Student Perspectives on Blended and Online Learning

FEBRUARY 2020







About Future of School

As the first-ever public charity focused on access to quality education, Future of School is dedicated to mobilizing change in American K-12 education from a one-size-fits-all system to one that ensures all students reach their unbounded potential.

Our Student Scholarship Program rewards students for their courage to forge new learning pathways, giving them greater financial means to continue their education in whatever post-secondary school they choose.

Through the Innovative Educator Prize, we empower pioneering educators with grant funding that enables them to bring programs and tools into the classroom to transform the learning experience.

By amplifying technology's impact on students and educators, we inform, inspire and spearhead much needed change.

Future of School is an organization of the people, by the people and for the people that calls on students, parents, educators, and employers to band together to embrace and inspire the future of our society and prepare the workforce of tomorrow. Join the movement at future of school.

Introduction

In 2016, Future of School (FoS)¹ commissioned a study to better understand why students were selecting online and blended learning options, with a goal of helping educators, policymakers, and others to better understand the value of new school and course opportunities. Researchers initially expected that online and blended schools would have robust data regarding why students had selected their schools. They found, however, that although educators had a general sense for why students chose their schools, few were able to share data that would shed light on this topic.

In the absence of existing data, the researchers began developing their own findings. They visited blended schools to hold student interviews and focus groups, spoke with teachers and school leaders in online and blended schools, and connected with parents of students in these schools. Because of limitations in how many students they could reach in this way, they did not feel that quantitative findings were representative of students nationally. Instead, they created a taxonomy exploring and explaining the reasons that students chose these alternative educational opportunities, and how their online and blended schools met these needs.

The findings were released in a study titled *Why do students choose blended and online schools?*² The taxonomy is described further below.

One topic, two studies

This report explores why students selected online or blended learning opportunities—either an online or blended school, or individua online courses while enrolled in a traditional school. For simplicity, this report refers to this range of opportunities simply as "online/blended learning"

A companion report examines how schools are meeting these student needs. It details the reasons that Future of School scholarship winners selected online/blended schools or courses, and provides insights from the schools regarding why and how they were able to provide these opportunities to their students

In the three years since that study was completed, FoS has implemented its scholarship program, which is described in the next section. As part of its scholarship application process, FoS requires that each applicant submit an essay describing their experiences with online/blended learning. In some cases, students have been enrolled in online or blended schools; in other cases, they took an online course while attending a traditional public school. One outcome of this process is that FoS has created a robust data set describing reasons that students select online or blended schools or courses. This report

¹ At the time Future of School was operating as the Foundation for Blended and Online Learning.

² Why do students choose blended and online schools? The "end of average" requires personalized learning environments. January 2017. The Foundation for Blended and Online Learning and Evergreen Education Group.

uses this data set to answer the question—why do students seek an alternative option? — in a quantitative way.

In the following sections, this report reviews the following topics:

- The Why Students Choose taxonomy created in the earlier study
- The Future of School scholarship program
- Findings from a new data analysis of the reasons that scholarship applicants sought an online/blended learning opportunity. This section, which makes up the majority of this study:
 - Lists the leading reasons that students gave for choosing a new educational option,
 - Explains those reasons, and
 - Explores correlations between these motivating factors (for example, a student may seek a flexible schedule due to pursuing an interest in the arts, or for health-related reasons.)

The end of average

The Future of School's 2017 report on why students select online or blended schools opens with a discussion of how no student is average. It builds on the findings of Harvard professor Todd Rose, who explains that many institutions, including schools, base their activities on their expectations of what an "average" person is, and assume that most individuals are similar to the average.

Consider how traditional schools have, in the past, designed their instruction around the assumptions of an "average" student. Traditional schools understand that students are different from one another, yet in most cases they group students in relatively large classes of comparable age, moving through the same assignments, assessments, and school year progression at a similar pace.

The key to understanding why students and families choose blended and online schools, and how these schools are meeting their needs, is first seeing students as individuals with unique interests and desires. These students usually feel that online and blended schools are able to meet their needs better than many traditional public schools. However, as detailed here and in the companion report, an increasing number of traditional public schools are responding by providing online and blended opportunities for students.

Students choose online and blended schools for a variety of reasons

The 2017 Why Students Choose study presented a taxonomy to frame the reasons that students gave for enrolling in an online or blended school. A total of 13 reasons fell into three major categories: academics, social-emotional health and safety, and interests and life circumstances. These reasons often overlapped. For example, a student's health issues might have caused her to fall behind academically. She would find herself needing a new school with greater scheduling flexibility in order to work within her health constraints and catch up.

Academics

These students typically are in one or more of three groups:

- Students who are behind in school and need to catch up.
- 2 Students who are doing well in school but feel they are not challenged, and become bored and disengaged.
- Students who feel that traditional school is "a bad fit" for a variety of reasons, leading them to lose interest in performing well academically.

Social-Emotional Health and Safety

Students in this category may have one or more of the following:

- Physical health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school on a traditional schedule. These may be: a debilitating injury, a serious illness, and short-term, longterm, or permanent.
- 2 Students who have experienced bullying.
- Mental health issues that interfere with the student's ability to perform well at a school in a traditional social setting. A common example is anxiety.
- Students whose traditional school is physically dangerous for them, for example because of gang violence.

Interests and Life Circumstances

Students in this category may have one or more of these interests and circumstances:

- Moving/switching schools may require making up credits when the new school or state has different graduation requirements.
- Jobs, internships, and college courses.
- Some online students were formerly homeschooled, and the families have chosen an online public school option that allows the students to work primarily from home.
- Travel or moving.
- Non-academic activities (sports, dance, music, theater).
- Death of a family member or another life-altering event.

The Future of School scholarship program

Future of School has three main programs: a student scholarship fund, a teacher grant program,³ and commissioned studies to help explain new schools and instructional systems to a wide range of audiences. The pool of student scholarship applicants has been growing (Figure 1), as has the number of scholarship winners (Figure 2).

FoS Student Scholarship Program

A Growing Reach and Response

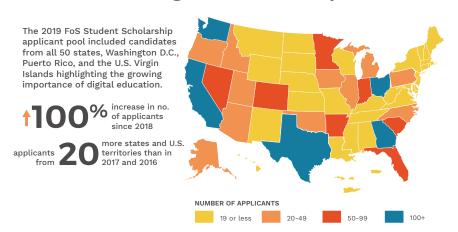


Figure 1: The reach of the Future of School student scholarship program is growing steadily

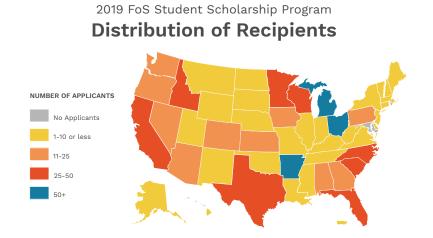


Figure 2: Future of School student scholarship winners represent 42 states and territories

³ The importance of teachers in school transformation is explored in the Future of School report Teaching with Technology.

In 2019, 751 high school students applied for scholarship funding from FoS—the largest pool of applicants in the history of the scholarship program (Figure 3). Students from 49 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico applied.

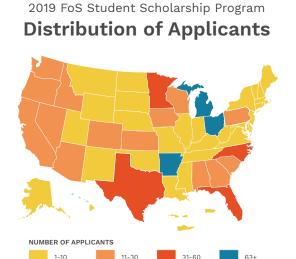


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of student scholarship applicants in 2019

Along with the increase in the overall number of scholarships has been significant growth in the *types of schools* represented by scholarship applicants and winners. In the first years of the program, most applicants were from online schools. Due to considerable outreach from FoS, the types of schools represented by applicants has grown to be more representative of schools in the United States. In particular, the number of applications from traditional public schools has grown considerably. Overall, FoS scholarship applicants represent traditional brick-and-mortar schools, online schools, blended schools, charter and magnet schools, private schools, and homeschool learning environments (Figure 4). In the 2019 application year, for the first time, a majority of applicants came from traditional brick-and-mortar schools.

Total Applicant Pool by Type

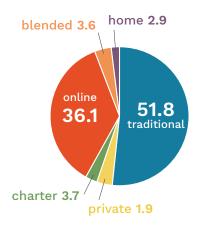


Figure 4: Scholarship applicants represent a variety of school types, with more than half enrolled in traditional public schools.

Scholarship process and research methods

The FoS scholarship program supports current high school seniors who have completed a minimum of five blended or online courses and plan to continue their education in college or vocational school programs. Students must demonstrate improved academic achievement, or personal improvement, as a direct result of their enrollment in the online/blended learning course of study.

Scholarship recipients are considered on the basis of:

- an essay detailing how blended/online learning has contributed to their postsecondary pursuits,
- academic improvement,
- demonstrated leadership and participation in school and community activities,
- honors and recognitions, and
- work experience.

For this study, applicants' essays—which are the most critical component of the applications—were examined for the top reasons why students are choosing online/blended learning options.

The study was conducted by a team led by a quantitative educational researcher at the University of Denver. Essays analyzed were from the entire pool of students who had submitted scholarship applications. First, the essays were reviewed to determine main themes that came up multiple times. The essays were then run through a program to identify key words and phrases, and to remove words that were common and did not convey useful meanings and distinctions, such as "school." The results demonstrated, based on the data set, the most common concepts that students associated with their online/blended schools and courses.

Why students choose online/blended learning

Applicants consistently discussed how blended/online learning gave them the opportunities to learn the way they learn best; key themes are represented in the word cloud in Figure 5.

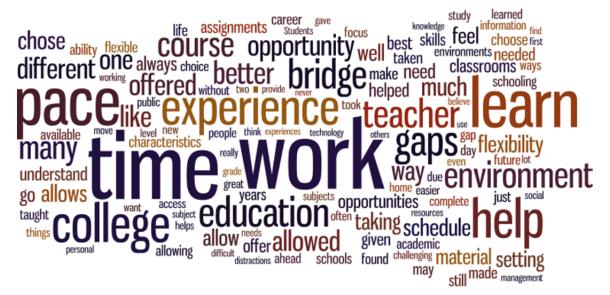


Figure 5: Word clouds were used to identify key words, by using the frequency of the word to make it appear larger or smaller within the image. Across all essays, the most common words included "time", "pace", "work", "teacher/teachers" and "college"

The essays were also reviewed for the main reasons that students gave for choosing online/blended schools and courses. Flexibility was by far the most common reason provided by students. Secondary reasons included seeking courses above grade level, increasing course offerings, and personalizing their educational pathway (see Figure 6).

- 1. Flexibility
- 2. Above Grade Level Courses
- 3. Increased Course Offerings
- 4. Personalized Learning
- 5. Busy/Extracurriculars
- 6. Individualized Attention

- 7. Health
- 8. Scheduling Challenges
- 9. Rurality
- 10. Advanced Learner
- 11. Bullying

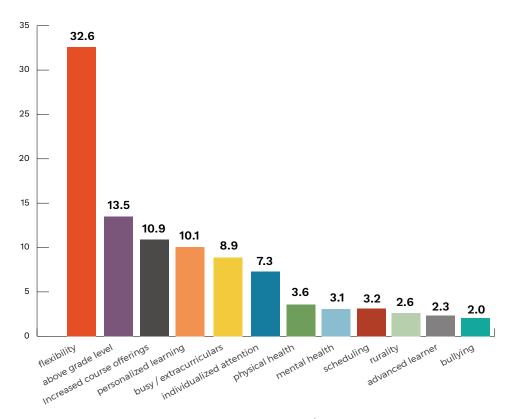


Figure 6: Reasons given by students for choosing online/blended learning. The x-axis represents the percentage of Future of School scholarship applicants who referenced each reason.

Researchers looked at the distribution of reasons given for seeking online/blended learning across school types (see Figure 7). The top three of these reasons (flexibility, above grade level, and increased course options) were strongly represented across all school types. Interestingly, "personalized learning," "health," "rurality," and "bullying" were not represented across all school types.

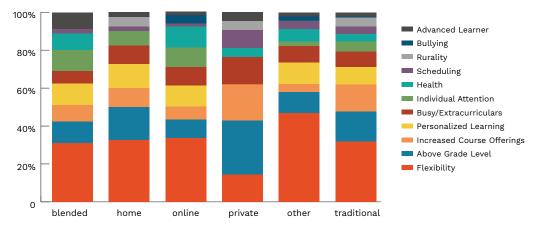


Figure 7: Reasons given for seeking online/blended learning across school types.

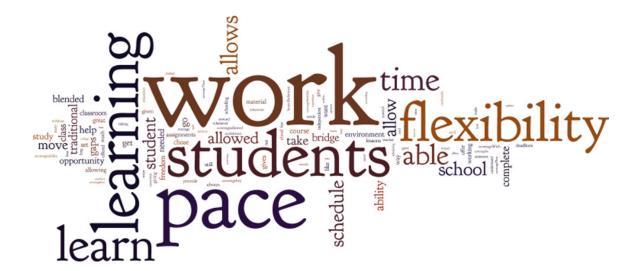
In order to better understand each of these 11 reasons that students gave for choosing a new type of school or course, word clouds were developed using the applicant essays that expressed each reason. The following pages go into each of these 11 reasons in more detail.

Flexibility

Flexibility is the number one reason why students are choosing online/blended learning (33% of students). Included under "flexibility" were all statements by applicants that noted their ability to move at their own pace, or have flexibility in their course scheduling. Key words used by applicants mentioning flexibility as their reason for choosing blended/online learning include "work," "pace," and "learn/learning." These words reflect two broad ways in which students conceive of online or blended learning supporting flexibility:

- "Flexibility" can refer to a learning path or pace within a course or within an overall school schedule. For example, students may find that they need more time on a challenging concept, and that an online course allows them to take the time to master that concept before moving on.
- "Flexibility" can also refer to the student's desire to pursue classes at times and/or places that fit their needs better than a traditional public school, for reasons that may be related to health issues, work requirements, or pursuit of arts or sports.

Student essays explained how the flexibility of blended/online learning helped them to continue to be involved in outside school activities, participate in community services, and work at their own pace. For example, an Ohio applicant stated, "The biggest variant for me was the ability to work at my own speed, manage my schedule, and dive deeper into topics of interest."



Above Grade Level Courses

The need or desire to enroll in college level courses or advanced courses constituted the second reason for choosing online/blended learning, "above grade level courses."

Students explained that having above grade level courses available to them in their blended/online learning environments made it possible for them to earn college credits before high school graduation and challenge themselves intellectually. An Arkansas applicant wrote, "I prefer to be intellectually challenged in a school environment, and online education gave me access to such classes. I was given the opportunity to attend classes such as AP Calculus and various dual enrollment courses."



Increased Course Options

The third most common reason for choosing online/blended learning options, "increased course options," represents any time an applicant mentioned a need or desire for a course or learning pathway (series of courses) that were not offered at their home school. These course options were usually directly related to the applicant's career interest or specific topic area of interest. Some of the key words that separated this reason from others were: "opportunity/opportunities," "variety," and "options".

Students conveyed how the increased course options of online/blended learning helped them fill curriculum gaps and explore career options that would not have been possible without these courses. An Arizona applicant wrote, "My high school did not offer a class that I was interested in, but the option to take it online was very beneficial to melaying the groundwork for the career path I'll choose in the future."



Personalized Learning

The "personalized learning" category represents an applicant specifying or alluding to the curriculum being tailored to them, their ability, or their learning needs, to give them a personalized learning experience. Personalized learning has become more of a need for students in all learning environments. Similar to the flexibility reason, the key word "pace" was important to applicants mentioning personalized learning as a reason for choosing blended/online learning environments and courses.

Applicants expressed how the personalized learning aspect of blended/online learning helped them succeed academically regardless of their learning level or pace of learning. A Colorado applicant wrote, "Online schools have a better understanding of the fact that not all children are on the same learning level, and they are willing to listen to your needs and make a plan specifically for the student."



Busy/Extracurriculars

Many Future of School applicants noted the need to balance school with their busy schedule and heavy involvement in passion pursuits such as competitive sports, arts, work, and family volunteering. The option for online/blended courses has allowed students to balance between their budding lives and academic growth. This is seen with key words such as "work," "activities," "involved," and "sports" being larger within the busy/ extracurricular word cloud.

One Georgia applicant explained, "I chose to pursue an online education where I have been able to work a job that I love, spend high school volunteering in the field where I want a career, and be involved in many organizations because I could study ahead when I had the time and free myself up on days that I needed to work or travel."



More Individualized Attention

The "more individualized attention" reason identified applicants who specified that their decision to enroll in online/blended learning gave them more one-on-one attention from teachers, counselors, and/or tutors. Identified key words for this group are "one," "one-on-one," "help," and "individual/personal." This rationale given by students counters the common misconception that students in blended and online schools are likely to feel isolated because they are mostly working alone on their computers. In many cases, these students feel like their teachers—whether in a blended or online setting—know them better than their former teachers in a traditional school did.

Applicants explored how the more individualized attention provided by the blended/ online learning environment gave them closer relationships with their teachers and allowed them to get added support when needed. An Ohio applicant offered, "I can schedule individual online help sessions with my teachers as needed with these courses."



Health-Related

The "health-related" reason encompasses applicants who mentioned a physical or mental illness and/or health concerns that made attending a traditional school challenging. As seen in the word cloud, anxiety was the most used key word by applicants. Other key words specific to this reason are: "medical," "mental," "social," and "disabilities."



One Minnesota applicant suffering from anxiety and depression explained how "making the move to online learning was the right decision, as I was able to sleep when my body and mind allowed and study at times that worked best for me."

Scheduling Challenges

Applicant essays that described issues with scheduling academic requirements with extracurricular activities, work, or family demands were part of the "scheduling challenges" reason. Identified key words associated with this reason were "work," "busy," "help," and "resources."

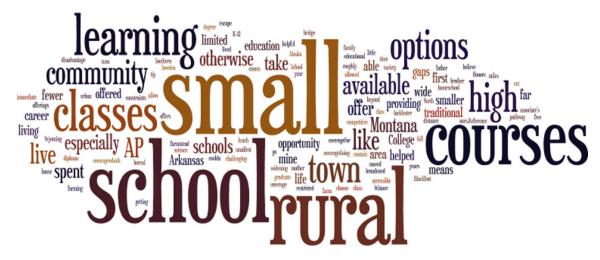
Applicants detailed how the scheduling flexibility of online/blended learning helped them balance academic schedules with work schedules and allowed them to participate in clubs, activities, and extracurriculars that had additional scheduling demands. One Colorado applicant wrote about, "the scheduling flexibility that was needed for me to be successful with my sport or with my schooling."

Students leading with the concept of scheduling challenges in their descriptions of why they chose online or blended programs are similar to students who selected flexibility as their main reason. These students, however, tended to be more focused on the time demands of extracurricular activities, whereas some of the students expressing a desire for flexibility were seeking a more flexible schedule within school.



Rurality

Students in rural areas attend schools that are usually smaller than urban and suburban schools, and often do not offer as many course options. The "rurality" category covered any applicant essays that self-identified as being in a rural location which impacted their ability to succeed academically. This reason was also associated with the reasons of flexibility, above grade level courses, and increased course options. Identified key words included: "small," "options," "town," and "community."



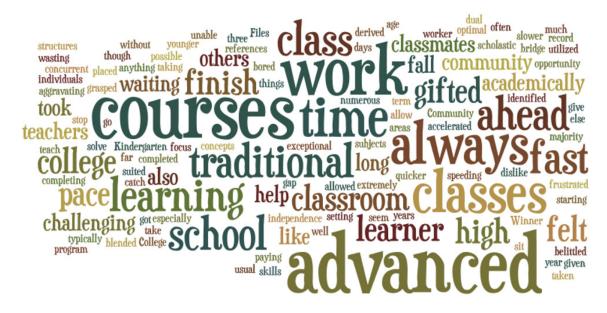
Students wrote about how blended/online learning helped them have access to courses and content they would not have had available at their local schools. One Vermont applicant shared, "I live in a very rural area, and online classes broadened my academic experiences far beyond what was available in my farming community."

School leaders feel that an additional benefit to online and blended learning is that if students can be shown that they can access a wide range of courses while attending their rural school, they may see other opportunities to remain in or near their hometowns after high school graduation, perhaps taking college courses online. Or, alternatively they may leave for a time in college, vocational training, the military, or another experience, but then be more willing to return to their small town.

Advanced Learner

The "advanced learner" category was designated to any applicant essay that self-identified as advanced, gifted, or learning quickly. Key words found in this group included "ahead," "fast," "time," "work," and "college."

Applicants conveyed how blended/online learning helped them move at a faster pace through their course work, as expressed by one applicant from Idaho, "Online courses allow individuals to work at an accelerated pace."



Bullying

Bullying is a commonly cited reason for students seeking new school options, and although it was not among the top reasons that students gave, educators believe bullying is sometimes linked to anxiety or depression even when it is not mentioned. For this study, it was identified only when the words "bully", "bullying", or "bullied" were used in an applicant's essay. Most often it was the "fear of bullying" that was used when describing this reason for choosing blended/online learning. Other key words included "distractions," "safe/safer/safety," and "freedom."



Applicants expressed how blended/online learning helped them to do better academically by letting them work in a safe environment that eliminated distractions from fear of bullying. While not all applicants in this category said that they themselves were bullied, they did explain the need for blended/online options to alleviate bullying generally.

Relationship between reasons for choosing blended/online

Among the benefits of having a relatively large data set is that the student responses showed five significant correlations between two of the reasons that students selected for choosing online/blended learning options. Three of these make sense, while the other two aren't quite as intuitive, as described below.

Above grade level courses ←→ advanced learner

Students who are advanced learners sought courses above their grade level, which is not a surprise. This finding shows the extent to which online and blended courses serve advanced students, in contrast to the views in some quarters that online courses are primarily allowing students to recover credits. In fact, online and blended courses provide the opportunity for any and all students to be advanced learners.

Increased course options ←→ health-related

This correlation is consistent with student quotes that explain how health issues often create challenges in keeping to a traditional school schedule. From applicants' essays it was evident that the wider range of course options provided by blended/online learning environments both filled gaps in students' educations due to health-related problems and allowed for health to be a high priority for students.

Busy/extracurriculars ←→ flexibility

Students who indicated that they are busy with extracurricular activities also expressed an interest in and need for scheduling flexibility. These are students pursuing arts, sports, jobs, internships, and other pursuits, which don't always fit well with the need to be at a traditional school from early morning to mid-afternoon.

Busy/extracurriculars ←→ rurality

The most surprising correlation was between busy/extracurriculars and rurality. It's not clear why this correlation would exist. One possibility is that the increased travel times in rural areas heighten the conflict between traditional school schedules and other activities. In an urban or suburban setting, a student may be able to get to her job or practice in fifteen minutes and fit that activity into an afternoon. If the travel time

between school and activity increases to an hour, the increased travel time may require adjusting the school schedule.

More Individual Attention ←→ bullying

Perhaps the most interesting relationship between reasons was between more individual attention and bullying. Applicants that selected these two reasons expressed how the added attention from teachers, counselors and administrators in their blended/online learning environments helped them heal from bullying and ensure that their academic success no longer suffered.

Blended/online learning in traditional public schools

As mentioned earlier, nearly six in ten applicants (59%) were from traditional brick-and-mortar schools. These traditional school applicants came from all across the country. Rural, suburban, and urban schools were all represented in the applicant pool.

A closer look at the students from traditional schools showed that collectively these applicants selected **all of the reasons** discussed in this study. The most common reasons given, however, were related to how the option for blended/online courses filled a gap in their learning or in their ability to attain a high-quality education.

For example, an applicant from Michigan said, "online learning helped bridge gaps for me by allowing me to take classes I would not have been able to otherwise. Driving an hour to college was not practical but self-paced online learning was."

In addition, several applicants from small schools expressed how online/blended learning filled gaps in their learning experiences.

Arkansas applicant: "Online learning was a way to attend classes my small school was not able to offer and bridge the learning gap between high school and college."

Texas applicant: "Online learning courses bridge learning gaps for students because of how much these classes have to offer. Bringing teachers of higher education through a computer screen to multiple students empowers everyone. Coming from a small school, I understand the struggle of getting a competitive education, and online courses have helped significantly."

Ohio applicant: "First and foremost, many families in my school are like mine, first-generation immigrant families. Ultimately, what bonds us together is our struggling economic circumstance. What blended and online learning courses did for us is bridge the economic gap between students and directed us towards productive learning."

Conclusion

Although educators working with online/blended schools and courses are generally aware of why students selected those options, for most educators their understanding has been based on limited experience from their own schools. This study provides findings based on a larger, more diverse data set, demonstrating the wide range of reasons that students are selecting new learning opportunities. The study shows that students have many reasons for choosing online/blended learning. These range from seeking advanced courses that are otherwise unavailable to them, to needing flexibility to pursue their passions, or seeking new options due to health issues. This report also demonstrates that online, blended, and traditional schools are all responding to students' interests and needs. As more traditional brick-and-mortar schools, in particular, harness the power of online and blended course offerings, stories like these are likely to become much more common.