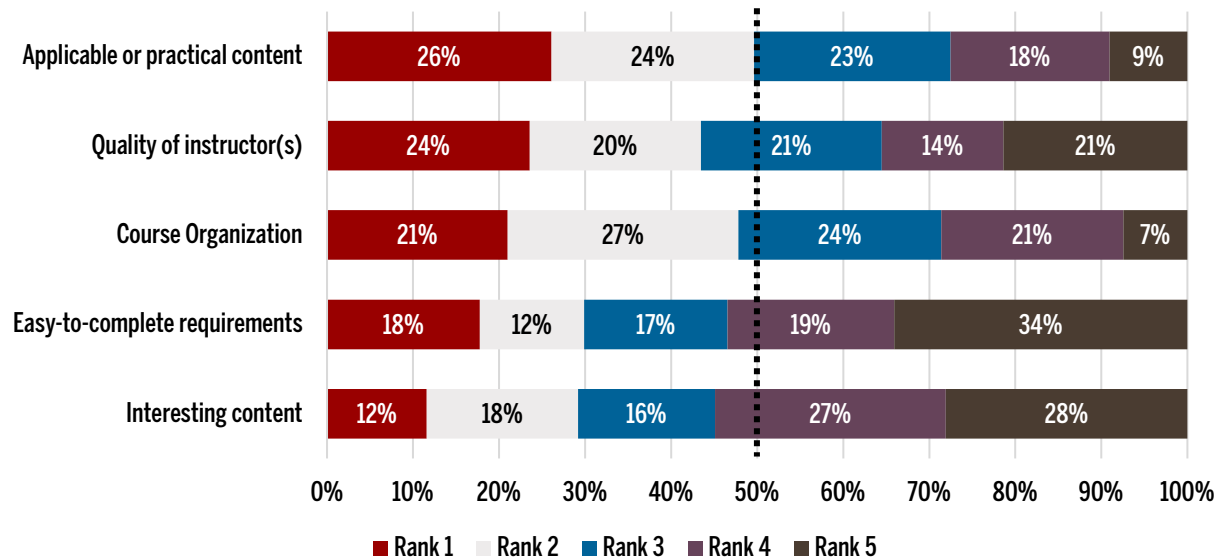
In addition to ranking the importance of the listed factors in their decisions to take courses with IU Online, respondents could enter text to indicate another reason for taking courses. These text responses were analyzed and grouped thematically; 69 respondents listed another reason here, with some indicating more than one, thus percentages sum to greater than 100. Some of the themes were similar or identical to the reasons listed in the rank-order question; for example, the most cited “other” reasons listed by respondents were related to flexibility or convenience of the online program. Response themes, frequencies, and examples are listed below:

- Flexibility/convenience (26%, 18)
  - *Allows me to work and go to school full-time*
  - *I can stay home with my son.*
  - *My jobs only allow me to take online classes. I don't have the time to go to campus for classes.*
- Program availability or features (20%, 14)
  - *Only way to get the degree I want*
  - *Credit for work experience/certification*
  - *Simpler transfer process*
- Required for work or career change/educational advancement (16%, 11)
  - *Career change, a degree will open more doors.*
  - *Stepping stone to obtain a master's degree*
  - *I now need a four-year degree where a two-year degree once worked.*
- Health concerns (e.g., COVID) (14%, 10)
  - *It is currently much safer than in-person classes*
- Degree completion (10%, 7)
- Reputation of IU (9%, 6)
- Other (9%, 6)
- Cost (6%, 4)

To provide more information on the factors contributing to IU Online students' satisfaction with their courses, survey respondents were asked to rank five factors from most to least important. These factors related to online coursework included applicable or practical content, course organization, easy-to-complete requirements, interesting content, and quality of instructor(s). Half (50%) of the 552 respondents ranked applicable or practical course content as the most or second-most important factor contributing to their satisfaction with IU Online courses, and nearly half (48%) ranked course organization as the most or second-most important factor. At

the other end of the scale, over half of respondents (55%) ranked interesting content as either the least or second-least important factor contributing to their satisfaction with IU Online courses (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Rankings of factors contributing to course satisfaction**



Note: Black dotted line indicates the median ranking where it passes through each bar (e.g., for “Applicable or practical content” and “Interesting content” the median responses were Rank 2 and Rank 3, respectively).

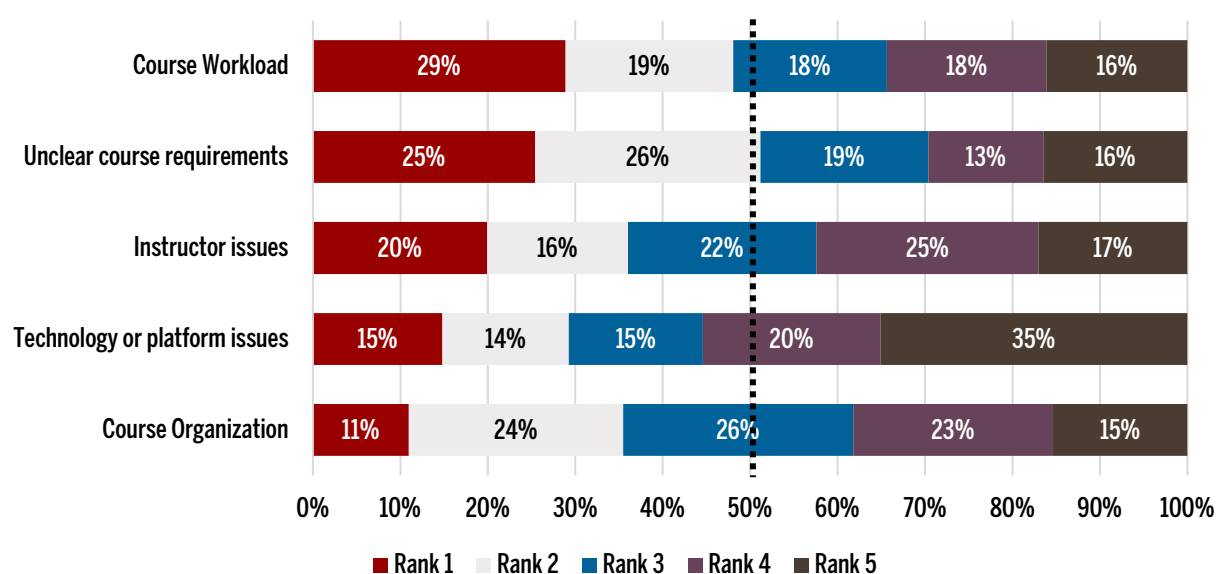
In an open-ended follow-up question, respondents were asked to list any additional factors that would contribute to their satisfaction with IU Online courses. These text responses were analyzed and grouped into thematic categories. Among the 58 responses, the most cited factors were related to course or program content. Response themes, frequencies, and examples are listed below:

- Course/program content (34%, 20)
  - *Having online recorded videos on the current class content from the professor helps.*
  - *Less busywork involving discussion threads*
  - *Materials are reused and contain unapplicable info. Recorded lectures often contain technical issues, real time errors, and delayed content while technical issues are being worked on during the recording.*
  - *Option of online textbooks*
  - *Less group projects*
  - *Course content used as indoctrination of immoral ideals*

- Platform/technical support or course organization (19%, 11)
  - *A tutorial video on how to use Canvas and the different materials*
  - *Consistency of user experience with the online platform. Currently it is very different among each professor, which distracts from the course because you have to learn how each instructor uses Canvas.*
  - *Make modules or assignments available so students who can work ahead can do so. This is extremely helpful when you have a very time consuming project at work to get ahead in class.*
- Instructors (19%, 11)
  - *Ability of instructors to adapt their preferred pedagogical approaches to reflect the needs of adult learners and to asynchronous learners*
  - *Additional access to instructors via organized e-lecture (on Zoom or another platform)*
  - *Professors who are consistent and efficient with communication and responses, getting back to your emails*
- Asynchronous or flexible format (9%, 5)
  - *Ability to complete course requirements without having a specific class time with participation points*
  - *Schedules allow completion around other responsibilities*
- Connections with other students/virtual meetings (9%, 5)
  - *A space to virtually meet my classmates or virtually experience activities of the in-person class*
  - *Virtual meeting opportunities*
- Offering additional degrees or program areas (3%, 2)
- Cost of program (3%, 2)
- Other (3%, 2)

Respondents were also asked to rank the importance of factors contributing to their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses. These factors included course workload, course organization, instructor issues, technology or platform issues, and unclear course requirements. Over half of the 547 respondents (51%) indicated that unclear course requirements were the most or second-most important factor in their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses, and nearly half (48%) ranked instructor issues as the most or second-most important factor. Over half of respondents each ranked technology or platform issues (55%) as the least or second-least important factors contributing to their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses (See Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Rankings of factors contributing to course dissatisfaction**



Note: Black dotted line indicates the median ranking where it passes through each bar (e.g., for “Course workload” and “Unclear course requirements” the median responses were Rank 2 and Rank 4, respectively).

In another open-ended follow-up question, respondents were asked to list any additional factors that would contribute to their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses. Again, these text responses were analyzed and grouped into thematic categories. Similar to the results for the factors contributing to respondent satisfaction, among the 52 responses to this question, the most common factors related to dissatisfaction were related to course content, including assignments, requirements, and organization. Additional response themes, frequencies, and examples are listed below.

- Course assignments/requirements/organization (37%, 19)
  - *Little to no understanding of what requirements should be prior to signing up for class. . . i.e., what should I really expect?*

- *Overreliance on discussion threads for homework*
- *I feel a lot of the time there is a textbook and the examples given are just direct copies from the textbook, which seems counterproductive, because then it just feels completely as if you are paying to study a textbook by yourself.*
- *Much more rigorous oversight of class organization from semester to semester. Some online courses I've taken have had horrible habits of copying an old course over from one session to the next, leading to great frustration and confusion.*
- Instructors (15%, 8)
  - *Instructors who don't communicate regularly with students*
  - *The instructor really makes the class—unorganized/unresponsive/unprofessional professors can really break a course for me.*
- Platform or apps (12%, 6)
  - *Examination methods, i.e., Examity*
  - *Some of the applications we are asked to use are very difficult to use if they work at all.*
- None (10%, 5)
- Program area or course/program availability (8%, 4)
- Community with peers (4%, 2)
- Flexibility (4%, 2)
- Access to campus resources (4%,2)
- Cost (4%,2)
- Other (4%,2)

## Communication within IU Online courses

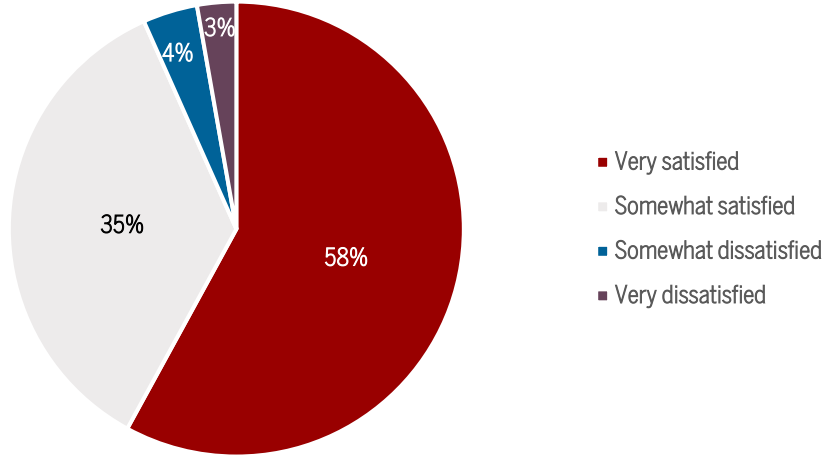
To investigate communication within IU Online courses, the survey included questions with regard to modes and frequency of communication and satisfaction with communications, with separate questions related to communication with instructors and with other online students. Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they communicate with IU Online instructors using various modes of communication, including direct messages in Canvas, discussion boards, email, in-person meetings, video calls, phone calls, text or messaging on another platform, or another mode (see Table 3). Respondents most frequently use discussion boards to communicate with their IU Online instructors, with over two-thirds (68%) indicating that they use these either weekly or daily. Furthermore, over half of respondents (58%) indicated that they were very satisfied with their communication with IU Online instructors and approximately another third (35%) indicated that they were somewhat satisfied (see Figure 10).

**Table 3. Modes of communication with IU Online instructors**

How frequently do you communicate with online instructors in each of the following ways?	Never		Rarely		Monthly		Weekly		Daily	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Direct messages in Canvas	33	6%	168	31%	<b>157</b>	<b>29%</b>	170	31%	12	2%
Discussion boards	46	9%	89	16%	39	7%	<b>324</b>	<b>60%</b>	42	8%
Email	72	13%	<b>229</b>	<b>42%</b>	100	19%	121	22%	18	3%
In-person meetings	443	82%	75	14%	12	2%	8	1%	2	0%
Video calls (e.g., Zoom, Skype)	253	47%	195	36%	44	8%	46	9%	2	0%
Phone calls	396	73%	129	24%	11	2%	3	1%	1	0%
Texts or messaging on another platform (e.g., WhatsApp)	435	81%	80	15%	10	2%	8	1%	7	1%
Other	<b>506</b>	<b>94%</b>	16	3%	5	1%	7	1%	6	1%

N=540

**Figure 10. Satisfaction with communication with IU Online instructors**



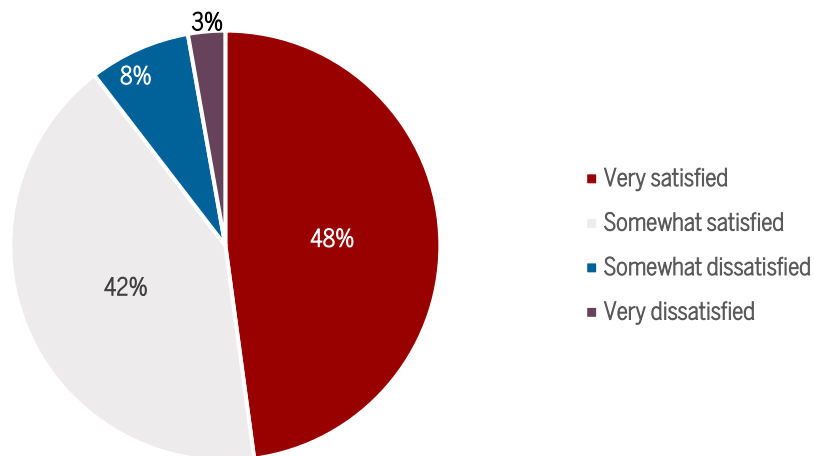
Respondents were asked a similar set of questions related to their modes and frequency of and satisfaction with communications with other IU Online students (see Table 4). Similar to communication with instructors, respondents most frequently use discussion boards to communicate with other IU Online students, with 86% indicating that they use these either weekly or daily. Reported levels of satisfaction with communication with other IU Online students were lower than for the instructor communication, with under half of 537 respondents (48%) reporting that they were very satisfied, and another 42% reporting that they were somewhat satisfied in their communications with other IU Online students (see Figure 11).

**Table 4. Modes of communication with IU Online students**

How frequently do you communicate with other students in your IU Online courses in each of the following ways?	Never		Rarely		Monthly		Weekly		Daily	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Direct messages in Canvas	195	36%	<b>203</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>12%</b>	70	13%	7	1%
Discussion boards	22	4%	30	6%	22	4%	<b>410</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>10%</b>
Email	280	52%	181	34%	47	9%	26	5%	3	1%
In-person meetings	477	89%	47	9%	5	1%	8	1%	0	0%
Video calls (e.g., Zoom, Skype)	349	65%	119	22%	34	6%	34	6%	1	0%
Phone calls	471	88%	55	10%	8	1%	3	1%	0	0%
Texts or messaging on another platform (e.g., WhatsApp)	416	77%	80	15%	13	2%	16	3%	12	2%
Other	<b>502</b>	<b>93%</b>	20	4%	3	1%	8	1%	4	1%

N=537

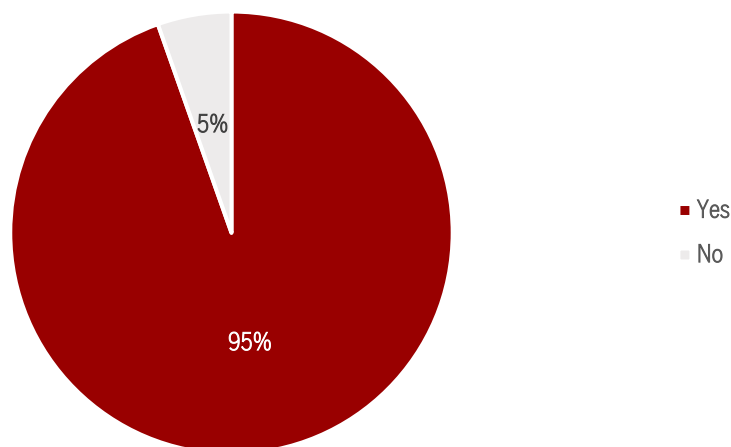
**Figure 11. Satisfaction in communication with IU Online students**



### Overall satisfaction with IU Online

Survey respondents were asked whether they would recommend their IU Online program to a friend or colleague. A majority of the 537 respondents (95%) answered that they would (see Figure 12). In an open-ended follow up question, respondents were asked why they would or would not recommend their program. These text responses were analyzed and grouped into thematic categories, and some respondents included comments that spanned multiple themes, thus percentages exceed 100%.

**Figure 12. Respondents recommending their IU Online program to a peer/colleague**



Of the 444 respondents who provided their reasons for recommending their online programs, over half (56%) remarked on the convenience or flexibility provided by online courses. Response themes, frequencies, and examples are included below:

- Convenience/flexibility (56%, 247)
  - *Being able to study online is super efficient and flexible for people like me, who also work full-time.*
  - *The online program allows you to complete coursework in the comfort of your home.*
  - *It is convenient for working parents.*
  - *It is a convenient way to finish out your degree without having to relocate to an IU campus.*
  - *I'd recommend because it is a way to advance your education within your own time.*
  - *You get to do your learning at your convenience in weekly increments.*
- Organization/ease of use on learning platform(s) (23%, 103)
  - *For the most part, it's been clearly laid out and expectations have been clearly communicated.*
  - *Easy to access*
  - *It's simple to pick up how the infrastructure works. It's not a complex or hard thing to learn and adapt to.*
  - *Program is pretty easy to follow and accessible.*
- Instructors/staff/advisors (17%, 74)
  - *The professors make an efforts despite it being an online course to have a presence.*
  - *I found it very easy to learn, and I have great communication with most of my professors.*
  - *It is consistent and most of the faculty and staff members are supportive.*
  - *I like that the advisors lay out exactly what you need per semester until you graduate. There are also many options for assistance with your subject material.*
- Relevant or interesting program, content, or courses (16%, 72)
  - *I feel it's giving me a great addition to my background and the coursework feels appropriate.*
  - *This is an online program where I feel that I am truly learning the content.*

- *Degree availability, totally online option, interesting class options*
- *The course content is relevant, interesting, and excellent for developing career-oriented skills.*
- Overall quality or reputation of IU (16%, 70)
  - *It is one of the best-ranked online programs in the USA.*
  - *Ability to get a real degree completely online*
  - *Indiana University is a good quality school.*
  - *IU is a great school, and the online program is equally as great. They don't make me feel any different than an in-person student.*
- Cost/affordability (13%, 57). Please note that 54/57 of responses that included cost/affordability as a reason to recommend IU Online also included one or more additional reasons, such as flexibility/convenience, program reputation, or instructor quality.
- Challenging/rewarding experience (2%, 11)
- Other (5%, 21)

Respondents who indicated that they would not recommend their IU Online program were also asked why they would not recommend the program. Twenty-four provided responses to this question, and the most frequently cited reasons included issues related to instructors/instruction. These text responses were analyzed and grouped into thematic categories, and some responses included more than one theme, thus percentages exceed 100. Response themes, frequencies, and examples are included below:

- Instructors/instruction (42%, 10)
  - *Anymore, I feel the professors are simply giving out busywork.*
  - *The instructors don't seem to care; many aren't helpful or clear, or can't relate their content to assignments. There is also no connection to your professors or other students.*
  - *I often feel like I'm not being taught the material. I'm left to just figure it out on my own or with the help of internet resources.*
- Lack of opportunity to recommend (17%, 4)
- Cost (13%, 3)
- Culture (13%, 3)
- Program/courses not fully online (8%, 2)
- Too easy or irrelevant (8%, 2)

- Too difficult (8%, 2)
- Organization/platform issues (4%, 1)

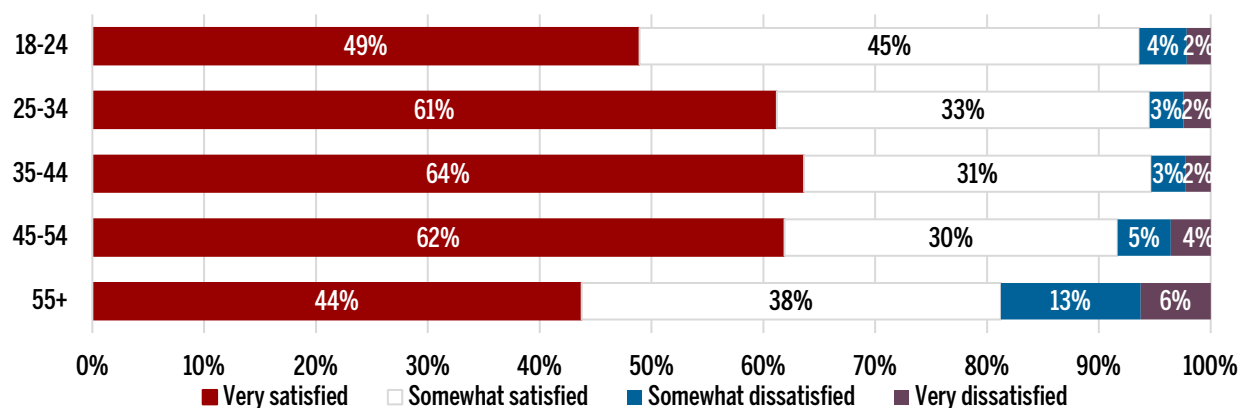
## Differences Across Demographics

Three survey questions were examined to discover if there were differences in responses based on eight demographic markers. The questions included those on level of satisfaction with communications with IU Online instructors, level of satisfaction with communications with fellow students, and whether respondents would recommend their IU Online program. The demographic markers included sex, age, race/ethnicity, employment status, campus of enrollment, program type, length of IU Online enrollment, and previous experience with online learning at a different institution. Some questions did show differences in responses but did not have large enough N values to be considered a quality sample size.

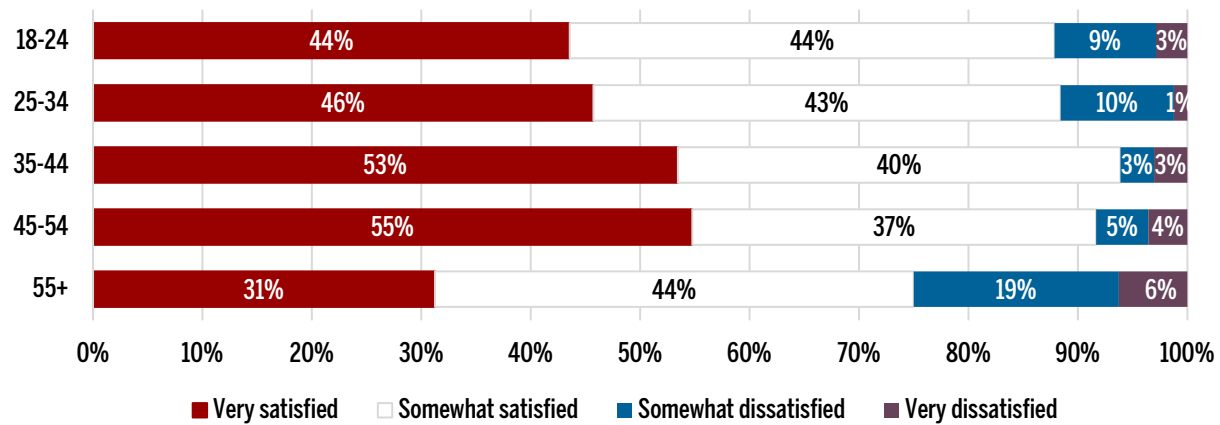
### Communication within IU Online courses

For the two questions on satisfaction with communication with IU Online instructors or with fellow IU Online students, the responses of somewhat satisfied and very satisfied were added together to create a total satisfaction rating. The 55+ age range showed the lowest total satisfaction rates with 77% either very or somewhat satisfied with communication with instructors (see Figure 13) and 75% either very or somewhat satisfied with communication with fellow students (see Figure 14).

**Figure 13. Satisfaction with communication with instructors by age range**

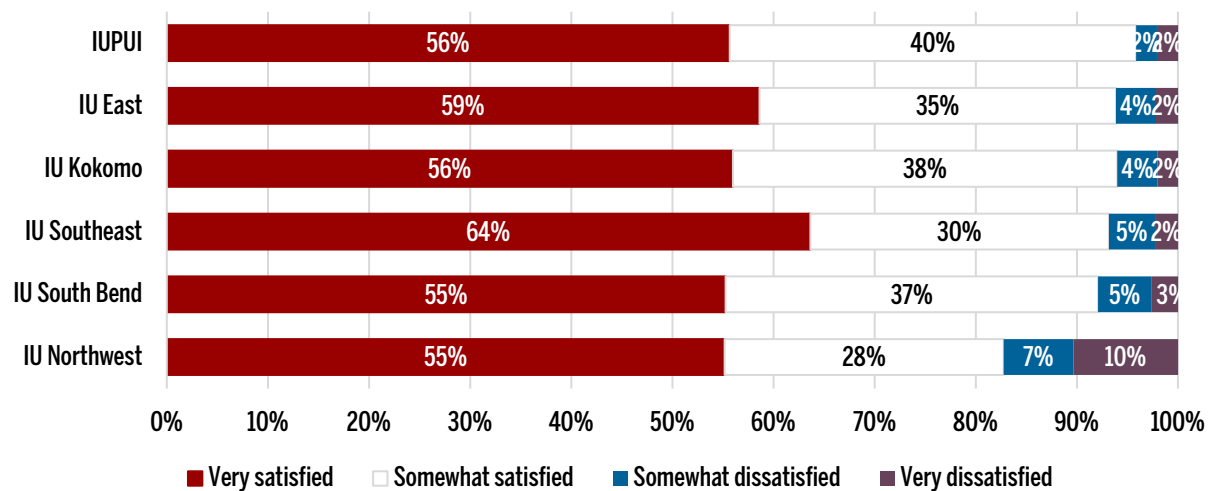


**Figure 14. Satisfaction with communication with fellow students by age range**



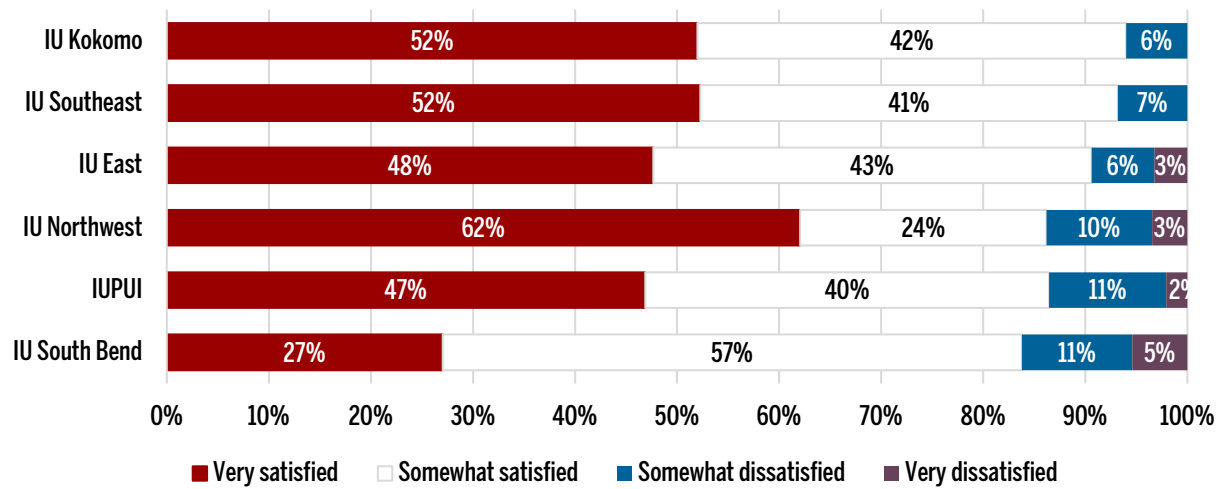
Levels of satisfaction with communications with instructors and students also varied according to a respondent's campus of enrollment. For communication with instructors, IU Northwest had the lowest total satisfaction rating for communication with instructors, with 83% either very or somewhat satisfied (see Figure 15), while IUPUI and IU South Bend had the lowest total satisfaction ratings for communication with students at 86% and 84% either very or somewhat satisfied, respectively (see Figure 16).

**Figure 15. Satisfaction with communication with instructors by campus**



Note: Campuses with an n lower than 10 have been excluded.

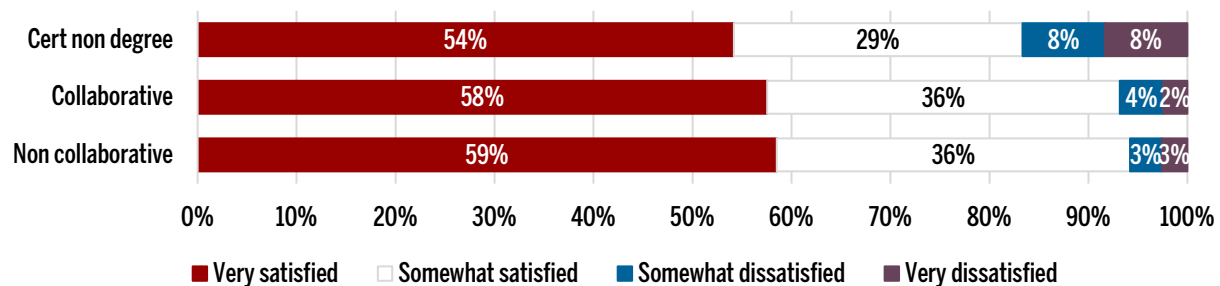
**Figure 16. Satisfaction for communication with students by campus**



Note: Campuses with an n lower than 10 have been excluded.

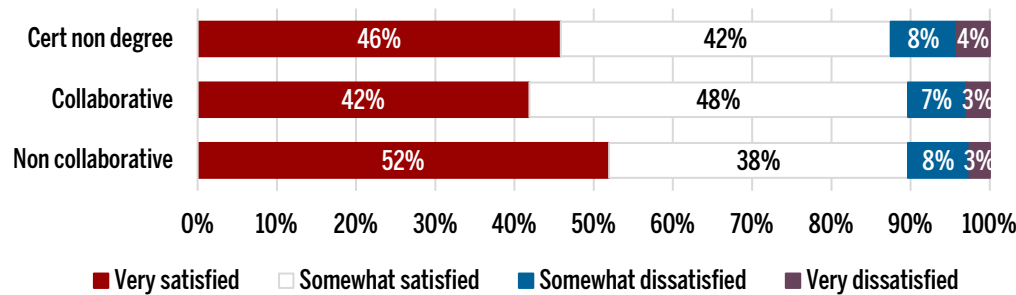
There were some differences in satisfaction with communication with instructors and with students according to the types of programs in which students were enrolled (e.g., collaborative, non-collaborative, or certificate/non-degree programs). As Figure 17 depicts, respondents enrolled in certificate/non-degree programs reported lower levels of satisfaction with instructor communication, compared with those enrolled in the other types of programs.

**Figure 17. Satisfaction with communication with instructors by program type**



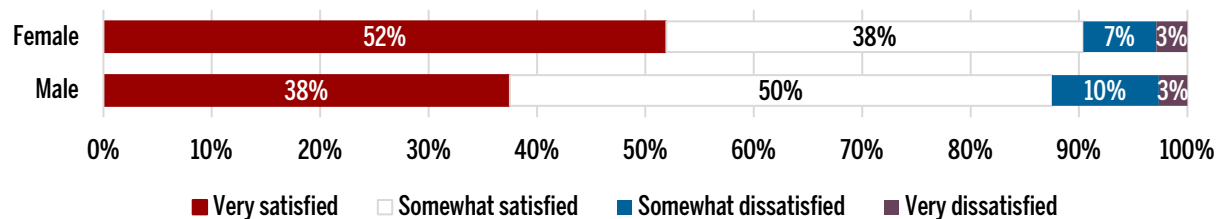
Differences were also noted in levels of satisfaction with communication with other students according to respondents' program type. On this question, students enrolled in collaborative programs reported lower levels of satisfaction with communication with other students, and respondents in non-collaborative programs reported the highest levels of satisfaction (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18. Satisfaction with communication with students by program type**



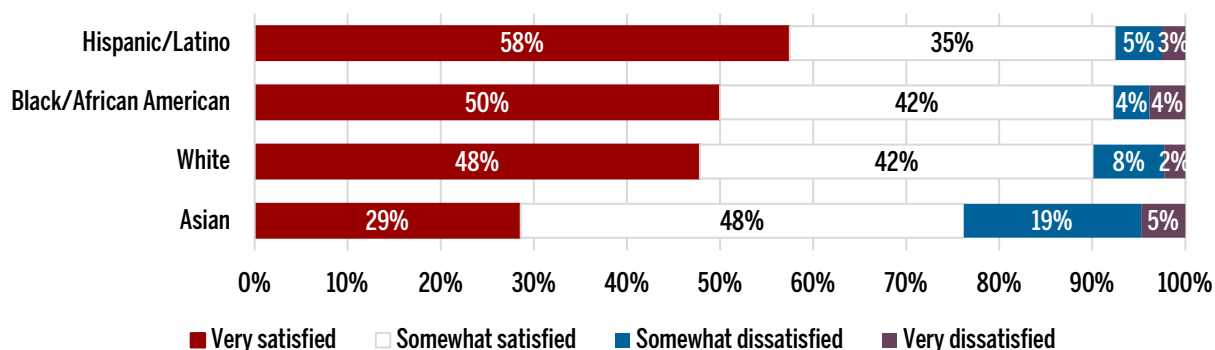
There was also a difference in satisfaction with communication with students between male and female respondents. While total satisfaction in this area was high for both female (90%) and male (88%) respondents, female respondents indicated higher levels of being very satisfied (see Figure 19).

**Figure 19. Satisfaction with communication with fellow students by sex**



Respondents who were identified as Asian had the lowest satisfaction ratings for communication with fellow students with 29% very satisfied and a total satisfaction rating of 67% (see Figure 20).

**Figure 20. Satisfaction with communication with fellow students by race/ethnicity**

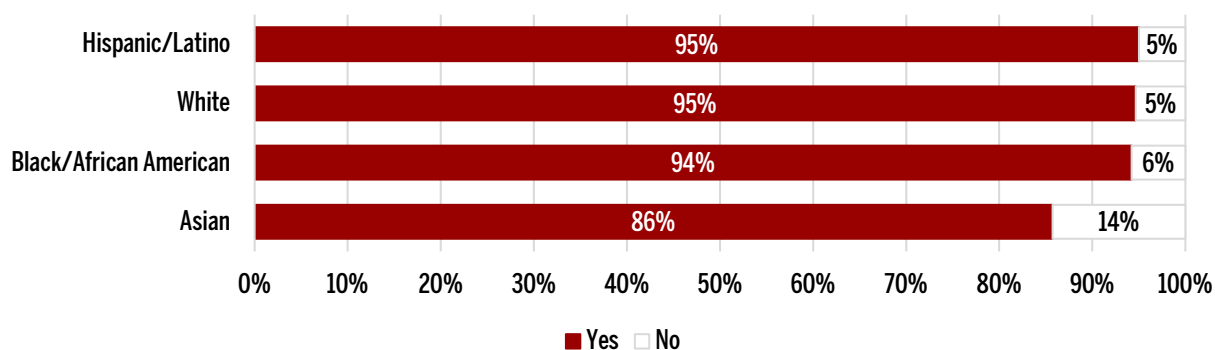


Note: Race/ethnicity markers with an n lower than 10 have been excluded.

### Overall satisfaction with IU Online

Respondents were asked if they would recommend the program to others. Some respondent groups that had lower total satisfaction ratings for communication with fellow students or with instructors also had lower rates of responding that they would recommend their IU Online program. As Figure 21 indicates, Asian respondents were the least likely to recommend IU Online when compared with other racial/ethnic groups.

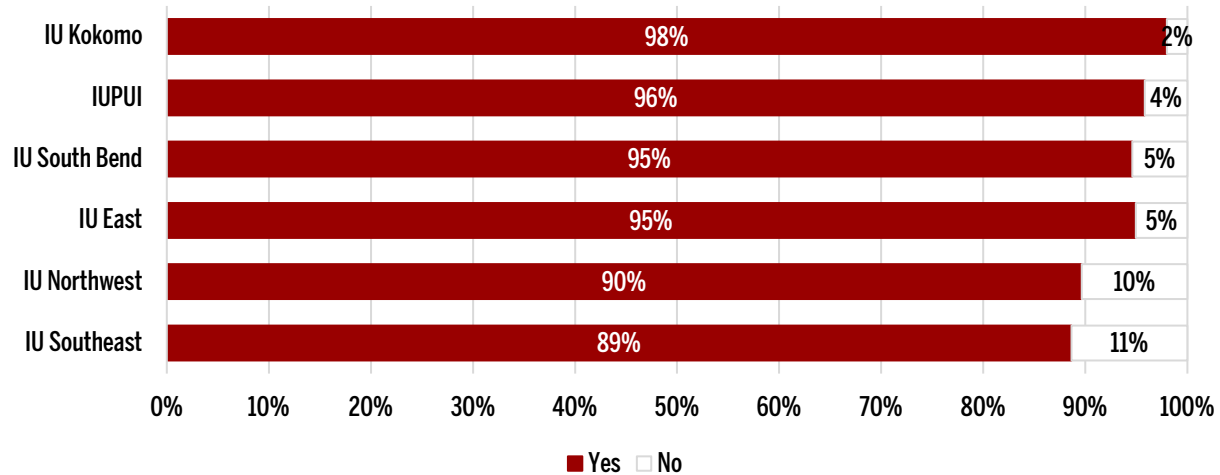
**Figure 21. Would recommend program by race/ethnicity**



Note: Race/ethnicity markers with an n lower than 10 have been excluded.

Respondents from IU Northeast and IU Southeast provided the lowest rates of recommending the program to others (see Figure 22).

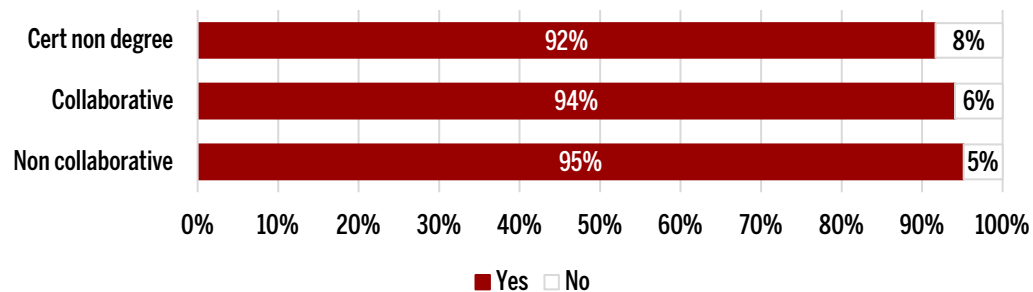
**Figure 22. Would recommend program by campus**



Note: Campus locations with an n lower than 10 have been excluded.

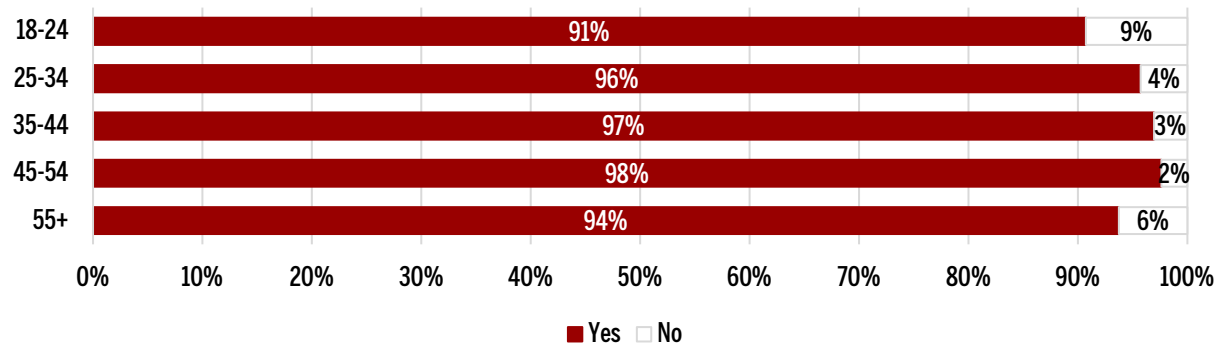
Respondents who were enrolled in certificate/non-degree programs had the lowest rate of recommending the program, compared with those enrolled in collaborative or non-collaborative programs (see Figure 23).

**Figure 23. Would recommend program by program type**



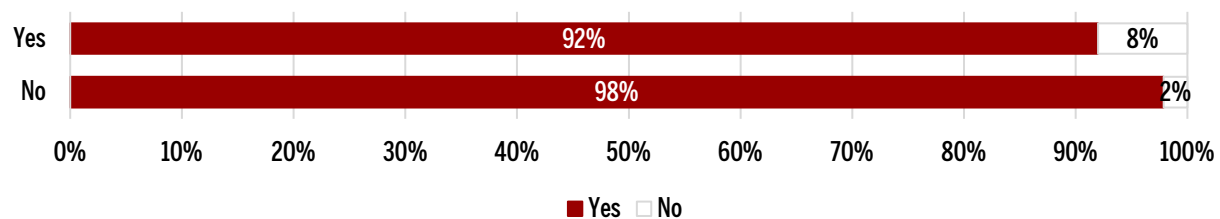
The age range for respondents with the lowest rate of recommending the program to others is the 18-24 bracket with 9% stating they would not recommend the program (see Figure 24).

**Figure 24. Would recommend program by age range**



Finally, respondents that had previous experience taking online courses from a different institution were less likely to recommend IU Online than respondents who had never taken online courses elsewhere. As shown in Figure 25, 92% of those who had previously taken online courses from a different college/university would recommend their IU Online program, compared with 98% of respondents who had never taken online courses elsewhere.

**Figure 25. Would recommend program by previous online course participation**



## Discussion

In general, the fall 2021 OLES findings were similar to the fall 2020 pilot survey findings from a smaller sample of IU Online students. The present survey results provide information about IU Online undergraduate students' experiences and perceptions of program quality from a larger sample of students and will serve as a basis for comparison moving forward with future survey administration. The following section summarizes the results of the fall 2021 OLES administration, with comparisons between these and the pilot survey results, where possible.

For both the pilot and the full survey administration, survey respondents frequently cited the convenience or flexibility offered by online education as a key factor in both their decision to enroll in IU Online courses and their overall satisfaction with their online learning programs. OLES respondents also cited career advancement as a primary reason for taking courses with IU Online, with over half ranking it as the most or second most important reason. These results differed somewhat from the results of the pilot survey; in Fall 2020, about two-thirds of pilot survey respondents ranked career advancement as the most or second-most important reason for taking courses with IU Online, and about half of them ranked convenience/flexibility in the same way.

Half of OLES respondents identified applicable or practical course content as a primary factor in their satisfaction with IU Online courses, and a little over half (57%) did the same on the pilot survey. However, a greater proportion of pilot survey respondents (39%) ranked applicable or practical content as the most important factor, compared with 26% of OLES respondents. There were some additional differences between the fall 2020 pilot and fall 2021 OLES survey results related to the relative importance of factors contributing to students' satisfaction. On the fall 2021 OLES survey, course organization was ranked most or second-most important by just under half of respondents, and on the pilot survey, this factor was only ranked #1 or #2 by 25% of respondents. Instructor quality was similarly important to pilot survey respondents, although in the present results, a greater proportion ranked it as the most important factor (24% compared with 19%).

The inverse of the findings with regard to student satisfaction factors was noted in the results of questions asking about factors related to dissatisfaction with IU Online courses; over half of OLES respondents indicated that unclear course requirements were the most or second-most important factor contributing to their dissatisfaction with IU Online courses. Course workload was listed as most or second most important by the greatest proportion of respondents on both surveys, but a higher proportion of those responding to the pilot survey listed course workload

as the most important factor (48%, compared to 29% here). More of the current survey respondents indicated unclear course requirements as a highly important factor for them—with over half ranking this as #1 or #2, compared with 30% on the pilot survey.

In comparison with the pilot survey findings, the fall 2021 OLES results indicate somewhat less emphasis on instructor quality in relation to IU Online students' overall satisfaction with their online learning programs. To illustrate, a majority (95%) of respondents indicated that they would recommend their IU Online program, and among those who provided reasons for this recommendation, a small percentage (17%) gave responses related to instructors, staff, or advisors. However, among the small percentage of respondents who indicated that they would not recommend their IU Online program, nearly half of these (42%) cited instructors or instruction as the reason they would not recommend their program. Similar to the pilot survey findings, over half (58%) of OLES respondents were very satisfied with their communication with IU Online instructors, and over two-thirds (68%) indicated that they use discussion boards to communicate with their instructors either weekly or daily.

For the fall 2021 OLES results, the larger number of respondents allowed for more meaningful analysis and findings comparing responses across different demographic groups. By cross-tabulating responses according to respondent characteristics, we discovered some differences across the results for questions related to instructor communication, student communication, and overall program satisfaction based on respondents' age, sex, race/ethnicity, campus of enrollment, program type, and previous online learning experience. Although there was a small group of respondents who fell into the 55+ age range, these students indicated lower levels of satisfaction with communications with both instructors and students, when compared with other age groups. However, these respondents (55+ years old) were nearly as likely to recommend IU Online as most other age groups, whereas those who were 18-24 were somewhat less likely to indicate this recommendation than the other age groups. These findings may indicate that satisfaction with communication with instructors and/or fellow students is not a strong predictor of overall satisfaction (as measured by whether or not a respondent would recommend IU Online), at least for students in those particular age groups.

Additional analyses of respondents according to program type, broken down by those enrolled in collaborative, non-collaborative, or certificate/non-degree programs yielded some differences among these groups with regard to satisfaction with communication and with IU Online in general. Survey respondents enrolled in programs classified as certificate or non-degree programs reported lower levels of satisfaction with communication with instructors and also

were less likely to recommend their IU Online program. Furthermore, respondents enrolled in collaborative programs indicated lower levels of satisfaction with communications with other students, but their overall levels of satisfaction, according to whether they would recommend their IU Online program to others, were on par with the survey average and with respondents enrolled in non-collaborative programs.

There were also some differences to highlight among racial/ethnic groups of respondents. When compared to all responses and to other racial/ethnic groups, respondents who were identified as Asian reported lower levels of satisfaction with communication with other students, and they were also less likely than others to recommend their IU Online program; 86% of Asian respondents indicated that they would recommend their program, compared with 95% of all respondents, 95% of Hispanic/Latinx or White respondents, and 94% of Black/African American respondents. These findings may point to a more meaningful correlation between satisfaction in communication with fellow students and overall program satisfaction for this group of students.

Because of the smaller number of respondents to the pilot survey and the inclusion of certain demographic data in the fall 2021 survey sample, the only opportunity for comparison between findings disaggregated by respondent groups from the fall 2020 pilot survey and the fall 2021 OLES administration comes from the analysis of the results of the question of recommending IU Online broken down according to respondents' previous experience taking online courses elsewhere. On the fall 2020 pilot survey, respondents who had previously taken online courses at a different institution more frequently indicated they would recommend their IU Online program (96%), compared with those who had no previous online learning experience (94%). For the pilot survey, respondents with previous online learning experience also reported higher levels of satisfaction in communication with instructors and other students. However, on the fall 2021 OLES results, there were no significant differences between these groups on their levels of satisfaction with communications, but there were differences on overall satisfaction (recommending IU Online). In contrast to the pilot survey results, in fall 2021 the OLES respondents who had previously taken online courses elsewhere were somewhat less likely to recommend their IU Online program; 92% would recommend IU Online, compared with 98% of respondents who had never taken online courses from a different institution.

# Recommendations

## Distribution

The larger sample size including the full enrollment of undergraduate students enrolled in IU Online programs through all regional campuses for the fall 2021 OLES administration allowed for deeper analysis of responses to certain survey items based on demographic differences among respondents. As summarized in the findings, when compared with the fall 2020 pilot survey results, there were more opportunities to detect differences among various respondent groups during this round of the survey. Moving forward, we recommend continuing to distribute the survey to the full sample of enrolled IU Online undergraduate students, which will enable use of the fall 2021 OLES results as a baseline for comparisons with future results.

The fall 2021 OLES response rate was 19%, which is within the acceptable range for a large online survey, and the survey distribution in mid-September did not coincide with other student surveys administered by the IU Office of Online Education. We recommend continuing to offer financial incentives for survey completion to a portion of the survey respondents, and we would consider the option to select incentive recipients randomly among those who complete the survey to boost response rates. We also recommend that the IU Office of Online Education continue to send email notifications and reminders for survey completion to emphasize the importance of student feedback in their improvement processes.

## Ongoing survey implementation

Moving forward, we propose the following steps for ongoing survey implementation:

- Attention to sample data and possibilities for further analyses of differences among respondent groups, for example if additional information with regard to current and/or previous campuses of enrollment may be available.
- Continued timing of the survey distribution during the early to middle part of a semester and planning carefully to avoid overlap with other surveys that may be distributed to the same population. We also recommend continuing to offer incentives for survey completion to boost response rates, and plan to offer these incentives to a randomly selected number of respondents, rather than those first to complete the survey.
- Analysis of survey data and reporting of findings. We seek feedback from IUOOE on the present report and plan to incorporate and adjust accordingly in reporting on future survey administration. We plan to continue to present quantitative and qualitative

findings in both visual and narrative form. We will continue to conduct cross-tabulation analysis to determine any differences across demographic groups. With the next full survey administration (fall 2022), we anticipate conducting analyses to compare longitudinal results in a more meaningful way, since the same survey instrument will be used.